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# Whole Fish Cookbook

New ways to cook, eat and think

Josh Niland

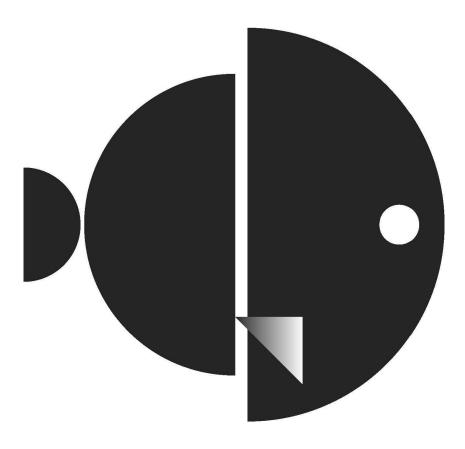
# **Keynote**

More than 60 exciting recipe ideas for sustainable ways to eat fish

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# THE WHOLE FISH COOKBOOK



New ways to cook, eat and think

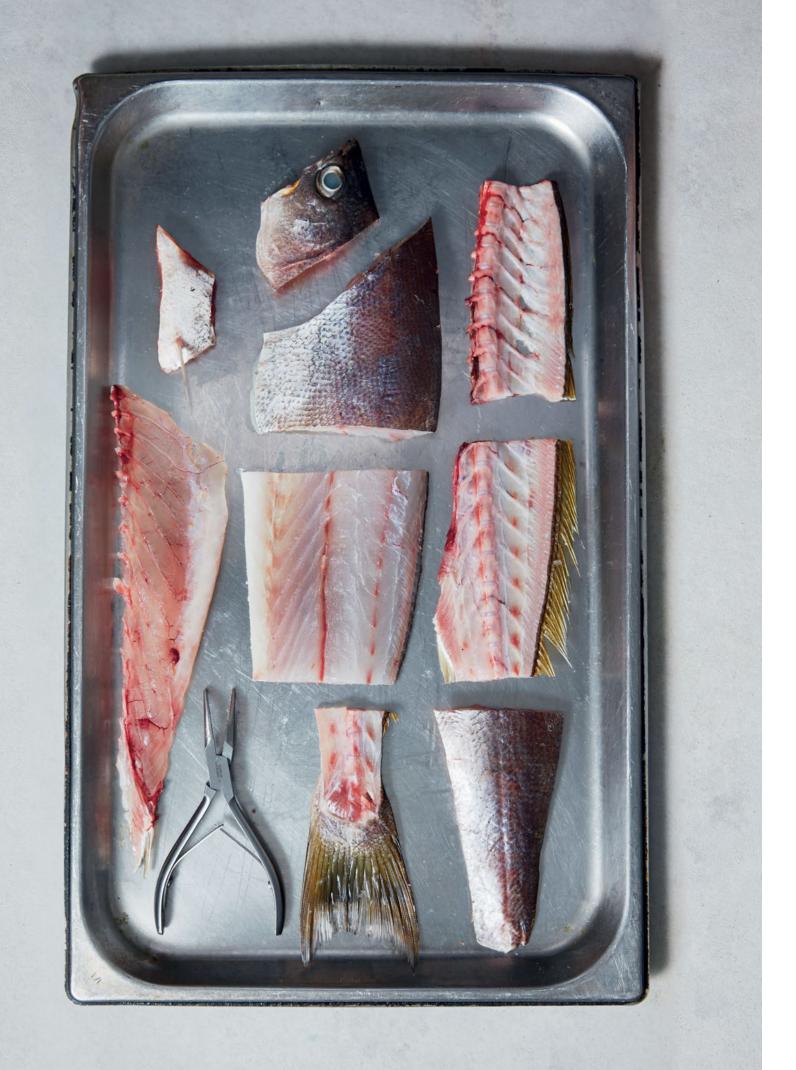
**JOSH NILAND** 



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# WHY NOT FISH?

