

A Fish Out of Water

NESTLED IN THE CENTER of the block-long strip that houses our farmer's market is a towering presence. The "fish guy", at 6'4", looms high above the seemingly diminutive bakers and providers of produce at the stands surrounding him.

Patrick Hannagan's ice-filled display case bears gifts from the rocky coastline of the Atlantic to the pristine waters of Alaska. Nature is truly benevolent in its bounty of globally accessible seafood. The glistening hues of pink shrimp and sunset colored orange salmon are astonishing. We're so fortunate to be the recipients of Neptune's largesse.

Whenever I offer fish from a menu, I'm showered with gratitude. There are so many people that say they always order seafood when eating out because they're afraid to make it at home. Statistics from the fish and wildlife information site reveal that Americans eat fish at home less than half as often as they do in restaurants. I overhear people asking the fish guy if a particular variety tastes fishy, yet I've never heard a butcher asked if the gorgeous porterhouse steak in his cooler tastes cow-y. A conundrum, to be sure.

We revel in the briny, salty smell of the sea if we're lucky enough to walk along an ocean's shore, yet we want the inhabitants of these waters to lose their perfume before coming to the table. Crazy, no?

There are multiple benefits to eating fresh seafood. Wild, line-caught ocean fish are organic, have a rich, bold flavor, yet are light in calories. They provide an excellent source of Omega 3 oils and protein, beneficial for glossy hair and strong nails. (However, there's no scientific proof that eating a diet laden with fresh fish will help you choose a good hair style.)

Fish are good natured once they come to the kitchen. They're filled with equanimity when asked what to have served with them. Rarely will a fish's flavor overwhelm anything surrounding it on a plate. They seem to be equally happy to be served with a simple salad and some roasted potatoes, or bubbling as the stars of bouillabaisse, a complex, fragrant fish stew. Being delicate creatures, they just require a few simple steps for their care.

Our fish guy suggests you buy fish that looks



PHOTO: GIRMANTAS URBONAS

KATHY HARRISON is a Barrington Hills resident who teaches the fine art of cooking. For more information, call 847-381-4828.

bright and firm. His products are delivered daily and have a rapid turnover. Once you purchase fish, keep it refrigerated and cook it within one to two days. Some varieties are more perishable than others. If in doubt, ask. Our farmers and fishermen love to talk about their wares and have techniques and suggestions they're willing to share.

So ... it's time to stare down this fear. It's so easy and gratifying to put together a marvelous meal just by strolling the short block that's home to our Thursday market. Fish without fear. Life is good. 

Fish Fillets with Tomatoes, Olives and Fresh Herbs - Serves 4

INGREDIENTS

- 3 tablespoons olive oil, divided
- 1 large onion, peeled and chopped into ½ inch dice
- 1 large red or yellow bell pepper, seeded and chopped into ½ inch dice
- 1 large clove garlic, peeled and minced
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1/8 teaspoon dried red pepper flakes, or to taste
- 1 ½ pounds fresh tomatoes, seeded and chopped, or 28 oz. can chopped tomatoes
- ½ cup oil cured olives, pitted and halved
- 4 red snapper or other firm white fish fillets, about 5-6 ounces each
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- ¼ cup fresh basil, chopped (optional)
- ¼ cup finely chopped flat leaf parsley leaves

PREPARATION

Heat 2 tablespoons olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. When the oil is hot, add the chopped onion and sauté until golden and lightly caramelized, about 5 minutes. Add the chopped bell pepper and cook until the pepper softens slightly, about 3-4 minutes. Add the minced garlic and sauté for an additional minute. Season with kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper. Stir in red pepper flakes, tomatoes, and olives. Bring the sauce to a simmer and cook for about 15 minutes until sauce is slightly thickened.

Meanwhile, season fish fillets lightly with salt and pepper. Place skin side down on the simmering sauce. Drizzle the fish fillets with lemon juice and the remaining tablespoon olive oil. Cover the pan and simmer the fish for 10-12 minutes.

Remove the fish to a serving platter, top with some sauce, and sprinkle with chopped fresh basil and parsley. Serve additional sauce at the table.