

How to broil a bottom-feeder

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VANCOUVER — You know what not to eat: Chilean sea bass is a no-no, monkfish is totally taboo. You've double-checked SeaChoice.org for a list of aquatic life that's not ethically verboten, maybe even read Taras Grescoe's *Bottomfeeder* for a deeper insight into the fish crisis.

But what are these exotic-looking critters in your fridge? And how do you turn them into something worth eating?

Rick Moonen feels your pain. The chef-owner of RM Seafood in Las Vegas has been front and centre in the movement toward sustainable seafood in the United States for many years, and believes enjoying fish has never been so fraught.

He recognizes how difficult it is for consumers not to navigate their way to a piece of ethically caught fish, but to know what to do with the darned thing once they've bought it.



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Don't be afraid to experiment with ethical fish at home, says chef Rick Moonen, co-author of *Fish without a Doubt*. The cookbook offers instructions on preparing such sustainable seafood as broiled sardines: Serve them with your favourite hummus and pita bread; drizzle the sardines with olive oil, sprinkle on some salt and curble on oregano if they're not marinated.



His message: "Be less afraid."

His new cookbook, *Fish Without a Doubt*, is designed to make choosing and cooking seafood at home a breeze. First, he proffers a list of what's okay and what is environmentally unsound, with information and links to the organizations that keep this information up to date.

Then he turns to the practicalities, keen to assuage readers of their fear of cooking fish.

"Even your average home cook is nervous about fish," Mr. Moonen says from Las Vegas. "It's expensive and they don't want to ruin it - you can pay \$30 for a piece of halibut, and you don't want it to turn out bad. I really want to see more people have successful seafood meals at home."

The book offers step-by-step guides on removing "wings" from squid, snipping off the faces of soft-shell crabs and shucking oysters without spearing your palm.

Feel good about the choices you've made, Mr. Moonen says.

He calls sardines - never far from the table in Mediterranean countries - "almost the perfect ocean product for your health." Full of protein, calcium, iron, phosphorous, potassium and omega-3 fatty acids, all they need is a grill or broiler, "a squirt of lemon, some good olive oil and crusty bread." (If small bones bother you, the book has instructions on how to butterfly sardines and anchovies.)

Mackerel is dispatched just as easily: Baked over a base of potatoes and topped with a tangy olive and anchovy puttanesca sauce; spiced up in burgers with jalapenos; or cured in a ceviche of rum and pineapple. Be sure it's really fresh, Mr. Moonen notes: "It's a fish that deteriorates rapidly. Check for bright, shiny skin and a clean aroma."

He also made sure to include substitutes for each recipe.

"You want to buy the seafood that looks the best that day," he explains. "If you go to the market and they either don't have what you needed, or it just doesn't look fresh, then knowing what can sub in the recipe really helps."

A pineapple-carrot ceviche with sea scallops, for example, can also be made with grouper, black sea bass, Arctic char or squid. To be sure his dishes can be recreated comfortably in the average kitchen, Mr. Moonen decamped to co-author Roy Finamore's apartment.

"This was your typical New York kitchen," he laughs. "One stove, four burners, one oven, regular pots and pans. ... I wasn't about to fill a book with recipes from my archives - these were all created specifically for the book in a small, basic kitchen."

But as much as he wants people to cook and eat more fish - a large part of the book is about motivating them to do so with a clear conscience.

"Our children are going to see the collapse of fisheries and this is a call to arms," Mr. Moonen argues. "All wild fish are going to be commercially extinct and we need to get the message across that there's a problem in the ocean."

While he hopes people will make changes in their purchasing, he looks to governments to take the lead.

"They need to make regulatory changes," he says. "The U.S. West Coast salmon fisheries were shut down this year - five years too late."