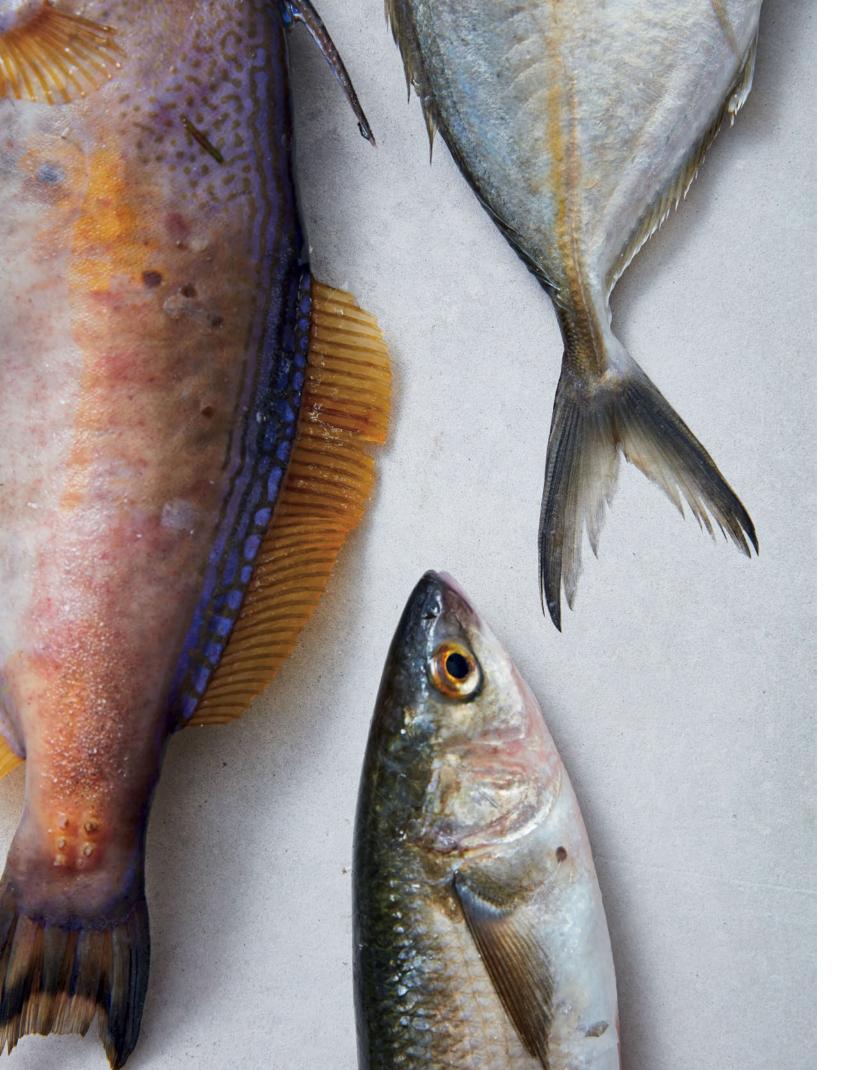
I firmly believe that fish is the one protein that most of us would like to consume more of, as we are so aware of its valuable health benefits. So why, then, do we cook so little of it in our own homes in comparison to meat? Why **not** fish?

The following pages go into detail on the various different factors at play but first things first, let's address the thing that puts most people off entirely – cooking fish can be extremely difficult due to the exhausting number of variables involved. These range from what time of year it is, what hour of the day the fish was caught and how it was caught, to how it was then transported to market (or, in our case, direct to the restaurant) and the time frame in which this takes place. There's also the question of how the fish has been stored and prepared. Has it come into contact with ice or water after death? How has it been scaled? Has it been

gutted? And how should it be cut? And that's all before you've got to the question of how, exactly, should the fish be cooked?

Seeing these variables written down looks overwhelming and some of these things might seem ridiculous or (to a degree) a little OCD, but for me, if one of these is not considered, the chain comes apart and the excellence in fish cookery that I want to achieve will not be possible.

To achieve best practice for all of these variables is no mean feat and is something that is probably not achievable on a mass scale. It is, however, what we strive to do at Fish Butchery and Saint Peter and what gives us, I believe, our point of difference. An understanding of these things, along with the rest of the factors at play that are detailed over the coming pages, will make a big difference to the way that you cook fish at home, too.



