




Salt Traces

Published by Salt Traces
October 2023

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Special thanks to:

 HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
TBILISI

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Salt Traces is asking
you: Do you have a
seashell somewhere
nearby?

Do you have a seashell somewhere nearby? Could you put it close to your ear? Did somebody already tell you that you would hear the sound of sea waves if you did that? This is more or less the place this collective's ideas and activities come from, not directly from the sea but from intense memories of it- from sensorial experiences that arise when you reminisce about the sea. It also comes from memories of juicy, sweet, crunchy red watermelon bites accompanied by some white cheese wraps. Or from wanting to buy that corn sold on the shore, but your mum not trusting the cleanliness of it... that longing for corn, the existence of which is only in someone's announcement. The seller passes you by and disappears on the horizon... There are so many memories of the sea entangled with the food, not only the food that comes from the sea directly but also the food eaten on its shores. Most interestingly!! how much one salts their pasta is correlated with the salinity levels of the sea in the vicinity of the area one has had a chance to grow up. Did you know? We didn't but came to discover after we came back

from the sea in Athens when we were thinking of how to name our collective. So this a speculative fact from one of the chefs that we follow, but it also became a relevant storyline for us and shaped our decision to name the collective Salt Traces. Salt- the grain in which the sea and food meet.

This research is a journey of four women who grew up on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Our idea is to start the research project with the Caspian Sea and create a community of artists and researchers with whom we could expand into exploring the impact of climate change on other water bodies through stories of food and people.

So far the Caspian Sea and communities around it have been interwoven with the narratives around oil. But climate change, decreasing levels of the sea, and extinction of sea species drew our attention to this sea with a new glance. There are many more stories to unravel about this unique water body, the largest lake on Earth. The Caspian holds a significant value for the communities that live around it. A diverse range of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, that these communities hold is reflected in their cuisine. With this project, we aim to create a space for discussion and reflection on climate change and its impact on daily life through an exploration of food recipes, and daily eating habits. Food can open up new venues for discussions around the underexplored topic of climate change and its impacts on the communities in the area. Through creating shared connections with food, we hope to also look at how the ingredients we use have altered as a result of climate change.

Growing up on the shores of the Caspian, we have mapped out some similar but also different patterns in our perception of the sea. The main commonality in our perception of the sea is that looking at our childhood we would associate her with warm sum-

mer memories in which food would be central: we would go to the beach with watermelon and white cheese and enjoy delicious snacks after swimming. When away from the sea, we would get hyped when we would find out there is some caviar decorating lavish tables for weddings, which has now become a delicacy attainable only for a few. Unfortunately, growing up, our relationship with the Caspian has changed. With oil tankers annually dumping tons of pollutants into the water, the entry of waste from factories, the release of urban and rural wastewater, and other harmful human interventions have turned the Caspian into a water body that we exploit, bringing it into almost a state of collapse.

In the backdrop of all these thoughts a quote from Haitian-Canadian writer Dany Laferrière resonated very strongly with us: “The sea is the greatest living space on our planet, yet we turn our backs on it every day”.

Via this project, we will attempt to face the sea, and to face it not only as four of us but by bringing stories from fishermen, inhabitants of the Caspian’s immediate vicinity, researchers and scientists working on relevant subjects, and memories of our own, our families and friends. To share our thinking process and findings we have started a monthly newsletter, that is also an invitation to think along with us and revoke your memories of the sea or any water body that you relate to the most. You can subscribe to the newsletter at <https://tinyletter.com/salttraces>

The newsletter will come to you monthly on Saturday with updates from our research process and some poetic reflections. We promise to keep light but also insightful and in the next chapters you can read through the first issues of our newsletter.

Su. Sahil. Südlü as. (Water. The shore. The recipe.)

I was indecisive about what to start this story with:

1) the recipe of the fish

2) the short journey with my dad trying to find new recipes

3) my memories with him and the Caspian shore

4) the tomatoes, that grow in the villages of the Absheron peninsula and pair well with the fried fish and onions

5) water

Water

Maybe there are creatures that can live without water, but fragile humans are not one of them. Water is an integral part of our existence, flowing through our veins and sustaining our bodies. It's present in the very air we breathe, in the rejuvenating showers we enjoy, in the refreshing lemonades and teas we savor, and in the saliva exchanged during a kiss.

