

From Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

Stuffed Mackerel

by Lydia Lovell

While there may not be a lot of them left, a few things are just as good today as when Aunt Olivia was presiding over her kitchen. One of those things is a fish native to our waters. Not everyone agrees, of course, that mackerel makes one of the finest meals ever served. There are those who look upon mackerel, even the small sweet ones that weigh only a pound or so and once were called "Tinker mackerel," as inedible. True, mackerel is oily and carries a distinctive flavor. Those very characteristics make it a favorite with some of us. We considered stuffed mackerel a special treat when I was growing up, and I still do.

Before setting down all the particulars for cooking mackerel, let us first discuss how to handle it between the moment it leaves the water and the time it is placed in the pan ready for the oven. Most important of all is the way it is cleaned and dressed. Uncle Henry always kept fresh-caught mackerel cool and wet until he brought them home and informed Aunt Olivia how much fish she could count on for dinner.

Then he drew two buckets of cold water, gathered up a stack of newspapers, slipped his fish-cleaning knife and kitchen shears into his hip pocket, and set out for the woodshed. On the bench, there, he spread the newspapers a dozen sheets thick and laid the fish out in a row, preparing to scale them.

To remove fish scales, you grab a fish by its tail, hold it with the head away from you, and push the back of your knife firmly "against the grain," first on one side of the fish and then on the other. Fish scales fly in all directions, which is the reason the activity should be conducted only out-of-doors or in some other place far removed from household operations. A place where you can make a terrible mess and on one cares is ideal.

Once the scales are off, it's a good idea to rinse all the fish in a bucket of cold water. Rinse off your knife, too. And your hands. Roll up the top couple sheets of newspapers to get rid of most of the scale mess. Lay your fish out on a clean sheet of paper.

Next you want to remove the dorsal fin that runs down the back of the fish. If you remove it now, cleaning the fish without jabbing yourself on the fin bones will be much easier. Presuming you are right-handed, lay the fish on its right side, with its left side up, its head away from you. Place your left hand, palm down, on the body of the fish.

Don't squeeze. And don't press down any harder than you must. Fish flesh is tender; you don't want to bruise it. Hold the fish just firmly enough so that with your sharp knife you can slice through the skin, just above the fin bones, all the way from the back of the fish's "neck" to where the dorsal fin ends, near its tail.

Now turn the fish over, reverse head and tail, and repeat the process, cutting in towards the backbone, about a quarter of an inch. Spin the fish around, once more, so its head is away from you again. The fin, and its interior bones, should



be quite loose, now, from the body. With your knife held as though you were about to hull a strawberry, take the tip of the fin nearest the head between the flat of your knife blade and your thumb. Pull. The entire fin, including the interior bones, will come out in one long strip. Not only have you eliminated the possibility of stabbing yourself on a fin bone, but you have eliminated a lot of little bones that might catch in someone's throat when they eat the fish.

Now you are ready to begin removing the head. Take a good look at the fish. Back of its mouth are gills and behind the gills is a small fin on each side of the fish. You want to remove both those fins, the gills, and the head, all at once.

Hold the fish upright in your left hand, as though it were swimming. Aiming behind those two little fins, cut straight down, just back of them, but not all the way through the fish only through the backbone. Now stop.

Lay the fish on its left side, its head away from you, its right side up, its belly on your right. You will see a hole in the belly near the tail. Insert the tip of your knife into the fish where the hole is and run the blade up the belly, cutting outward, through the skin of the fish as far as the "neck." You will immediately see you have exposed the entrails.

Using the kitchen shears, snip the narrow piece of skin connecting the fish's head to its belly. As the head is freed, it and most of the fish's gut will come away, leaving the cavity virtually clean. Should anything remain in the cavity, scrape it out with your knife blade.

Cutting off the fish's tail and snipping away any remaining fin at the edge of the belly finishes up the process. Rinse your fish in clean water and gently wipe it dry; use a sheet of newspaper or keep a roll of paper towels handy for the purpose.

The fish is now ready for the pan. Roll up the top few sheets of newspaper so you'll have a clean surface to work on as you reach for another fish.

While Uncle Henry went through this procedure with each of the mackerel he had caught, Aunt Olivia mixed up the stuffing and put half-a-dozen well-scrubbed baking potatoes into the oven. After setting me to work making about three cups of crumbs from the heels of bread she had saved for just such an occasion, she busied herself chopping up an onion and two or three stalks of celery. These she fried quickly in a few tablespoons of butter or margarine, then tossed with the bread crumbs. To that mixture, she added a half teaspoon of salt, a pinch of pepper, a teaspoon of poultry dressing, a quarter teaspoon of dry mustard, and poured in a little hot water, enough to hold the mixture together.

When Uncle Henry brought the fish into the kitchen, Aunt Olivia laid them in a shallow baking pan (I line my pan with foil to make clean-up easy) and filled their cavities with stuffing. The pan was then popped into the oven to bake along with the potatoes. Now there was time to prepare a vegetable and toss a salad before the fish was ready.

When the skin was crisp and the fish meat flaky and white, Aunt Olivia knew the fish was done. She stripped off the top skin easily; then, with a broad spatula, lifted one entire side of the fish off its backbone and slid it onto a dinner plate. With care, the backbone and all the bones attached to it could then be removed. Again, the broad spatula lifted the remaining half fish, leaving the bottom skin in the pan. For any normal appetite, half a mackerel is an ideal serving.

Often, however, Aunt Olivia served me a whole tinker mackerel and I polished off every smitch and smidgeon and gobbled up, as well, a serving of stuffing, a good-sized potato, a helping of vegetables, and a salad. Perhaps I declined dessert, but I wouldn't swear to that.