# SOURCING

One of the most enjoyable parts of my day happens in the morning, when I have a text full of fish options from my buyer at the market. This interaction with him is crucial in making good choices for the restaurant and butchery. In addition to this relationship, we also deal directly with local and interstate fisherman. This allows us to work in slightly greater volumes and also eliminates some of the (understandable) middleman costs associated with going through market spaces.

Conversations with fishermen throughout the week are also important for giving our team at the restaurant an insight into their world as well as their struggles, whether those are weather-related or other unforeseen issues, as it helps us to understand the price value of the fish and why some fish just aren't available in a particular week. Direct rapport between the chef and the fishermen allows us to educate our front-of-house team not only about different fish species, but also about where a particular fish has come from. It is a powerful thing to be able to tell

a customer the name of the fisherman who caught their dinner.

Knowledge of the source of the fish can also inform us about its flavour profile. If you know that a fish has fed on crustaceans or seagrasses, then it can be slightly easier to recognise distinct flavours when tasting it. Understanding the flavour of a fish often aids in a better decision on what garnish to pair with it or even a logical method of cookery. Often, the flavour of a fish is described with adjectives, such as flaky, creamy or delicious, and not actual words that best highlight a potential flavour profile and which might encourage the consumer to diversify their choices. Too many fish have a bad rap for their perceived flavour profile and are thrown aside as inferior options.

Before any of this can be considered, though, we need to understand what it is we are actually looking for in regards to quality. Your instincts as a consumer should place you in the best position to buy an excellent fish, and the following details should all be taken into account.

# 1. A fish with a firm mucus covering and shiny coating is the first sign of a good-quality fish.

This is something you can check visually by looking at the scale coverage across the fish. The mucus of a fish was something that always seemed a mystery to me when I first started learning about fish. The mucus basically provides protection to the fish in the open ocean by trapping pathogens that would cause disease. Antibodies and enzymes in the mucus actively attack those pathogens to protect the fish. When an old mucus layer containing the pathogens is shed, it is replaced by new mucus and the pathogens are lost. Any visual damage or imperfections on a fish can suggest poor handling, prolonged direct ice contact or variable temperature control.

# 2. The eyes of a fish are a determining factor of a healthy, fresh fish.

A fish's eyes should look bulbous, be risen slightly from the head and look moist, bright and clear. There are, however, times when a fish that looks spectacular in every other way can have cloudy, slightly foggy eyes. This is predominantly due to the fish being chilled too quickly post-harvest.

Note: If you see a fish at the market with eyes that protrude considerably from the head, rest assured there is nothing wrong with it. This is an example of barotrauma, where a deep-sea fish has been caught at great depths and the large change in pressure caused by it being brought to the surface causes the eyes (and often also the stomach) to become more visually prominent than other species.

# 3. A fresh fish should not smell fishy.

As not every supplier or seller will allow you to handle the fish they are displaying, it is best to revert to your nose. Even the fish I dry-age for upwards of twenty days carry little to no aroma. The only smells a fish should have are a light ocean water smell sometimes comparable to mineral driven aromas, such as cucumber or parsley stems. If a fish smells 'fishy' (see page 78), with an odour comparable to that of ammonia or oxidised blood, then it is best to avoid it. Unfortunately, no matter how much culinary genius you may possess, there is very little that can be done to rectify a fishy fish.

