

The first Minorcan story for the "Minorcan Pilau (per-low) For The Soul".
Barbara McCarl Acosta

Minorcan food and meals.

What's for dinner? A typical Minorcan response would be fried mullet with mullet roe and grits. From late November to February, mullet roe was plentiful and was considered a delicacy. Shrimp, fried or boiled, was always a special treat. Other times, another Minorcan specialty would be gopher (tortoise) stew, followed by a serving of datil peppers. During the Depression, this became a common meal because gophers were so plentiful. However, today, the gopher tortoise is protected by state law, as it has become a threatened species. It is even unlawful to keep one as a pet. Gophers make their home in burrows, often shared with rattlesnakes.

My personal favorite has always been shrimp or sausage pilau. The typical Minorcan recipe calls for white rice, the fat of bacon, onions, sugar, green peppers, and datil peppers, combined with tomatoes, bay leaves, thyme, cloves, salt, and pepper. Additionally, bay leaves and cloves were added as the finishing touch, along with the meat of choice, usually chicken, sausage, or shrimp. The table was often graced with delicious meals of duck or turkey. There was always an abundance of fowl hunted by Granddaddy Canova, who was an avid hunter and fisherman.

Turtle eggs were considered a delicacy by some Minorcans. The practice of getting the eggs out of the nest is now outlawed, but it was legal in my youth. This was a source of food and survival for many. As a child, my cousin and I would load our little red wagon with the turtle eggs and walk up and down the streets of Saint Augustine shouting, "Turtle eggs for sale!" Part of the fun of getting the eggs was riding in Granddaddy's Skeeter from Saint Augustine Beach to Daytona Beach, dodging washouts and drop-offs all along the way.

The Skeeter was a homemade version of today's beach buggy and was our mode of transportation that could easily conquer the sand dunes. The dunes were huge when I was a child. Before the hurricanes washed them all away, a special vehicle was required to climb up and ride on them

without getting stuck. Visitors and tourists who were not familiar with our beach and tides would often get stuck and were unable to escape the clutches of the sand or the rising tide. At these times, the Skeeter was invaluable. Granddaddy would ride the beach looking for people who needed help, never charging them for his service.

A few of my family went riding in the Skeeter one beautiful day, getting out at the jetties to look for shells and bait. Along came a couple of scary drunk characters looking for trouble. They used their 4-wheel drive truck to push us into the rocks! Laughing and jeering, they threatened to hurt us and damage the Skeeter unless we paid them \$10. None of us carried money to the beach, so this angered them even more. These seemed to be criminal types we were dealing with, so we became more frightened with each threat they made. But not Granddaddy Canova! That crusty, crippled-up, 85-year-old Minorcan grabbed his shovel out of the Skeeter, waved it around with a few choice Minorcan expletives, and threatened to cut their heads off! The men laughed and cursed, saying, "You know, I think he means it!" Granddaddy was so angry he was shaking, but not from fear! After a lot of back-and-forth yelling and threats, to our great relief, they decided to leave us alone to figure out how to get ourselves out of that predicament. With a lot of skillful driving, Granddaddy finally got us out of there, and we were just so relieved and thankful to be alive.

Digging for clams and oysters provided another source of food for most Minorcans, in addition to fishing and shrimping. Clam chowder and oyster stew were favorites, as well as oysters roasted over a fire. Memories flood my mind of preparing for an oyster roast on Saint Augustine Beach in the evenings. The firelight flickered and danced across the stacks of shells as they grew higher and higher during the night. Many nights, we would set up overnight tents. The following morning, set against the backdrop of a fairy, glowing sunrise, the nets would be cast and bring in a fresh haul of fish. What a breakfast feast that was!

A dying art is the handmade fish or shrimp nets, which were such an important part of survival and income to the earlier Minorcans and those who still fish today. Mike Usina of Saint Augustine is one of the very few skilled artisans who still carry on this tradition. He has contributed greatly to keeping this lost art alive, teaching students and spending many hours a day knitting exquisite nets. Mike showed great patience when trying to teach me net-making, which was something I had wanted to do since childhood.

When Sheepshead were in season, it was fun to catch sand fleas to be used as bait. The trick was to watch for the wave to recede, and then the sand fleas would show up. Also, fiddler crabs could be used. The periwinkles could be used in chowder or stew.

It is my understanding that some Minorcans also ate rattlesnakes, as they were so plentiful. Granddaddy was one of those brave souls who captured them with a forked stake and noose, and his young accomplice holding the croaker sack open was me! He would carefully put them in the bag, and when he had several, he would head to the alligator farm to sell them for some additional income. He survived a couple of severe bites, which almost took his life!