Mr. Moonen has seen first-hand how such action can make a difference. He was prominent in the Give Swordfish a Break campaign, launched in 1998 when 27 East Coast chefs took the fish off their menus and demanded action. The campaign ended in 2000 when the National Marine Fisheries Service announced the protection of key nursery populations within U.S. waters. Two years later, swordfish had reached 94 per cent of full recovery.

Still, it doesn't help, he says, when organizations send out confusing signals.

"Whole Foods puts Chilean sea bass back in its stores because it has a reliable source but what message does that actually send?" he asks. "Suddenly, people think Chilean sea bass is universally okay again."

Keeping it interesting in the kitchen, he says, is the key to enjoying fish at home.

"Let's mix it up a little. Don't get fixated on the one fish you know how to cook, or forgo fish altogether because cooking squid or sardines scares you. With just a little effort, you can take your level of comfort to the next level."

Broiled sardines

If you have the time and inclination, marinate the sardines. But even if you don't, they will still be blistered, browned and delicious. Serve them with your favourite hummus and pita bread, which you can warm under the griddle while you broil the fish.

Marinade

What you need

2 teaspoons cumin seeds, toasted (see below)

1/4 cup olive oil

1 tablespoon chopped garlic

What you do

To toast the cumin seeds, put seeds in a small heavy skillet, either over medium heat or in a preheated 350 F oven. Shake the pan often, until the seeds are lightly coloured and aromatic. Remove them from the skillet immediately so they don't burn and let cool before you grind them.

Stir the oil, garlic and cumin seeds together in a dish large enough to hold the sardines in a single layer. Roll the sardines in the marinade, coating them, then cover with plastic and refrigerate for three to four hours.

Broiled Sardines

What you need

8 sardines, scaled and gutted

Extra virgin olive oil

Coarse sea salt

About 1/2 teaspoon dried oregano (if not marinating the fish)

Lemon wedges

What you do

Set a cast-iron griddle on the top oven rack and heat the broiler for at least 15 minutes.

When the griddle is searing hot, remove the sardines from the marinade. (If you haven't marinated them, rub the fish generously with olive oil and season with salt.) Broil until the skin is blistered and browned and the tails are charred, about four minutes.

Drizzle the sardines with olive oil. Sprinkle on some salt and crumble on the oregano if you haven't marinated the sardines. The lemon wedges go on the plates. Serve while the sardines are hot.

Serves 4.

Butterflying sardines and anchovies

Scale the fish with your fingers under cold running water, working from the tail to the head. Be gentle - the skin is delicate.

Stand the fish on its belly on a cutting board and make a cut right behind the front fins and through the spine. Hold the body of the fish in one hand and the head in the other. Bend the head down toward the belly, pulling it off. Most of the guts will come out as you do this.

Push your index finger into the cavity you've made at the head end and open the fish up along its belly. Remove the remaining guts and rinse.

With the fish on its back, work your index finger under the spine at the head end. When your finger is in to the first knuckle, slide in your middle finger too. This will lift the small bones from the flesh. Continue working your fingers under the bones until you reach the tail. Pinch off the spine at the tail.

Lay the fish flat on your working surface and trim the edges. Pat down any ragged flesh.

Mackerel with puttanesca and potatoes

I like making this satisfying, warming casserole in individual gratin dishes, but you can just as easily make it in one larger dish — just increase the cooking time by five minutes. Make the puttanesca and boil the potatoes a day ahead and the dish will be a snap to put together. This pasta sauce is actually a great accompaniment to fish. It's the start of a fine fish casserole, too.

Accept substitutes: Try this recipe with bluefish or filleted, fresh sardines.