# 4. Iridescent bright red gills are an almost guaranteed indicator of the freshness of a fish.

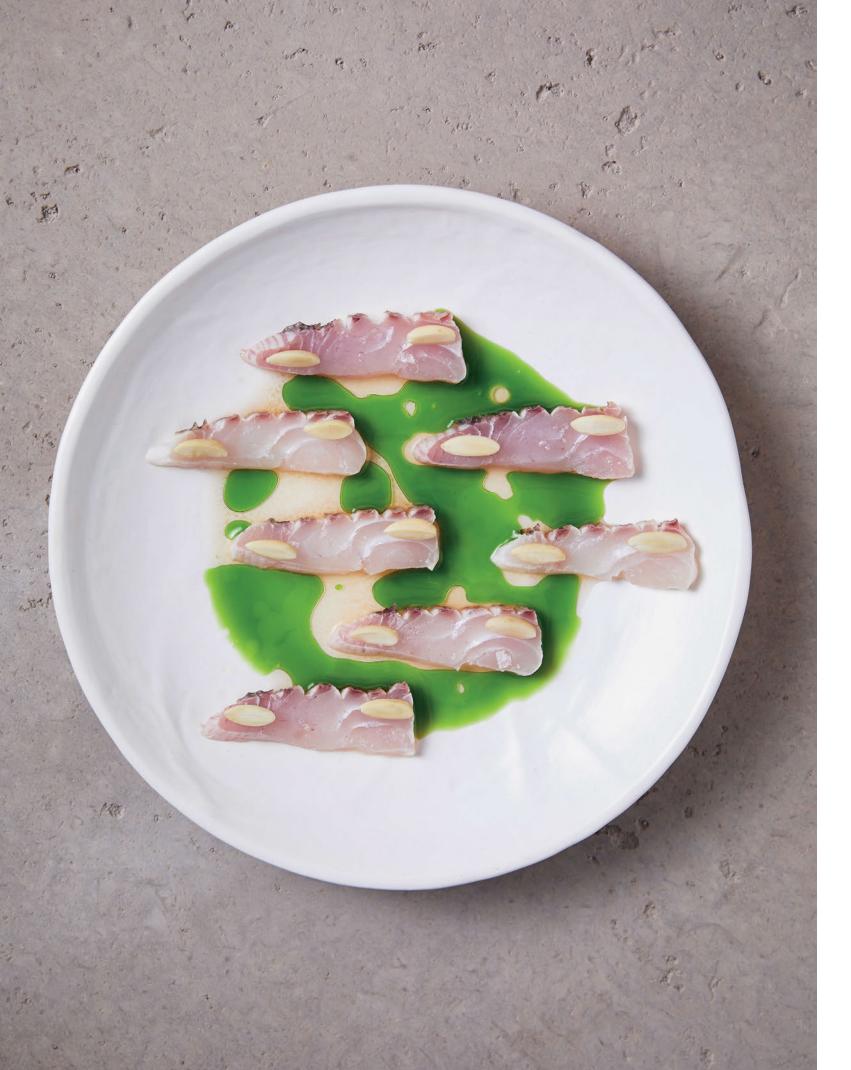
Fish force water through their gills, where it flows past lots of tiny blood vessels. Oxygen penetrates through the walls of those vessels into the blood, and, in turn, carbon dioxide is released. The redder the gills, the fresher the fish. Where slime and mucus are desirable on the outside of a fish, the gills should be slightly drier and clean of any debris.



# The perception question: red mullet

A good example of skewed customer perception towards a fish is red mullet. Already in a consumer's eyes without talking to someone, a conclusion is drawn that it's mullet and must taste like the earthy, muddy and often 'fishy' fish that they may have grown up eating. Contrary to this, knowing that the diet of red mullet is rich in crustaceans will give us the knowledge that the fish also has a flavour profile reminiscent of lobster, crab or prawn (shrimp). A conversation when purchasing fish with the individuals handling or selling it will help guide you in the right direction.





# Raw Red Snapper, Green Almonds, Fig Leaf Oil & Garum

Native Australian red snapper, also known as nannygai, is renowned for its firm texture and sweet, shellfish-like quality. This is a fish that's far more interesting texturally and holds far more flavour than stock standard snapper.

Spring in Australia means green almonds and they are among my favourite ingredients. Juicy, acidic and with a little crunch, they go perfectly with raw fish dishes.