The water of the Sea*, our Sea is salty. But since it is a lake, it is not as salty as the oceans, it doesn't hurt your eyes when you open them underwater, and it doesn't crystallize on your skin while sunbathing. It leaves a salty and bitter after-taste in your mouth if an unexpected wave swallows you suddenly from behind. That taste was my lighthouse when people from the YouTube videos told me repeatedly to salt the boiling water as the Sea. "As salty as the sea, we all know this by now", said one of the cooks I follow.

I salted the pasta water as salty as the Caspian. My pasta turned out bland many times before I realized

that I should double or even triple the amount of salt. Pasta water should be saltier than your tears. Pasta water should be as salty as the water of the foreign seas, deceptively turquoise, alluring, burning your eyeballs when you dive in. I learned how to cook my pasta, and how to season it properly, but I still undersalt it sometimes and blame it on the Caspian.



* I will further use the word Sea with capital S for the Caspian Sea.

The shore

I went with my father to the shore in the village of Bilgah on the *Abşeron* peninsula. This is a shore that makes other shores, the ones of oceans or of the azure seas, seem impertinent with their growling beauty and purity. To me, they are mere obtrusions in the world where the shore of Bilgah is the center.

We were waiting for the fishermen to come back from the Sea to buy some fish. There was a man waiting for them, their manager, their salesmen sort of, and a representative of the coastal police, who I at first did not notice. I spoke to the 60-year-old man with a mustache and he told me that he was from the village of Bilgah. I asked him about the food, whether he loved fish, and how he liked it to be prepared. He told me that among all the fishes his favorite is *kütüm*. “*Kütüm* is the *shah* of all the fishes...We just fry the fish”, he replied briefly, looking at the Sea awaiting the boat. When I followed up with questions he told me that they also make a dish with fish and tomatoes called *Mitamça* before telling me hastily that I better ask women these kinds of questions. I imme-



diately thought this was similar to some Italian recipes I had heard about - how Eurocentric of me! I heard the name of the dish for the first time, though I had eaten fish fried in the skillet with tomatoes many times before.

Our dialogue didn't last long. I thanked the man and walked around the shore when I got the remark from the coastal officer to not take any photos of the boats. At first, I attempted to negotiate,

but I soon lost my enthusiasm as this whole interaction abruptly reminded me that my uncle's words, 'This is yours, this shore is yours,' while teaching me to swim were not true.

The fishermen arrived. The boat slid in the sand with gusto and then got tied to a metal tube in a pile of knotted fish ropes on the hill up near the cars. My father approached and tried to buy the fish, but it seemed these fish were reserved for a restaurant. The fishermen were in waterproof green and yellow clothes and rubber boots. Both of them were swarthy men with salt and pepper beards in wool gray hats.

In two minutes the second boat arrived and the person I had the dialogue with about the fish and Mitamça rushed to the boat, took the fish, and brought it to the trunk of a red Zhiguli car. My dad bought two kütüms while the officer ran to the boat and wrote some numbers in the registry.

The recipe

Inspired by my conversation at the Sea, we tried to make a version of a Mitamça, fish with fried onions and tomatoes. It turned out to be quite tasty. I think it is a simple recipe that I need to ask around about. I want to share another recipe that has been loved by my family.

My family has always had love for fish and fish products. One of the beloved dishes for generations was Südlü aş. To my surprise, when I asked friends about Südlü aş, the milk rice made with cured fish, everyone seemed to associate it with a sweet rice porridge, appropriate for breakfast or times of cold. But in our family it was a fully-fledged main dish with the salty cured fish that was boiled to be served next to the saffron-infused milky basmati rice mixed with softened by the steam raisins and dried fruit. Would you guess where I am from based on the knowledge of this dish? The components include, 1- basmati rice prepared in milky, buttery, saffrony liquid, 2-raisins,

dried fruit softened in melted butter with oil or ghee, 3-the cured fish (usually kütüm) either boiled or prepared wrapped in a wet piece of paper in the oven. Salt and pepper to taste, I think, as salty as the Sea, Caspian Sea, would work here.