Frog legs were also a favorite fried meal, tasting somewhat like white meat chicken. My daddy built three frog ponds and kept them stocked with huge bullfrogs, which he sold to restaurants in the area. When I was a young kid, we would go into deep ditches with a lantern at night to catch tadpoles and minnows to replenish the ponds. We would also go to the marshes and corral fiddlers in a wire tray, which would also serve as food for the frogs. After some time had passed, this became quite laborious, and he decided to turn all the frogs loose.

Granddaddy had two pet raccoons that he raised from babies. They followed him around like dogs and would often join him outside for a feast of shrimp, oysters, or whatever the offering of the day might be. They always washed their food as they ate. There was also a pet crow who frequented a Japanese plum tree in the backyard.

RELATIVES AND ANCESTORS

Many well-known and famous Minorcans have contributed to society and to Saint Augustine with their abundance of talent. Among them, one who immediately comes to mind is my cousin, Judy (Julietta) Canova. She was born in Starke, Florida, in 1913 as part of a very musical family. Judy claimed that her family originated in the Pyrenees mountains of Spain. Other sources indicate the family may have been from the island of Menorca. Her family tree also includes Antonio Josef V. Canova as her ancestor (1794-1845). Judy Canova was a renowned comedian, actress, singer, and radio personality whose popularity spread over five decades. She appeared in numerous movies and TV shows, on Broadway, and in Las Vegas. The movie studios wanted her to appear to be a country bumpkin or hillbilly, so her road to stardom became filled with cornpone humor, hog calling, yodeling, and her signature pigtailed. She was the forerunner of such television programs as "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Petticoat Junction," and "Green Acres." Many other talented writers and artists have contributed to the story and heritage of Saint Augustine, New Smyrna, Mayport, Mandarin and Starke, where most of the Minorcans settled. There is a vast amount of history within this small area.

Antonio Josef V. Canova was my great-great-great-grandfather. He belonged to one of the original Minorcan families who landed in New Smyrna, Florida, in 1768. Antonio Canova is listed as one of the passengers of *Alayor*, Minorca, coming from the Balearic Islands to Florida. In 1839, Antonio built the house known as the Dow House for his son Paul. The Canova House was built in 1840 for his other son, John. Antonio resided in the Prince Murat House located on the same property, and John moved there in 1866.

The Canova House was then conveyed to another son, Ramon, for one dollar. These houses are all now situated at the location of The Collector Luxury Inn and Gardens, which is one of the most popular tourist retreats of Saint Augustine. While walking around the beautiful gardens and grounds of The Collector, it's as though the presence of these courageous ancestors goes before me. Thoughts flood

my mind of the sacrifices and hardships they must have endured, and the strength of spirit they possessed, and it makes me proud of my Minorcan heritage.

My great-uncle Carl Canova (Granddaddy's brother) became known as the "Blind Boatman of Saint Augustine." His is an inspirational story of determination and perseverance. "The American Magazine" in 1925 wrote a feature story about him, with his picture in that article, barefooted, with one of his boats.

At the age of 28, after lifting an extremely heavy anchor, Uncle Carl immediately lost his eyesight! Doctors treating him confirmed he was totally and permanently blind, but that didn't prevent him from enjoying a quality life.

From his youth, Uncle Carl had been a seafaring man, working on small sailing vessels. As such, he was very familiar with the surrounding waterways of Florida. He understood tides and weather. This knowledge enabled him to conduct fishing parties (with some assistance) acting as a professional guide. The customers were amazed at his ability to lead them to the best fishing locations.

Another of his abilities was his skill as a carpenter. He built at least two cottages and several boats and often worked 16 hours a day. He said he preferred to work at night when there was less activity and noise to distract him. The magazine article said he was a man of great strength and vitality, trying to do the work of two men. Apparently, a positive attitude and hopeful outlook enabled him to have a happy life in spite of his blindness. He felt blessed that he had been able to see for so many years, as that gave him the ability to picture things in his mind.

Granddaddy's other brother, Uncle Leon Canova, was a well-known and popular captain of a deep-sea fishing boat in Mayport for many years. He was a unique Minorcan, known to be a humorous prankster, likable, and skilled in his profession. Some of his pranks became legendary around Mayport, especially the one where he pretended to be wrestling with a live gator in the water, but it was really already dead! He nearly scared his wife to death!

Aunt Blanche Canova Cerveau, one of Granddaddy's sisters, was, as I understand, a nurse at one time in her life. I admired her art and talent as an oil painting artist. As a child, I was impressed by her and inspired to follow in her footsteps. She also wrote poems every day in a little journal containing her thoughts and observations of life. What a treasure that was!

Her house on Cuna Street has served as many places of business since her passing. It is rumored to be one of the haunted houses of Saint Augustine. One of the store owners years ago told me she was constantly hearing footsteps on the steps, doors opening and closing for no reason, lights flickering, and obscure voices upstairs.

Most Minorcans, from my personal observation, were strong, courageous, resilient, hard-working, and talented. Hardships did not deter them, and they found ways to cope, survive, and make the best of a bad situation.