#### SERVES 4

2 boneless red snapper (nannygai), bream or snapper fillets, skin on 300 g (10½ oz/2 cups) fresh green almonds (see note) 100 ml (3½ fl oz) Fish Garum (see page 73) or good-quality fish sauce, white soy sauce or

light soy sauce 100 ml (3½ fl oz) Fig leaf oil (see below) juice of 1 lime

#### Fig leaf oil

125 g (4½ oz) fresh fig leaves or use kaffir lime leaves or bay leaves 250 ml (8½ fl oz/1 cup) extra-virgin olive oil For the fig leaf oil, trim the fig leaf off the central stem and discard, then place the leaves and oil into a Thermomix set to 85°C (185°F) and blend on high for 10 minutes. Place a bowl inside a larger bowl of ice. Strain the oil through a filter paper-lined sieve into the chilled bowl. Transfer to an airtight container and chill in the freezer until needed. If you don't have a Thermomix, bring the fig leaves and oil to 85°C (185°F) in a pan. Transfer to a blender and blend on low speed, then gradually increase the speed and blend for 5–6 minutes until the oil is flavoured.

To prepare the fish, bring a small saucepan of water to the boil over a high heat.

Using a sharp knife, make eight slashes in the skin – just cutting the skin but not going deep into the flesh – then arrange the fish over a wire rack. Using a 50 ml (1% fl oz) ladle, tip three ladlefuls of boiling water over the skin of each fillet. Transfer the rack to the refrigerator and leave to dry for at least 30 minutes.

For the green almonds, use a small, sharp knife to cut the nut in half lengthways, then carefully take the tender green almond out by cracking the outer shell to help it fall out or by flicking it out with the tip of the knife. Set aside.

To cut the fish, working from the head to the tail, cut 5 mm ( $\frac{1}{2}$  in) thick slices from the fillet. You will need about eight slices per portion, about 75–80 g (2 $\frac{3}{2}$  oz) each. Assemble these on a serving plate, then dress the fish with the garum, fig leaf oil and lime juice. Serve at room temperature.

**Note:** Peel the green almonds and use them immediately as they are prone to oxidising and going brown (a way to avoid this oxidisation if the plan is to peel them ahead of time is to store them in milk). The oil here is best made in this quantity so you have enough to blend – the excess will freeze well and is good for salad dressings, with roast pork or brushed over cooked fish.



ALTERNATIVE FISH: Albacore Sea bass

Sea bream





# FRIED (DEEP, SHALLOW & PAN)



Great fish for fried fish preparations include:

Bream

Gurnard

Halibut

Herring

John dory

Kingfish

Mackerel

Mahi-mahi

Meagre (Jewfish)

Mullet

Murray cod

Pilchards

Plaice

Sea bass

Sprats

Trumpeter Whiting

Fried fish, what more needs to be said? Globally known, globally loved. Whether it's fried haddock and vinegared chips on a wharf in Cornwall or Southern-fried catfish and grits in Nashville, all these provoke a sense of nostalgia and comfort, hence why they are so loved.

I prefer to use ghee or clarified butter for pan- and shallow-frying instead of cooking oils as ghee has a high smoking point of 250°C (482°). The flavour is also superior to other oils, giving the fish skin a sweet characteristic only a derivative of butter could produce.

When shallow- and pan-frying I find that when the fish is turned to the flesh side when cooking for a prolonged period of time, too much damage is done to the flesh, resulting in dryness and a texture that's too firm. If the species has an edible skin it is always better left on.

When shallow- and pan-frying fish the choice of pan is really up to you. I pan-fry in thin cast-iron skillets as they generate a lot of heat very quickly. The following recipes are intended to help you understand how to be more confident when cooking with different fats and temperatures.

Left, overleaf & page 134: Coral trout (aged 3 days).



# **CRISP-SKIN FISH ESSENTIALS**

There are a number of key points to bear in mind when pan-frying fish on the skin.

1.

**THE FISH.** Be sure the fish is ambient before adding to the hot pan. If cooking straight from the fridge, the protein will set unevenly and it will be challenging to determine doneness, especially as fish has a relatively short cooking time.

2.

**THE FAT.** To cook crisp-skin fish I use a small amount of ghee to begin the process, which I discard after 2 minutes of cooking and replenish with another small amount to finish the cooking.

3.

