

From Aunt Olivia's kitchen - a fish story

by Lydia Lovell

June 30, 1983 VILLAGE ADVERTISER

Living, as we do, within scent of the sea, we may consider ourselves fortunate; the ocean not only provides inspiring views, infinite entertainment, and a moderating effect on both hot and cold weather, but salt waters make available fresh fish for our tables.

Despite this precious advantage, many cooks neglect the bounties of the sea, apparently under the impression fish is difficult to prepare and clean up after, or smells up the kitchen. Nothing could be further from the truth!

Coming in many sizes, shapes and kinds, fish adds enormously to gustatory pleasures and makes a welcome change from red meats. Not only is fish an excellent source of low-fat protein, but the finickiest of eaters finds fresh fish, properly prepared, a delight to the taste buds. And yet, I hear people say, "I eat fish only in restaurants...it's such a chore to cook."

If you believe fish is complicated to serve at home, I submit the following: (1) Overcooked fish is ruined; cook it quickly, only until the pearly gray meat turns pure white and flakes when lightly broken with a fork. (2) The easiest to cook fish is to bake it. To eliminate clean-up chores, line a shallow pan with heavy-duty aluminum foil. (After serving the portions, just fold the foil-edges toward the center and discard immediately. Return the pan to the still-hot oven; by after-dinner, any fishy odor is gone.) (3) Because most properly cleaned fish is bone-free, everything you pay for is consumed, eliminating waste.

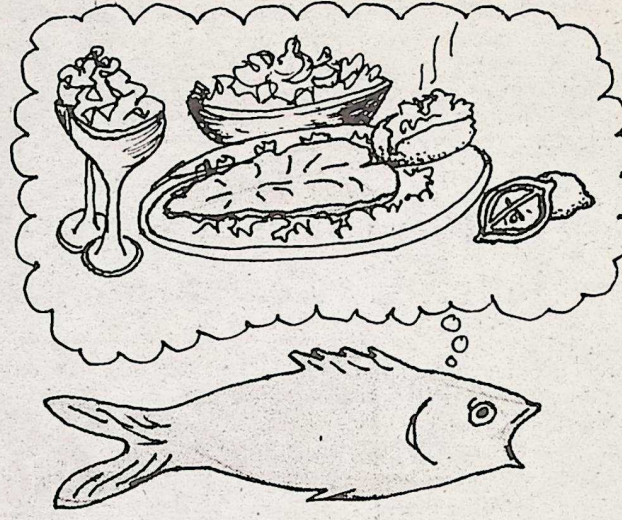
Fish may be divided into two major categories: shell and fin. Shellfish include oysters, clams, scallops, crabs, lobsters, mussels and quahogs; finny fishes come in so many kinds the list is cumbersome, but can be broken into two more subdivisions: oily and dry.

Among oilies are mackerel, bluefish, striped bass and swordfish; to those fond of oilies, these are the most popular. Dry fishes include flounder (sometimes called filet of sole), cod and haddock, to name but a few favorites.

Assuming those at your table often enjoy fish when eating out, I urge you to take courage. Cook fish at home. Once you've taken the plunge, fish will appear often on your menus.

Remember that any and all fish, to be fit to eat, **must** be fresh. If you catch it yourself, wonderful. If you purchase it from a harborside fish market, usually it's right out-of-the-water. If you buy fish at a case in the supermarket, it may or may not be the same-day's catch. If it smells when you unwrap it at home, chances are it's older than it ought to be.

Allow up to half-a-pound per person when ordering dry fish; even less for oily ones, for their meat is richer. At home with your dressed fish, unwrap it, wipe with a paper towel, wrap loosely in waxed paper, and refrigerate until cooking



time.

Fish may be fried, poached, broiled, or baked. Except for scallops, cherrystone clams or oysters-on-the-half-shell, raw fish is not a recommended dish to serve most Americans. The Japanese, though, relish raw fish.

