

The bright yellow Genoa sail billowed out

and John, hanging on to the halyards, tried to sit in it. It was a glorious blustery day of brilliant sunshine and 'Ratu Etai', our catamaran, was sailing at seven knots, an all time record. We were headed for the islands of Lavezzi situated about seven sea miles south of Corsica in the Bonifacio straights. Half an hour later we rounded the southernmost tip of the islands and changed tack to bring the boat back into the sheltered bay tucked into the western corner. It was completely calm and, as we anchored, we marvelled that we were the only people there. The Lavezzi islands are uninhabited apart from a guardian and his dog, who allegedly live there. We had never seen them but had heard that Brigitte Bardot had once captured the dog supposing it to be abandoned.

Rob, an Australian friend who was sailing with us, dived overboard and swam ashore while John and I unlashed the dinghy to take Charlie, our five-year-old daughter, to the beach, which is one of the prettiest that I know. At either end it is made up of minuscule perfect shells. Just behind it is the cemetery of the crew and passengers of the ill-fated frigate 'The Semillante'. This sank in a storm of 1855 en route for the Crimea with the loss of all 750 people aboard. Of these, 580 bodies were recovered including that of the captain, who was identified by his club-foot. It is a very simple and beautiful resting place. Some people say the islands are haunted and that at night you can hear the wailing of ghosts. In fact, when the wind blows through the great holes in the granite rocks which stand all over the island, it does make a noise which sounds very much like wailing, and we fell asleep that night listening to it.

When we tuned into the weather forecast the next day we heard that the blusters of the day before had turned to a full blown storm. With the evidence of what a storm in the Bonifacio straights could wreak lying before us in the cemetery, we decided to stay put.

Three days later the storm was still raging. We had swum, fished and sunbathed. John and Rob had cleaned the sides of the boat and I had baked bread. No other boats had arrived or were likely to in the storm. We decided to explore the other side of the island so, feeling very Robinson Crusoeish, we left Tiggypuss, the cat, in charge of Ratu Etai and set off across the sparsely vegetated land behind the beach. We came across enormous pillars of granite lying on the ground and John remembered being told of stories of ancient granite quarries on the islands.

We soon reached the bay on the other side. It was fairly well protected but beyond it we could see the full fury of the storm and were very thankful to be in such a safe anchorage. As we neared the water I saw the bottom of the bay was almost black and realised that it was covered with sea urchins. Moreover, they almost all had something adhering to them, a shell, a small pebble or a piece of seaweed. This is one way of telling that they are good to eat. The inedible jet-black variety is always naked of adornment. Rob willingly went back to the boat to fetch bags and long spoons to prise them off their hold on the rocks and before long we had as many as we could carry.

In the cockpit of Ratu Etai, armed with three pairs of scissors, we dug the points into the core of each sea urchin and cut around the tops. Then we shook the urchins upside down over the side of the boat. We were left with the corals, the orange coloured segments, which we scooped out with crusty pieces of bread. They tasted salty sweet and had a texture a bit like peach flesh. Delicious, especially with a glass of cold white wine! We ate until we could eat no more, swinging our legs over the limpid, crystal clear water, watching the fish darting about snatching the breadcrumbs that fell from our fingers. When we had finished we still had several sea urchins left. I scooped out the corals and folded them into a mayonnaise, which I poured over sliced hard-boiled eggs. We called the dish 'Eggs Lavezzi'.

A few months later we were visiting an English friend who was on holiday in Corsica. She was staying at a hotel by the sea on the road between Ajaccio and the Isles Sanguinaires. The owner of the hotel, a keen diver, had decided to give his guests a treat. He was on the terrace of his hotel, still in his diving suit, serving them freshly-gathered sea urchins and white wine. 'Well' said a loud female English voice, 'If they'll eat that, they'll eat anything!' You betcha!

If, on a self-catering, camping or yachting holiday you are lucky enough to find some sea urchins, here is a recipe for cooking them. Of course, nothing can beat eating them 'au nature' beside the sea, but they're also delicious cooked. Oursinade is the name for a feast of sea urchins and Oursinado is the name of the following dish.

OURSINADO.

Serves 6

- 1 1/2 kilos of cleaned white fish cut into thick slices. Choose a mixture of three or four of the following. Angler fish, sea bream, bass, cod, hake, haddock, halibut or turbot.
- 3 dozen sea urchins
- 2 medium or 1 large chopped onion
- 1 chopped carrot
- 4 sprigs parsley, 1 sprig thyme, 1 bay leaf
- 6 egg yolks
- 100 grms butter
- salt and pepper
- 6 slices of day-old French or country style bread, toasted.

Open the sea urchins with a pair of scissors or with a special cutter. Put the corals into a small bowl and keep cool. Put the carrots and onions into a big saucepan with the white wine, herbs and salt and pepper. Bring to the boil and simmer for 10 minutes. Add the fish and, if necessary, water to cover. Bring to the boil again, lower heat and simmer for about 10 minutes, until the fish is just cooked. Remove fish and keep warm. Meanwhile melt the butter in a bowl over a saucepan of boiling water and stir in the egg yolks. Add two ladles of the liquid from the fish to the bowl and beat all together until creamy. Add the corals to this mixture and stir well. Correct seasoning. Put the toast into a serving dish and moisten well with the fish stock. Pour over the sea urchin sauce and serve together with the pieces of fish.

Alternatively, sea urchins can be folded into a Hollandaise or Mousseline sauce to serve with steamed or baked fish.

HOLLANDAISE SAUCE.

- 1 tbsp lemon juice
- 2 tbsps cold water
- 125 grms softened butter
- 4 egg yolks
- salt and white pepper.

Put the egg yolks, water and salt and pepper in a bowl set over a saucepan of hot, not boiling, water. Whisk until the mixture thickens and then draw the pan to one side. Gradually add the butter in little pieces, whisking all the time. Add the lemon juice. The sauce must not boil or it will curdle. To make Mousseline sauce, add some whipped cream to warm, not hot, Hollandaise sauce.



ANTONA *Manifestation de femmes.*