I wonder what questions you, the reader, have at the end of the text. My text started with questions, questions about what to write, and what part of my knowledge/memory/passions to include. It turned out to mention almost all of the themes I lined out in the beginning, except the tomatoes. They deserve a text dedicated just to them, but I featured them in the visuals—the tomatoes from Bilgah.

The questions and themes that the Caspian poses and answers are endless. These were some of them. What puzzles you about the Caspian Sea?



Artisanal fishing
in the Caspian Sea:
the knowledge that
matters for climate
and anthropogenic
change.

“It is great that you do this research
before everything disappears... the
sea, us (fishermen), and the fish”.

The conversation with the fishermen in Lankaran started with



a deep and disturbing tone. In the background of the idyllic black sand and waves of the Caspian, fishermen shared with us their struggles in the sea, and efforts to collectivize in order to ‘survive the change’.

The decline of artisanal fishing in various water bodies of the world due to the rise of industrialization, particularly through aquaculture and large-scale fish and seafood production, is a widely acknowledged issue. In the specific case of the Caspian Sea - Azerbaijan shore, this phenomenon is contextually situated - complex

geopolitics, historical and institutional legacies of the USSR, industrial extractivism - oil and gas, and potentially water and sand. These anthropogenic changes equally influenced the ecosystem of the Caspian Sea and the livelihoods of the artisanal fishermen and communities living around it. The extraction of oil and gas in the area impacts fish migration patterns and leads to oil pollution, adversely affecting the fish population. The overarching issue of climate change contributes to the problem through elevated temperatures, the introduction of invasive species, and the

decreasing levels of the sea. In addition to all of that, policies on fishing designed by the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources impose conservation frameworks with stringent fishing quotas making artisanal fishing even more challenging. Adherence to the quantity and distance quotas severely restricts the fishermen. Artisanal fishing is at risk of becoming obsolete also because of cultural shifts - like the decreasing interest of younger generations in fishing caused by declining sea levels leading to the increasing challenges related to deep-sea fishing.

Our research on local knowledge regarding climate change in the Caspian Sea region led us to investigate various locations, including Pirallahı Island, Şıxov village, Dübandı village in Baku and Sarı Island, and Narimanabad - the fishermen villages of Lankaran, in the South of Azerbaijan. These places, though modestly built during the Soviet era, have been largely overlooked by government bodies, international development organizations, and broader society. Nonetheless, they exist in parallel with what the locals perceive as the unfiltered and authentic nature of the sea. Among the affected communities,

fishermen residing in Pirallahı Island and Narimanabad face the greatest hardships. Due to the receding sea levels, they are compelled to venture farther into the sea on small boats to catch fish. This shift towards deeper waters poses inherent dangers, as many fishermen lack proficient swimming skills and harbor deep-seated fears about the sea, often steeped in the unjustified ‘myth’ of sea dragging in the swimmers in the Caspian Sea. Despite these challenges, the shared “blue” fear and the impetus to provide for their families foster cooperation among the fishermen, who struggle alone. The primary driving force behind their collaborative practices is the need to sustain their families, coupled with the subtler objective of preserving their fishing culture—an integral part of their communal identity—and demonstrating respect for fish migration patterns while safeguarding the natural resources as the fishermen believe that the “Sea belongs to God.”

In the face of climate and anthropogenic change in the Caspian Sea, collective adaptation among the local fishing communities occurs through sharing knowledge, information, and technologies. Some groups



of fishermen pool their financial resources to invest in life-saving vests, GPS trackers (essential for navigating deeper waters), larger boats, fishing nets, and rods. Additionally, they actively share their geographical coordinates through WhatsApp groups and casual conversations at tea houses known as çayxanas. These WhatsApp groups serve as a crucial means of survival, facilitating the exchange of coordinates for weather events and fish migration patterns. Fishermen believe their knowledge, often overlooked by policymakers, is more reliable than the government data on which

the fishing quota system is based. With generations of experience in fishing and spending more than six hours at the sea, they have developed a deep understanding of various anthropogenic impacts on the ecosystem. Their expertise extends to areas such as fish migration, nutrition, and contamination, enabling them to assess these domains accurately.

