

# Mackerel - The most underrated fish in the sea

Contributed by Jonnyboy

If ever there was a fish that deserved better treatment, then *Scomber scombrus* is certainly it. Caught in the thousands by seaside holiday makers on two hour trips around the bay, bunged in a carrier bag for the drive back home and then dumped in the bin, a wasteful end to such a fantastic fish.

But for this writer the most ignoble fate that awaits our mackerel is the supermarket wet slab; fish several days old slowly drying out under fluorescent lights, turning greyer by the hour whilst shoppers wrinkle their noses in distaste and buy some farmed salmon. Those who buy it on cost chew their way through a bland, slightly rancid piece of insole. However, if every shopper could be given a mackerel two hours out of the sea then our opinion would change overnight.

Mackerel is, to a certain extent, the architect of its own downfall; plentiful and easy to catch thanks to a predatory reflex that causes it to attack most moving things smaller than itself, this little fish is almost given away during the summer months. Its cheapness and availability encourages a shocking wastefulness that leads one to believe that we only worry about fish stocks when it is too late.

Mackerel is an oily fish, rich in Omega-3 fatty acids which reduce cholesterol levels. Unfortunately one downside to this is that it deteriorates rapidly after death, anything more than two days old is certainly poor eating and same day mackerel is certainly the best; fresh from the sea it is a deep, fluorescent green over its tiger stripe camouflage, fading to a bluer shade soon after the obligatory knock on the head.

Fresh caught mackerel is meaty, firm and flavourful, its 'fishiness' is decidedly muted when really fresh, and by this I'm talking on the barbecue within two hours of leaving the sea. Get something like this and you really are eating one of the finest tasting fish from our waters and to do this you need to either catch some yourself or meet a day boat when it reaches harbour.

Fortunately during the summer months they reach shallow waters in huge numbers, chasing shoals of sand eel and sprats, this makes them easily accessible from harbour walls and rocks. Pound for pound mackerel are a hard fighting fish, their sport only limited by their size. You can fish for them with light spinning gear but as a downsizer you will want to maximise your catch (within reason) and so a three or four feather rig is a must.

By far the best technique is from a small boat, you will probably need to go no more than 200 yards offshore at most, you also give yourself the ability to throw the odd pot or fish for other species. I simply head out around the bay, hugging the coast for a mile or two but staying close in, pick up my pots, throw a couple of feather rigs over the side and then drift back in on the tide.

If you are fishing from the rocks, pier or harbour wall, then a longish cast followed by a gentle retrieve using a sink and then draw technique should put you into a shoal eventually. Pay attention to other anglers, patches of disturbed water, signs of birds feeding for an indicator that mackerel are present.

Alternatively, pick some up from a boat when it comes into harbour, but the important message that I'm trying to hammer home is get them as fresh as you possibly can.

So, you get your fish home and you need to prepare it, firstly scrape off any loose scales with the back of a knife, and then make an incision from the anal vent to the head, keeping the cut shallow to avoid piercing the guts, then insert your thumb and run along the cavity to remove the guts, (If you are careful, and lucky, then you might get some roe as well, but that's another article). With the guts removed, locate the dark bloodline that runs along the backbone and scrape out with a teaspoon or blunt knife. Run the fish under a cold tap and pull out any bits of guts that may remain in the cavity.

Now you have a perfect fish, ready for cooking. Simply slash it a few times on either side, pop a bay leaf in its cavity and sling it on the bbq for 5-6 mins each side. Squeeze over half a lime before serving and you will experience mackerel in its finest form.

My second favourite dish is Devilled Mackerel; the recipe below is taken from Rick Stein's Seafood.

Serves 4

4 x 12oz/350g mackerel  
1.5oz/40g butter  
1 tsp caster sugar

1 tsp English mustard powder  
1 tsp cayenne pepper  
1 tsp paprika  
1 tsp ground coriander  
2 tbsp red wine vinegar  
1 tsp freshly ground black pepper  
2 tsp salt

Heat the grill to high. Slash the mackerel skin at .5-in intervals on both sides, taking care not to cut too deeply. Melt the butter in a shallow, flameproof dish. Remove from the heat, stir in the sugar, mustard, spices, vinegar, seasoning and mix well. Add the mackerel and turn once or twice until well coated, spreading some of the mixture into the cavity of the fish. Transfer to a lightly oiled baking sheet or the rack of the grill pan and grill for four minutes a side, until cooked through.

I hope that this article has whet your appetite to rediscover this fish, it&rsquo;s not intended as a comprehensive guide to all things mackerel, but hopefully it will inspire you to seize one of these tasty little fish when the opportunity arises.