THE FISH WEIGHT. I would find it difficult, if not impossible, to pan-fry or grill fish well without this piece of kitchen equipment, which can be found easily enough online. These weights are not designed to be heated. When pan-frying a fish on the skin, the heat that's generated crisps the skin, which travels up through the muscle of the fish and sits on the face of the weight. This sets the top of the fillet very gently while forcing the skin to have direct contact with the pan. By using a weight on thin to thickish fillets, you will be able to cook the fish from raw to cooked on the stove and rely less on the oven to finish cooking, However, if cooking a very thick fillet, start by using the weight to crisp the skin, then once you see the first signs of colour, remove the weight and transfer to an oven to complete cooking. An alternative to a fish weight would be to use a small, heavy-based saucepan filled with water, though this will be considerably more fiddly.

4.

THE HEAT. The heat we use to cook with is a target top gas stove, which is one large square of intense heat. I don't enjoy cooking over gas burners as a very high heat is needed to cook crisp fish skin and the flames of a gas stove can often flare up during cooking when moisture spits from the pan. However, if you have a gas burner, don't tilt the pan too much when cooking fish as beads of moisture can hit the fat and cause flames to surround the fish. Constant, uninterrupted heat is key to creating a crisp, glassy skin and pearl-like flesh – temperature control is everything.

# Crumbed Garfish, Yoghurt Tartare & Herb Salad

I absolutely love crumbed fish (I think it's partly due to growing up eating fish fingers and mashed potato as a kid). I love, too, that crumbed fish needn't be limited to fillets of unknown white fish but can be as luxurious as this boneless, butterflied garfish. Don't cut corners when it comes to how you cook it, though – always in a hot frying pan with ghee, not deep-fried!

#### SERVES 4

4 x 200 g (7 oz) garfish, scaled, gutted, gilled and reverse butterflied (see page 55)
150 g (5½ oz/1 cup) plain (all-purpose) flour
4 eggs, lightly whisked
120 g (4½ oz/2 cups) white panko breadcrumbs
400 g (14 oz) ghee
sea salt flakes and freshly cracked white/black pepper
lemon wedges

## Yoghurt tartare sauce

375 g (13 oz/1½ cups) natural yoghurt 3 large French shallots, diced 1 tablespoon small salted capers, rinsed, dried and finely chopped 60 g (2 oz/⅓ cup) coarsely chopped cornichons 2 tablespoons finely sliced flat-leaf (Italian) parsley leaves

## Herb salad

pinch of salt

1 teaspoon caster (superfine) sugar

6 French shallots, finely sliced
into rings

140 ml (4½ fl oz) extra-virgin olive oil

50 ml (1¾ fl oz) chardonnay vinegar
or white-wine vinegar with a pinch
of sugar

1 bunch each of flat-leaf (Italian)

parsley, dill, chervil and French tarragon, leaves picked 30 g (1 oz/1 cup) watercress leaves 35 g (1½ oz/1 cup) wild rocket (arugula) leaves 2 large butter lettuce, broken into For the sauce, stir all the ingredients together in a bowl. Set aside.

Preheat the oven to 100°C (210°F).

Holding the fish by the tail, dip one fish into the flour, then in the egg, then in the breadcrumbs, pressing gently to coat it well. Place on a baking tray and repeat with the remaining fish.

Heat one-third of the ghee in a large frying pan over a high heat. When hot, fry two fish for 2 minutes, or until crisp and golden, then turn and cook the other side for a further minute. Place on a baking tray and keep warm in the oven. Wipe the pan, then repeat with the remaining ghee and fish.

For the herb salad, combine the salt, sugar and shallot in a bowl. Leave for 10 minutes, then stir in the olive oil and vinegar. Combine the herbs, watercress, rocket and lettuce in a separate bowl, then toss with enough of the dressing to lightly coat the leaves (any leftover dressing will keep refrigerated in an airtight container for up to a week).