An intriguing aspect of the coordinate-sharing practice is the redefinition of territorial boundaries. Prior to the significant impact of declining sea levels, fishermen adhered to a code of

conduct that involved respecting each other's territories and village boundaries to ensure a fair distribution of the available fish resources. However, the shifting dynamics resulting from the need to venture into deeper waters have challenged these traditional boundaries. By sharing coordinates, the fishermen aim to establish equitable access to fishing grounds for all individuals, enabling them to fish on an equal basis and support their respective families. This cooperative approach reflects their desire to navigate the evolving circumstances and maintain fairness in changing environmental conditions.

Collective action in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, particularly within the context of the Caspian Sea fishing communities, presents an intriguing subject for further examination. During the Soviet era, collectivization was primarily enforced as a top-down resource and labor management approach. However, historical records indicate a lack of grassroots self-collectivization among the sea and fish laborers in the region. This highlights the significance

of exploring and understanding the emergence of contemporary collective actions among these communities, which may differ from the previous Soviet-era collectivization models.

Undoubtedly, this fieldwork has generated numerous questions and left a lasting impact on us through the cultural and social significance of artisanal fishing. Additionally, it has underscored the relevance of the fishermen's knowledge in adapting to the challenges posed by climate change and anthropogenic transformations. The wealth of insights from this research prompts further exploration into the interplay between traditional fishing practices, anthropogenic and climate change, resonating with broader discussions on preserving traditional knowledge systems and their contribution to contemporary adaptation strategies.

A tip for turning the fish from the sick sea into a healthy one.

To start a text with a question of who owns the sea is perhaps too big of a question and not the most relevant one for the purpose of this research at this stage. But one thing is clear: several complex ownership structures are entangled with the different layers and aspects of the Caspian Sea.

On my last trip to Baku and Sumqayıt, the decreasing sea level was more visible to the eye than ever. The port in Pirallahı isn't a port anymore, the restaurant in

Sumqayıt's promenade constructed in the middle of the sea is idle among the mud left from the dried seawater. It is a very stark image to encounter, putting the timelines related to the impacts of climate change in a tragic perspective.

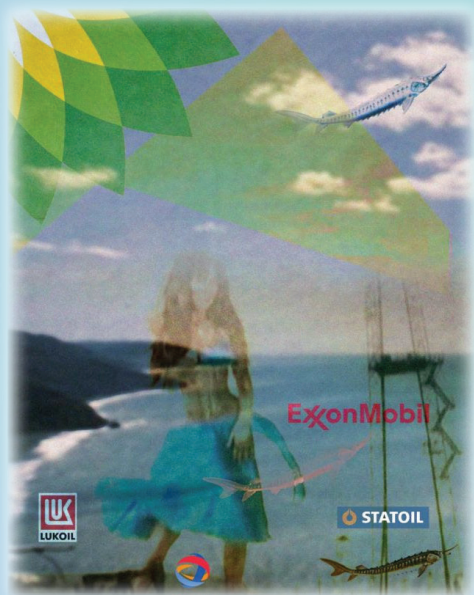
In times of crisis, one starts to look for information and data to understand what is at risk and what are the possibilities for averting that. And the truth is while I grew up and lived most of my life on the shores of the Caspian, years



have passed me by with very little information on what this sea holds. To change that, in between all the visits to family and friends, I craved an hour to go to the second-hand bookstore on Istiqlaliyat Street. I started digging through the sections at the left-hand side at the entrance, going through books on the Caspian, and cookery books from different times. I found quite a few relevant books that I am reading through nowadays. There is one common thread between all these books, they had all been sponsored by oil and gas companies... Shouldn't be a surprising fact, as fossil fuel companies

have been exploiting the sea for decades now, having the closest and the least restricted access to it. Against the recent news on how accurately oil giants like Shell and Exxon Mobil knew about climate change in the 70s, one can't help but think about all the data that major fossil fuel corporations hold on the sea right now. Could it help us to understand the sea and all the dangers it is exposed to better?

