

Hooked!

Fish has always been a great favourite of mine, a passion not shared I know by everyone but I am sure this has more to do with bad experience than anything else. Fish is so often served overcooked, under-seasoned or swamped in so much sauce it does not taste of anything.

For my part a visit to the fishmonger means instant inspiration. Your butcher can offer chicken, lamb, beef and pork on a regular basis while your fish man has bass, sea bream, whiting, pollack, ling, huss, skate, cod, haddock, plaice, sole, halibut, hake, turbot, monkfish, salmon, trout.....need I go on?

As a child growing up we never lived by the sea but my Mother would travel miles and indeed did to ensure we had good fresh fish at least once a week. Fish was simply grilled or maybe fried and inevitably appeared with crisp melt-in-the-mouth fries or creamy cauliflower cheese and the carrots that successfully hooked the family on our fish eating habits. I grew up to be a fish fanatic (although I love meat too) as have my own adult children even if their idea of a childhood treat when friends came round for tea was Captain Birdseye's very own cod fish fingers. Young mothers take heart!

I grew up between two of our great salmon rivers the Wye and the Severn. There was no salmon farming then; there was just local salmon, "the inferior" imported Canadian salmon and that Sunday evening supper treat of the fifties and sixties, tinned salmon.

Fresh local salmon came into season in early summer; boards were proudly posted outside every hotel and café in the area heralding the advent of their Salmon Teas. Sadly today the salmon season, comes and goes in this same area without causing the slightest ripple.

I worked in Rome for many years and Campo di Fiori where I lived offered a thronging daily market of stalls selling everything from flowers to frying pans and of course fish of every kind. I was young and single and did not "do" cooking. Eating out in that part of Rome was cheap. Cooking was for high days and holidays but slowly, slowly I took on board the multifarious squid and octopus, the myriad prawns and array of molluscs and learned to mimic the dishes I ate in the Piazza's eateries.

When I came home to Britain to live in Cornwall I was shocked to find that even though mussels clung to every rock at low tide, no one ate them and there was nowhere to buy them. If I was lucky local divers brought ashore silken scallops undisturbed still in their Venus shells thus adding to my repertoire of seafood cooking skills.

I came back to live in this area to find that little had changed since my childhood; fish was still hard to source. Since then many supermarkets have started selling a good range of fresh fish which is very useful. However in Ross our very own fish man who has come down from Fleetwood every Wednesday for the best part of forty years offers quality and freshness that you will not find elsewhere locally.

For those who care to travel in search of something extra-special; there is the magnificent fish stall at the back of Gloucester Market and Vin Sullivans in Blaenavon. Today there is also the very fine Cooks at Westbury-on-Severn, home of the Severn and Wye Smoke House.

For thousands of years man had little more than rods, lines, pots and hand harvesting to rely on but with today's greedy fishing methods many fish such as cod and plaice have been over fished. We are often told we must look to sustainable sources but it is difficult to define just what is sustainable. Therefore the best course of action is to diversify and next time; try something different!

On my travels I have paddled my way around countless wholesale fish markets where the choice is mind bending, as is the quality and freshness. I have gleaned my own fish cooking skills from far and near and have long promoted fish preparation and cookery. However in July I shall be joining forces with Vin Sullivan, one of this area's best known purveyors of fish to open a new fish and cookery school; thus starting a new chapter in my long history as a fish lover.



Cook and food writer Lindy Wildsmith runs the g2club, holding regular demonstrations and hands-on cookery courses at the Orles Barn Hotel in Ross-on-Wye. She also hosts cookery classes with Franco Taruschio and James Summerin at the Chef's Room Blaenavon. For details see the advert on Page 15.

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