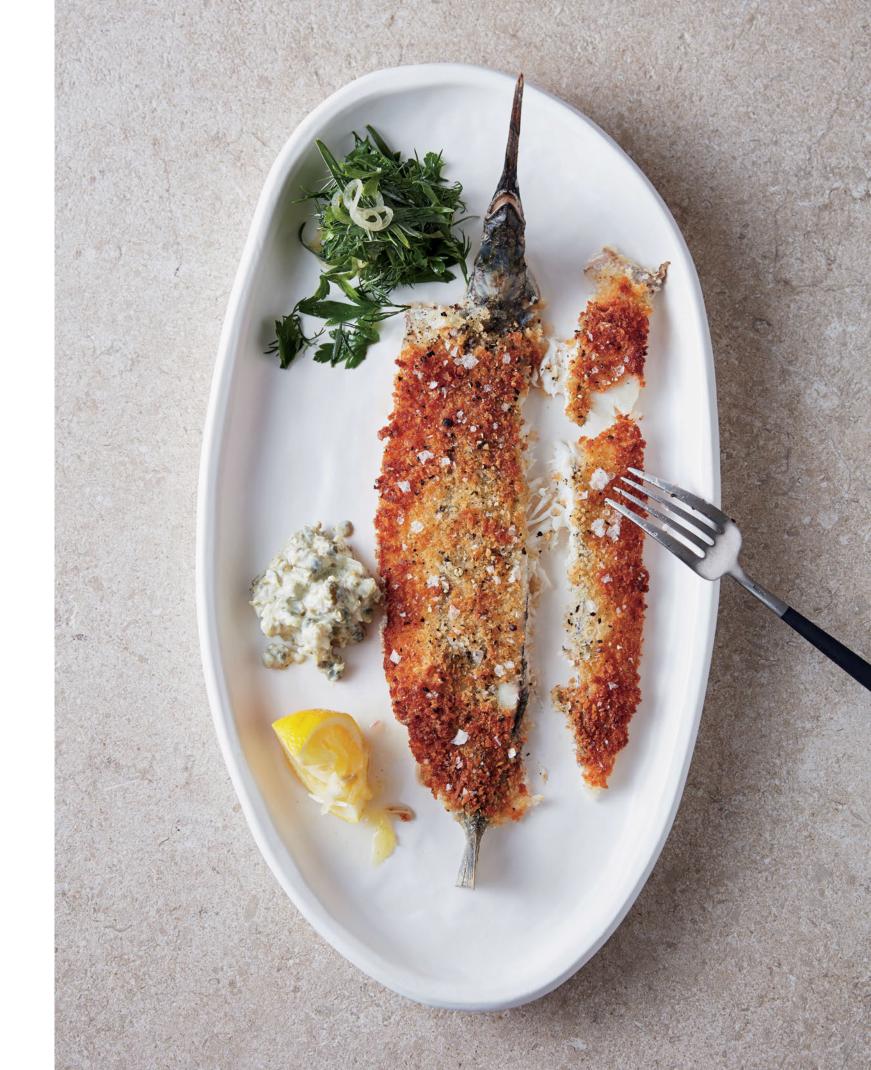
Season the fish liberally and serve with lemon wedges, generous spoonfuls of the sauce and the herb salad on the side.



### ALTERNATIVE FISH:

bite-sized pieces

Herring Mullet Whiting



# Fish Wellington

A Wellington, at least in my family, has been seen to be something of extravagance and only cooked on special occasions. The idea to produce a fish Wellington is in line with the traditional thinking behind a coulibiac, a traditional Russian fish pie. This is another fish dish that presents itself extremely well at the table, showing a great deal of technique and flair but also a lot of love and generosity.

#### SERVES 6

 whole ocean or sea trout fillet, skinned and pin-boned
 nori sheets
 500 g (1 lb 2 oz) ready-made puff pastry
plain (all-purpose) flour, for dusting

#### Mushroom & lentil puree

150 g (5½ oz) ghee

1 kg (2 lb 3 oz oz) field mushrooms, coarsely chopped
100 g (3½ oz) butter, coarsely chopped
1 onion, finely chopped
6 garlic cloves, finely chopped
½ tablespoon finely chopped thyme sea salt flakes
125 g (4½ oz/¾ cup) cooked black

# Egg wash 2 whole eggs

lentils, strained

1 egg yolk 1 tablespoon white sesame seeds sea salt flakes For the mushrooms, heat 75 g (2% oz) ghee in a large pot over a medium heat and cook the mushrooms in two batches until golden, about 10–12 minutes each batch. Add all the fried mushrooms back to the pot, then turn the heat up high. Add the butter, onion, garlic and thyme and sauté for 10 minutes until tender and the mushrooms have little to no moisture left. Season with salt to taste, then pulse in a food processor until finely chopped. Drain any excess fat or moisture from the mushroom mix, add the lentils and stir to combine. Cool.