Recently I came across the blue-green capitalism concept of Stefan Helmreich. It describes the kind of capitalism that understands very well that sick seas might be more



profitable than healthy ones. That resonated eerily well with my discoveries and thoughts around the Caspian Sea on my last trip home. Today the fish from the Caspian Sea continues to be the main source of sustenance for many families in the seaside villages of Baku. The families realize that the fish is not the best, coming from the intoxicated and deeply polluted waters, but they have developed a way of purifying the fish from toxins. In one of our interviews, one of the fishermen who had his regular catch of golden grey mullet mentioned that before cooking the fish they marinate it in garlic for 24 hours. It was his strong advice that we should definitely do the same before we eat the fish he gifted to us. I wonder what other ways people on the shores of the Caspian have developed in a hopeless attempt to deal with the inevitable and unstoppable effects of pollution and climate change.

Yet the question of the ownership keeps lingering with me. What will happen to all that land appearing under the surface of the sea?

Have you ever wondered how to cook fish without a recipe?

“Have you ever wondered how to cook fish without a recipe?” That’s the question I asked my mom during my visit to Baku this summer. I went there with a clear goal in mind: to collect my mom’s seafood recipes. I remembered her recipes being neatly written in a 40-page notebook with a pretty cover featuring a singer, adorned with cat stickers from my childhood. Little did I know, my memory had deceived me. Little did I know, this trip would turn into a quest into the unknown - missing recipes

from my mum’s copybook, missing books on recipes, missing fish...

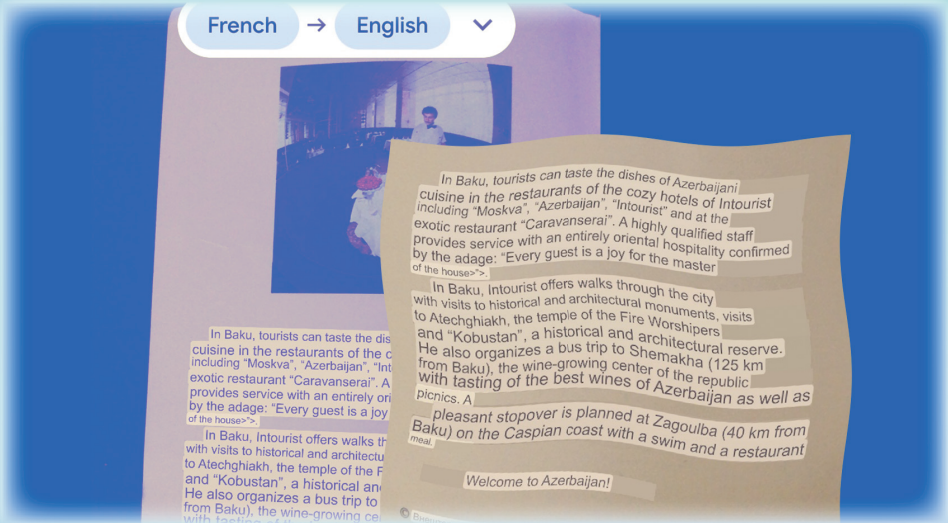
My mom’s answer was straightforward: “I learned from your grandma.” It’s a tradition passed down through the generations, she explained. Ironically, though, I’ve learned more about cooking from reels on Instagram than from her. We even laughed about it because she now uses TikTok to discover new recipes, occasionally sharing them with me. When I asked her to show me the fish recipes from her



notebook, she revealed it was filled with baking recipes and only a few meal recipes, but nothing about fish. I sighed and began flipping through the pages, struggling to decipher her Cyrillic handwriting, which highlighted our generational and cultural differences. She learned to write in Cyrillic during her school days in the Soviet era, unlike me. (Note: Azerbaijani language was written in different alphabets through the XX century. The Latin alphabet replaced the Arabic script in 1928. Cyrillic alphabet was used from 1939 until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since

1992 Azerbaijani language has been written in the Latin alphabet). When I went to school to learn the Latin alphabet for the first time, my mom also joined me in re-learning the alphabet, although she still finds writing in Cyrillic more comfortable. This was evident in her shopping lists, which sometimes left me puzzled.

Frustrated with my fruitless search, I decided to explore our favorite second-hand bookstore, Bukinist, hoping to find a seafood cookbook. I always enjoyed being in that bookstore, surrounded by



books from different eras, as if transported with a time machine. After scanning piles of books, I asked the bookseller for guidance. He directed me to a small cookbook section where I also found old books on "Being a Good Housewife" from the Soviet times. It reminded me that my mom also had one of those books at home. They covered various topics like cleaning, skincare, home remedies, embroidery, knitting, and cooking. But, they did also lack fish recipes. Instead, they focused on traditional dishes with more intricate cooking techniques, adding tasteful complexity to the lives of housewives.

