

A Gastronomy of Barbel

In our modern era of Angling we take it as written that all fish are returned to their environment regardless of the circumstance. We angle for the sheer pleasure of it and don't need to worry about fishing to put food on the table.

Clearly a few trout and salmon end up on the table but even here the practice is diminishing with many salmon fisheries having a strict catch and release policy.

Commercial trout fisheries encourage catch and release by discounting their tickets to encourage the practice. Most anglers will even think twice about killing an eel for the pot given the parlous state of the eel population.

In some European cultures the eating of freshwater fish continues but even this is generally out of tradition at celebration times, they much prefer a Big Mac in these modern times.

This practice of caring for our fish is of course quite recent in the overall scheme of human existence. Until around a hundred years ago fishing was generally a search for food. Sea fish were generally hard to come by if you didn't live near the sea and in consequence freshwater fish were there to provide a source of protein. Of course rivers and lakes were closely guarded by their riparian owners, particularly so where game fish were concerned. But on any water with free fishing it was no doubt a free for all. Yet despite the taking of fish for the pot fish populations appear to survive. Indeed it is well documented that the apprentices of London once complained at the relentless diet of salmon they were

fed from the Thames, this obviously predates the total destruction of the Thames tideway by pollution. There are similar accounts of a large eel fishery on the Thames and of bleak netted from the river in huge quantities not for food but for their scales to be used for various decorative purposes. In the UK as we came to the close of the Victorian era attitudes began to change firstly with the Mundella Act which introduced the closed

although I have it on good authority that for a good few years after World War 2 all fish weighed in were allowed to die and collected up to be used for pig food. This practice soon ceased in the 50s but the carrying of fish in canvas buckets to a central weigh point persisted into the early 80s and not surprisingly resulted in many fish deaths.

I began my club fishing with an L.A.A. affiliated club in the early 60s which as

treat fish today compared to the past.

My wife obtained a copy of Rick Stein's Spanish cooking book. Tucked away in the Extramadura Regional chapter is a recipe for Tenchin a sweet and sour marinade, *escabeche*. This got me thinking and looking for other unusual freshwater fish recipes not, I hasten to add, for being used but just out of curiosity.

I looked through large collection of cook books at home finding the predictable plethora of recipes for trout and salmon, in one American cookbook recipes for catfish and walleye were to be found along with the odd carp recipe in some Chinese books.

It was only when I ventured into the pages of the *New Larousse Gastronomique* which proclaims itself as 'The World's Greatest Cookery Reference Book' that I found a recipe for barbel. Sacrilege I hear you cry but in this mighty tome there is a lengthy description of the barbel and particular reference to its feeding habits which includes the taking of crickets and grasshoppers in the autumn for which the barbel rises to the surface. Large barbel from the Loire are considered the best and may be poached, braised, baked or roasted. The smaller fish known as barbillons are grilled or fried; the soft roe of

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seasons which we continue to debate to this day.

As groups of working class anglers began to form clubs and associations rules about the number and size of fish retained for the pot started to appear. The London Anglers Associations size limit regulations appeared meaning only fish over a certain size would count in a match which in practice meant only qualifying fish would be retained in a keepnet with undersize fish generally returned immediately. Only one fish exceeding the appropriate size limit could be retained for the pot

a young teenager gave me access to coach outings to many of the Association's fisheries. I can recall many occasions when a fat eel or jack pike would go home on the coach with its captor, however, the most unusual fish to receive the coup de grace was a tench caught from the Suffolk Stour at Bures. The captor was a bloke of Spanish origin who was more delighted to have a fat tench for his supper than to have won some of the match pool for coming second on the day.

It was this event that in a roundabout way which got me thinking about how we

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barbel are a delicate flavour, however, the hard roe is reputed to be poisonous.

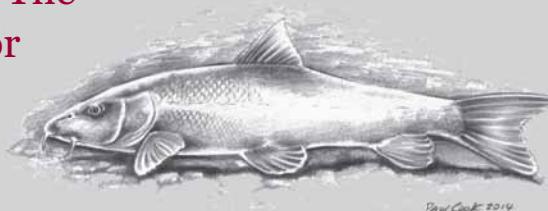
The book then goes on to provide a dozen or so quite complicated recipes.

Next a trawl through my fishing book collection found me consulting a book I had hardly looked at, a random purchase from a Charity Shop judging by the sticker on the cover. Freshwater Fishing by Buller and Falkus (*first published in 1975*) is as much a recipe book as it is a book about angling.

There are recipes for everyone of our UK species including burbot, good luck finding one of those.

In the barbel chapter they list recipes from various authors including Dame Juliana Berners "A Treatysse of Fysshynge with an Angle (1496)" where she writes "The Barbel is a swete fysshe, but it is aquasymeete and perilous for manrys body". I think this roughly translates

"The barbel is soft and moist, of easy concoction, and very pleasant taste; of good nourishment, but somewhat muddy and excremental. The greater excel the lesser for meat, because their superfluous moisture is amended by age"



to it causing an upset stomach for some people. Mrs Beeton has her recipe for barbeu as does the much revered Auguste Escoffier. Two little snippets that caught my eye however were these.

"But timorous barbels will not taste the bit till with their tayles they have unhooked it, and all the baytes the fisher can deuse cannot beguile their warie jealousies."

Guillaume de Saluste du Bartas, La Semaine (1578)".

It would seem from this statement that barbel were just as hard to catch in the 16th century.

"The barbel is soft and moist, of easy concoction, and very pleasant taste; of good nourishment, but somewhat muddy and excremental. The greater excel the lesser for meat, because their superfluous moisture is amended by age. The spawn of them is to be objected to as most offensive to the belly and stomach."

T Venner: *Offish. From Via Recta ad Vitam Longam* (1650).

Clearly a century or more later barbel were still causing upset stomachs for those who sought to eat them.

Nothing from the past would tempt me to use a barbel for culinary purposes, however, catching a rising barbel on a grass hopper sounds like a lot of fun, with even more fun to be had debating it with Fred had he still been with us.

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