To bake fish, prepare a shallow pan, large enough to accommodate the piece or pieces without crowding, by lining it with a generous-sized sheet of heavy-duty aluminum foil. Crumple the foil edges over the top of the pan to keep it clean. Pour about a tablespoon of cooking oil in the bottom and, with your fingertips, oil the foil, bottom and sides.

Several herbs and flavors enhance the taste of fish. Lemon is often used to cut the oiliness of the richer meats. For drier kinds, either tarragon or rosemary lend delicate savor. Experiment to see which appeals most to palates of the household.

Thirty to forty-five minutes before serving time, remove fish from refrigerator and place it in the pan. Now your culinary art comes into play. Preheat oven to 350°.

Place a few small dabs of butter on top of fish, dust with several snipped fresh rosemary leaves (or ¼ tsp. of dried). Or, arrange a sprig of fresh tarragon (or a much smaller amount of the dried crumbled leaf found in cans at grocery spice racks) and top with a thin slice or two of lemon (or sprinkle on a tablespoon of lemon juice).

Pop in the oven, reset temperature to 325°, and set the timer for 20 minutes if baking sole (flounder); if your piece of fish is thick (it will be if you've brought home cod or haddock), allow up to 45 minutes for baking. Do not overcook.

To vary the above recipe, omit the seasonings. Instead, mix two tablespoons of grated parmesan cheese into a half cup of milk. Pour over and around the fish. Bake as above.

Should you choose an oily fish... mackerel, striped bass, or bluefish... you may want to prepare a bread stuffing, just as you would for a roasting chicken. Aunt Olivia dried her bread heels and used them up this way.

Melt a stick of oleo in a large frying pan. Dice 2 large stalks of celery and one medium onion. Saute until translucent, but not brown. Meanwhile, break bread into large crumbs in a bowl, add one tsp. salt, ¼ tsp. black pepper, ½ tsp. dry mustard, ½ tsp. poultry seasoning, and a pinch of sage. Add to onions and celery, and stir until bread absorbs oleo. Return to bowl. Add an unbeaten egg and stir until blended. If mixture is too dry to hold together, add hot water, a little at a time, until stuffing is moistened enough to shape.

If your fish is in one piece with a cavity where its innards were removed, stuff the dressing into the pocket. If the fish is filet, pile dressing into bottom of pan, mound to approximately the same size and shape as the filet, and lay the fish on top.

Bake at 325° for 30 minutes for fish up to an inch thick; if thicker, increase time to 45 minutes. Check before serving to be sure meat is white throughout.

Baked potatoes with sour cream are good with baked fish. So, too, are small boiled potatoes, browned in butter and parsleyed. When potatoes are fork-tender, pour off cooking water, add 1 Tbsp. butter, snip up a quarter cup of fresh parsley, and toss in pan. Cover and brown at very low heat for ten minutes, shaking pan occasionally to prevent sticking. Kernel corn is also good with fish, and a tossed green salad. Or arrange Boston lettuce leaves in individual salad bowls, cut tomatoes into sixths, slice a small sweet onion, and dust with dried oregano leaves. Drizzle on an oil and vinegar dressing and refrigerate for half-an-hour.

Fresh fruit complements a fish dinner; a compote of sliced oranges, bananas, strawberries, topped with lime sherbet is a perfect finale. Or try Pineapple Delight for a make-ahead, richer dessert.

PINEAPPLE DELIGHT (Serves 4)

1 Lg. can crushed pineapple (drained)
½ Cup heavy cream, whipped
1 Cup small marshmallows
4 crumbled macaroons

Mix ingredients with drained pineapple. Refrigerate at least 3 hours. Whip cream, add crushed macaroons. Fold mixtures together. Heap into sherbet glasses, and top with maraschino cherries or coarsely chopped walnuts. Chill until serving time.

Can you buy a fish dinner this good at a restaurant?