My dissatisfaction grew as I looked through the books, but the bookseller came to my rescue again. He showed me another section with cookbooks in European languages discussing Azerbaijani cuisine. I found a French publication with beautiful food photos. It was a simple staple-bound booklet published in 1989 by the Vneshtorgizdat publishing house in Moscow, each page featuring a photo with a dish and brief text beneath about ingredients and instructions on how to cook, emphasizing visuals over instructions. The booklet contained a variety of dishes, from soups to kebabs, pilafs, dolma,



kutabs, preserves, desserts, and jams, even saffron-infused sorbet. But once again, there was nothing about fish or caviar, which used to be a popular yet affordable delicacy back in those days. It struck me as odd. However, I did find a hint about fish and the Caspian Sea in the introduction, recommending a visit to the charming Zagulba district on the Caspian coast for swimming and dining at a restaurant to enjoy the fish they omitted from the booklet.

After skimming through all the food images I was still wondering why this book was in French. Then

the big logo of Intourist caught my attention. Intourist was originally a national tourism agency founded in 1929 in the Soviet Union, aiming to attract foreign tourists to bring in foreign currency and enhance the country's international image. Its name, derived from the Russian words for "foreign tourist" (innostranniy turist). To appeal to its intended audience, Intourist employed Western advertising techniques. Therefore, they imitated the more inviting Art Deco style commonly found in Western tourism marketing as opposed to the minimalist Constructivist style they were using domestically.



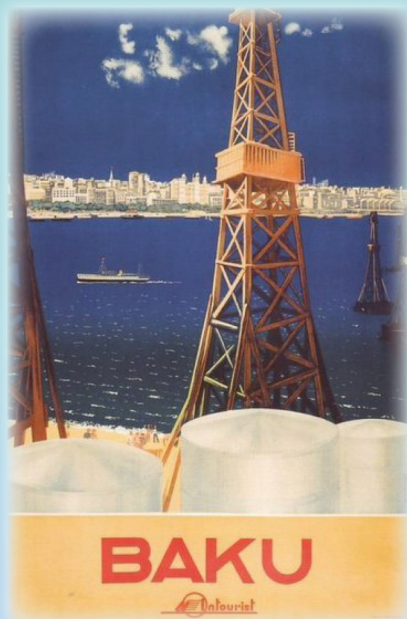


Additionally, their travel posters highlighted the distinct culture and rich history of each of the 16 Soviet republics to showcase that the Soviet Union was more diverse than just Russia.

Another interesting detail worth mentioning was the Intourist's portrayal of women in their posters, which deviated from the domestic posters. Instead of women standing alongside men on tractors or trains as often seen locally, Intourist depicted women as fashionable figures for Western tourists or as exotic locals. This contrast also reminded me of previous research I did regarding the portrayal of women in the Soviet Women magazine in fashionable clothes, which was also primarily aimed at a foreign audience. In one such example, they depict the railway line to Baku (Azerbaijan), combined with a journey over the Caspian Sea. This railway was promoted as a connection between Western Europe and Iran. The trajectory from Shepetivka (Ukraine) via Rostov (Russia) to Baku took 'only' 55 hours, a total journey of almost 5 days.



Now it all made sense - this publication was made to introduce our cuisine to the French-speaking audience. I don't know much about the logistics of it - whether this was something tourists would get upon their arrival in Baku or whether they would get this booklet abroad as Intourist also had its offices in Berlin, Amsterdam, London, and New York. This story, though different from my initial quest, reminds me that research can take unexpected turns, leading to new discoveries. I may have forgotten my original focus, but sometimes, forgetting can be liberating. Fish are said to have short memories, and maybe I do too. Though I find this comparison somewhat unfair to fish, it's also freeing. Some memories are destined to fade or be remembered inaccurately, just like how I wrongly remembered my mom's notebook as full of savory recipes when it was primarily filled with baking recipes.



On the shores of
silence: Photographs
from the Caspian.























