

The Joys of Fresh Whole Fish

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A baked whole fish dish is seen in Concord, N.H., on Nov. 16, 2015. AP Photo/Matthew Mead



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Commentary

Growing up in West Texas, I knew not fresh fish from the grocery store. Back in the day, the stores did not even carry the flash-frozen

fish that is common now.

Everything was beef, always beef, and I barely knew anything else. Moving to adulthood, I had no idea how to cook fish, and I never ordered it because I was not used to the flavor.



True, sometimes as a boy my family would go fishing in freshwater lakes, clean the fish, bread it with corn meal, and cook the results in hot oil. That always seemed like camping to me, not normal eating. Somehow I never connected fish eating with the normal course of life. After all, we also ate snakes that my father shot with his pistol. True story. This was not food but survival.

Then, many decades later, came a boat trip. It was somewhere in the Aegean Sea. I was there for an event. The boat stopped and the crew threw lines in the water. Up came some fish that had previously been swimming around. A chef cleaned it out, put it on the grill, and, to my astonishment, put it on a plate and put it in front of me. I was expected to eat it, just like that.

I watched carefully as others took on the task, using a knife to spit the first down the backside, flipping half to one side and carefully removing the middle bone and putting it to one side. I did the same with some errors along the way. We all ate around a table. There were no other side dishes, just one whole fish.

That was a moment of revelation for me. I never imagined something like this was possible. It felt so foundational, so fundamental. It tasted absolutely delicious but the experience was a bit of a shock to me.

Then my mind raced back to my religious training when God filled the oceans with fish. Then an obvious point occurred to me. We are surrounded on all sides with food, just swimming around and exercising in order that we can catch it and eat it.

It was the diet built-in to the structure of the world that man could survive. We didn't need to outrun animals or cultivate gardens, not necessarily in any case. We could just get a line and reach into the water and pull out the food. In any case, this would apply to those who lived close enough to water.

I wondered if it would be possible to replicate in my own home. But there was one contingency: I needed to find a market with fresh fish.

I'm fortunate enough now to live in such an area, and I marvel constantly at the plentiful bounty available. Snapper, tilapia, bass of several sorts, bronzini, shark, mackerel, and so much more, all beautifully displayed on ice and ready for cleaning and eating. There is a certain drama associated with serving the whole fish, not the filets, because it's a reminder of precisely what it is we are eating and meant to eat.

To be sure, there can be mistakes along the way. Having fallen in love with the flavor of skate, I decided to buy a real stingray and skin it myself. Three hours later, I had finally finished and then discovered why the explainer YouTube video recommended using gloves and pliers. My hands swelled up with poison of course!

Most fish are far easier to manage. After that experience, I stuck with the more familiar ones.

A fresh-fish dinner party sounds like a great idea but there is a problem. People in the United States these days are oddly squeamish about actual food. For a very a long time, many generations at this point, our food has been packaged from the store in perfect presentation, ready for the microwave, and eaten like an industrial product.

That's how the chain restaurants serve food and people want the same thing at home.

As RFK, Jr., has pointed out most recently, much of this food is stuffed with strange chemicals and odd sweeteners and color agents designed

to make it all more delicious than nature itself. Once you start eating this way, it is hard to stop.

Once you start looking at ingredient lists, it's hard to find anything you can safely consume. Not even the most common tonic water is free of the sludge called high-fructose corn syrup.

Many people today, especially in light of the uniting of forces between Make America Great Again (MAGA) and Make America Healthy Again (MAHA), have dreamed for a return to whole foods and genuine health. It's going to be a hard slog because, quite frankly, Americans are addicted to awful food and have neither the palate nor the stomach for the real thing.

If you want a crash course and go cold turkey off chemicalized and processed food, I strongly suggest you go full-on with a straight-up whole fish on a plate, no sides. That's your food, period, end of story. Doing it this way is a blast and strangely resetting of one's tastes and sensibilities.

A major reason people are scared of this concerns cooking technique. For reasons I cannot follow, people think it is hard to cook a fish, whereas in truth, nothing is easier. I buy a whole fish at the fishmonger and have them clean it. I will typically soak it for a bit in salt and/or sugar for an hour and put it on a metal cookie sheet on top of some olive oil. Put it in an oven preheated to 350 degrees and forget about it for 30 minutes or so.

That's all there is to it. It is ready to eat. And there is a thrill in putting the whole thing on a plate, just by itself, with nothing else. It's like finding out who you are, biologically and anthropologically.

Sadly, most dinner guests will not be ready for such a treat.

The people who traffic my fishmonger the most are invariably foreign-born or otherwise trying to hang on to their roots and family heritage. They are from all over but typically not from the United States. At least, that is my experience, and it is telling. Our health in this country

has declined dramatically for a long time, and perhaps this is one reason.

The coming together of MAGA and MAHA in a united front is one of the most implausible developments of our time, because one group was considered right-wing and the other left-wing.

One day we all realized that the same agencies that overtax and overregulate enterprise have also made a mess of our food supply and medicines. It's so obvious once you see it that way but it was not so obvious even six months ago.

Indeed, in my case, I had long believed that to be a champion of the market economy meant to have a sanguine attitude toward chemical additives in food and pesticides and so on. I'm not sure what flipped me to realize that the cause of freedom itself requires grave skepticism toward all of this. Perhaps it was how the same people who gave us mRNA shots had also become champions of lab-grown meat and all sorts of other food fakery. That's when the scales fell from my eyes, in any case.

At any rate, a dramatic cultural shift has occurred in the course of just a few months, as new alliances have been formed against all modern precedent. The food-freedom movement has joined the health-freedom movement and joined the pro-Constitution movement and the religious-freedom movement, and all these groups have come together with the free-speech and free-enterprise movements.

It seems like millions have suddenly realized that freedom is all of a piece, and are determined to rebuild the world according to that principle.

Those are big thoughts but they all come down to the choices you make in your life. Perhaps you want to join me in a celebration of real food, starting with a fish served the way it comes in nature, straight of the water, right over the fire, and served on a plate in a way that lets the fish be a fish.

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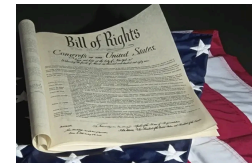


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