What you need

Olive oil

1 pound white or red-skinned potatoes, boiled until tender, peeled and sliced

Coarse salt

4 tablespoons dry vermouth

4 (6- to 7-ounce) pieces mackerel fillet

Freshly ground white pepper

2 cups puttanesca sauce (recipe below)

1 cup dry bread crumbs

2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

2 garlic cloves, minced or put through a press

What you do

Preheat the oven to 450 F. Oil four individual gratin dishes (two-cup capacity) generously with olive oil. Divide the potatoes among the dishes and season with salt. Sprinkle one tablespoon vermouth into each dish. Season the fish with salt and white pepper. Lay the fillets on top of the potatoes and spread 1/2 cup of the puttanesca sauce over each, covering it completely. Mix the bread crumbs, parsley, garlic and two teaspoons of olive oil together in a small bowl. Sprinkle the crumbs over the casseroles, dividing them as evenly as you can.

Slip the casseroles into the oven and bake until the potatoes are piping hot and the fish is cooked through, about 12 minutes.

Serves 4.

Puttanesca

What you need

1/4 cup olive oil
1 cup chopped onion
1/4 cup chopped garlic
8 to 10 anchovy fillets, chopped
Crushed red pepper
3 cups chopped tomatoes (Pomi preferred)
1/2 cup sliced kalamata or other black olives
1/4 cup drained capers

What you do

Add oil and onion to medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Stir often, until the onion is translucent, about seven minutes. Add the garlic and continue cooking until the onion turns gold at the edges, another three to four minutes. Add the anchovies and a good pinch of crushed red pepper and stir until the anchovies start to melt, about one minute. Add the tomatoes, olives and capers and bring to a simmer. Reduce the heat and let the sauce simmer for 15 minutes, or until thick and fragrant.

You can use the sauce now or refrigerate it for up to one week.

Makes about three cups.

Grilled squid

At its best, grilled squid is tender and sweet, and almost creamy inside. The secret to keeping it tender is cutting off the tip of the body. That way you won't have any steam buildup, which can toughen the squid.

You can prepare the squid inside in a cast-iron grill pan or fire up your outdoor grill.

What you need

Olive oil
About 1 1/2 pounds cleaned squid
Coarse salt and freshly ground white pepper
Chopped fresh parsley
Asian Vinaigrette (recipe below)

What you do

Heat a cast-iron grill pan to almost smoking or fire up an outdoor grill. If using a grill, when the coals are hot set the grate on the lowest level (closest to the coals) and get it very hot, then brush the grate with olive oil.

Meanwhile, cut the tips from the squid bodies and discard. Dry the squid well with paper towels. Season the squid lightly with salt and white pepper. Drizzle with a little olive oil and toss to coat the squid.

Start by grilling the tentacles (which will take the longest) and the biggest squid bodies. Then add the smaller bodies. Press down on them with the back of a spatula to get grill marks, then turn the pieces over. The squid bodies will seem to inflate and turn milky white and opaque as they cook.

If you are grilling indoors, total cooking time for the bodies will be about 90 seconds; the tentacles may take up to two minutes. If you are grilling outdoors, total time for the bodies will be about 75 seconds; the tentacles will take about 1 1/2 minutes.

Shower the squid with chopped parsley and serve with a bowl of the garlic butter sauce or the vinaigrette for dipping.

Serves 4 as an appetizer.

Asian Vinaigrette

This tangy dressing works well with all sorts of salads. It doesn't emulsify the way a French-style vinaigrette will; just give it a shake before you use it.

Vietnamese fish sauce (*nuoc nam*) can be found in most Asian markets and in many specialty food and grocery stores. Look for the Golden Boy brand. Thai chili peppers are what I prefer, but any hot pepper will work. Whatever you use, though, don't seed it.

What you need




1/3 cup vegetable oil
1/3 cup fish sauce
1/4 cup fresh lime juice
1/4 cup rice vinegar
2 tablespoons sugar
1 tablespoon chopped garlic
1 teaspoon chopped hot pepper

What you do

Combine all the ingredients in a jar and give them a good shake. Use as needed in a salad and keep the leftovers in the refrigerator.

Makes about 1 1/4 cups.

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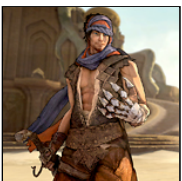
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