

Foodie's Guide to Regional Gastronomy: Caçoila, caçoula or caçarola

Series Introduction (Move down if you're familiar with the thread or don't care)

In this series, we hope to highlight and showcase in as interesting a way as possible, the stories behind our favorite, mouth-watering local dishes. While we'll focus on greater New Bedford and the South Coast, we will occasionally "travel" to places like Plymouth, Providence or even Boston. I will attempt to keep it light-hearted, fun and easy to read. While I can't promise to keep you compelled and pull you along with prose – that would take a professional writer – I will promise to be liberal with the drool-inducing images of these dishes.

I grew up in a Sicilian household where everyone – man, woman, child – was participating in preparing meals. It was a "trick" to get everyone together, talking, laughing and of course, the occasional heated debate. Food was a huge part of our identity, where we came from, who we were. There was something special about the atmosphere that revolved around a meal that **we** prepared.



This is certainly not unique to an Italian or Sicilian household. Every ethnic group in the country has a proud culinary tradition that they grew up around. You can easily replace “Sicilian” with Irish, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Ethiopian, Greek or anything else. This is why food as a topic is always so popular. We humans love our food and that passion goes beyond the gustatory or taste – we crave the aromas, delight in the presentation, are fueled by the atmosphere, and relish – pardon the pun – discussion about our favorite dishes, restaurants or cuisines.

One thing that is often not discussed – is glossed over, or barely touched upon – is the history or background of these dishes. Now, to some, this conjures up the voice of the guy from the “dry eyes” commercial. The terms, for many, are synonymous with “boring,” “dull,” or “It’s time to go.” However, the background can be interesting, fun, or funny and

it can be so without being facetious, dumbed-down or popular. I will make every attempt to maintain a fresh balance with those elements in this series.

As always, feedback is encouraged. Anecdotes are wanted. Discussion is paramount. **Please** join in!

Want to get into a fistfight? Tell someone that they are flat-out wrong about the best local spot to get caçoila and that your spot is the best. We here on the SouthCoast are rabid about our caçoila and where to go to get it and here in New Bedford, we'll punch a Nazi in the mouth, I mean, we'll punch someone that tells us some really bad place is the best place to get it. It'll be like the "Red Wedding" scene.

I don't want to even ponder the sheer terror of the concept and reality that there are millions upon millions of people across the country or even the world, that simply never heard the word or...gasp...ever tried caçoila. Clearly, these poor souls were horrible people generating dark karma over thousands of lifetimes during countless kalpas to receive such punishment.

For the rest of us, we know caçoila. Oh, we **know** caçoila. **Our** caçoila.



In fact, we know it so well, many have no problem changing New Bedford nickname from the “Whaling City” to Caçoila City. Seriously, whaling is dead, harkens back to a time when we slaughtered the poor things almost to the point of extinction, and no one really cares to call it by that name. It’s a dead name like the industry.

Caçoila, on the other hand, is alive and well. Let’s have it, Mayor Mitchell, we were the Whaling City, then that died and we became the City Of Light. Who even calls New Bedford “The City Of Light”? Caçoila City has such a nice ring to it.

While you’ll find few people that will offer much disagreement and little to no fight when it comes to the fact that no one, and I mean no one, makes caçoila better than our avó or vovó or if you aren’t Portuguese, you’ve had it at someone’s house that is Portuguese. Where the disagreement comes from is where else to get it when you don’t have access to vovó’s cooking and when it comes to that there are eateries with decades of

tradition and fans behind them.

Now, I'm not going to tell you where to get the best caçoila – I don't want to have strangers randomly punching me in the mouth or suplexing me while I'm taking out the garbage or getting a coffee – this is about caçoila, its culinary history and culture.

To begin with – for those ghastly souls who aren't sure what caçoila is – generally, caçoila is marinated cuts of pork butt stewed for hours with spices like paprika, garlic, allspice, coriander, cinnamon, bay leaves and wine and/or vinegar. Stewed until tender, tender, tender, “fall-off-the-bone” tender. I say “generally” since some folks like to substitute pork for lamb or beef, and every region and family has their own variety steeped in tradition when it comes to the ratios or even specific spices.



It is this variety which is cause for all the hoopla and disagreement on who makes the best, but truth be told you would really be hard-pressed to find genuinely **bad** caçoila. You are likely just to find caçoila the way you prefer it and dislike or even bad-mouth the other ways. If you still can't picture it, think “BBQ Pork pulled sandwich Portuguese-style

without all the BBQ sauce.”

While you can, of course, find caçoila as a dish with let’s say potatoes and onions, some classic Portuguese red peppers, and sides of rice, olives and perhaps a basic salad it is probably the caçoila that reigns supreme in popularity. Using a “pop” or pãom of course. Want one of those aforementioned punches in the mouth? Go ahead and make that sandwich with an English muffin, some rye bread, gluten-free, fat-free, cholesterol-free, pro-PaleoKetogenicAtkinsSouthBeachDukan5:2, you Nazi.

The sheer practicality and handiness – pardon the pun – that comes with a sandwich when it comes to the very industrial, busy and blue-collar SouthCoast make it a favorite. You may not have time to seat and eat, you may want to continue to work, perhaps drive (you didn’t hear that from me!), keep watching the game on TV or something else. One hand on the sandwich, the other free to do other things.

Also, there is the frugality and affordability: for about \$5 you can get a sandwich with some fries on the side, at the vast majority of local restaurants.

So where does caçoila come from? How many calories does it have? Who invented it or came up with it? What was vovó’s that name so we can send her flowers, love letters, and put her in our last will and testament? Well, that’s like asking “Who invented fire?” or the wheel, or breathing. It hardly matters. Especially when we can’t taste **her** caçoila anyway. We can, however, taste the caçoila from all the living, breathing, vovó’s in the area and that’s what matters.



If you could find out who made the first and/or had access to that original recipe as if there was some “Ur-Caçoila” it might even turn out to be so unlike **your** favorite way of making it that you wouldn’t like it. And no one is going to tolerate you punching a vovó in the face, pal.

There are significant differences in other Portuguese enclaves around the world anyway. So, if you are prone to being triggered you better not go to Hawaii where the Portuguese there added pineapple and a little ketchup to their caçoila sandwich. There are even sick, sadistic and twisted rumors that you can optionally add avacado. Definitely fascists.

Now, one thing that always puzzled me, and being a Grammar and Spelling Nazi (in spite of making a ton of mistakes in those departments myself) and even irked me being a First Worlder, when people would insert an “r” in the word. They would say “caçerla” and I would think “Listen, buddy: we are in the land hating on the letter ‘r.’ We lop it off of the ends of words, we skip its existence in the middle of words, we just don’t like that letter – it’s ‘pahk’ not ‘park’, it’s ‘tahtah’ sauce not “tartar” sauce. So what possessed you to add one where there isn’t one?” Why are you coming at me, bro?

I get the same feeling when I pour my bowl of cereal and find out there is no milk. It's pure rage. I take it out on people by replying to "Have a good day!" with a "No thanks." or "No one tells me what to do."

Anyhow, it turns out I am a miser, curmudgeon, a cranky old man because that mysterious 'r' that seems redundant turns up in certain regional Portuguese dialects where you will see the word as **caçoila**, **caçoula** or **caçarola**.

Damnit. I wanted to hear myself complain.