To assemble, cut the trout fillet in half widthways, then pick the tail half up and position it on top of the other half, ensuring the loin side sits in line with the belly side, so it creates a seamless appearance.

Place a large square of plastic wrap on the work surface, then arrange the nori sheets on top so they overlap, forming a square. Spoon the mushroom and lentil puree onto the nori and spread it out. Position the fillet on top, then pick up the plastic wrap that is closest to you to bring the nori and mushroom puree up over the fillets, forming a log. The puree should completely enclose the fillet. Tie off the plastic wrap at both ends and chill overnight.

The next day, mix all the egg wash ingredients together in a bowl. Roll out a large square of the very chilled pastry that exceeds both the width and height of the trout log on a lightly floured work surface.

Cut the plastic wrap from the outside of the trout and position the fish in the centre of the pastry. Brush all corners of the pastry with egg wash and roll up over the trout log. Trim off any excess pastry and brush with more egg wash. Chill for at least 1 hour.

Preheat the oven to 220°C (430°F). Brush more egg wash over the Wellington and season lightly with sea salt. Bake for 20–25 minutes until brown and the interior temperature has reached  $48^{\circ}$ C (118°F) on a probe thermometer.

Leave to rest for 10 minutes, then carve the Wellington into six even slices and serve with good crunchy salad leaves.





ALTERNATIVE FISH:

Coral trout Rainbow trout Salmon



# **Hot Smoked Fish Turducken**

The butterflying of these fish is a job for your fish shop to undertake but, really, the deboning of the fish is the only fiddly part of this recipe. This dish is definitely a show stopper - try serving at your next special occasion.

### SERVES 12

- 2 kg (4 lb 6 oz) boneless, butterflied ocean trout or sea trout, head and tail on
- 1 kg (2 lb 3 oz) boneless, butterflied Murray cod
- 1 kg (2 lb 3 oz) yellowfin tuna loin, trimmed
- 100 g (3½ oz) soaked iron bark or other hardwood wood chips

### **Brine**

 $400 g (14 oz/1\frac{1}{3} cups)$  fine salt 8 litres (270 fl oz/32 cups) cold water

For the brine, combine the salt and water together and stir until the salt has dissolved. Place the fish in separate bowls and pour over the brine. Leave to stand overnight.

The next day, thoroughly dry the fish with paper towel. Lay the trout out in front of you with the tail closest to you. Place the Murray cod on top of the trout in the same position, the tail end closest to you, then place the tuna in the centre of the Murray cod. Using kitchen twine, truss the fish together ensuring that each fish remains in position and the bellies of the fish join up creating a seamless finish.

To smoke the fish, an oven can be used set to the lowest temperature. Make sure the kitchen is well ventilated. Place a saucepan full of soaked smoking chips in the bottom. Light the chips and allow the smoke to flood the oven. Smoke the fish for 2 hours, or until the internal temperature of the fish reaches 40°C (104°F) when tested with a probe thermometer. Leave to rest, then chill overnight.

Serve chilled or brushed with a little oil, season with sea salt and return to an oven preheated to 240°C (475°F) to crisp the skin for 10 minutes. Rest, then carve and serve hot.



ALTERNATIVE FISH: Hake Rainbow trout Salmon



# Whole Fish Cookbook

New ways to cook, eat and think Josh Niland

# **Keynote**

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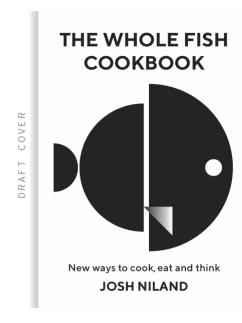
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### **Author**

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