

OUR SEAFOOD LARDER

A new initiative spearheaded by Devon chef Mitch Tonks encourages us to rediscover the abundant daily harvest from our own island waters

WORDS **Anna Turns**



PHOTOGRAPHS **SIMON BURT; CHRIS TERRY**

There's no better place to crack open a brown crab claw and get sticky fingers picking the white meat out than at a table in Rockfish overlooking Brixham harbour on Devon's south coast. A colourful fleet of beam trawlers, day boats and rod-and-line boats lands on average 70 tonnes of seafood every day here at England's premier fishing port. 'Eating seafood by the water when you can see the fishermen moor up in the harbour... it's a symbiotic relationship,' says seafood chef, restaurateur and food writer, Mitch Tonks who showcases the wonderful array of fresh shellfish and fish on his menus. 'Seafood for me is all about the informality of hands-on

messy dining, and a strong connection with the sea enhances that experience.'

CRACKING SEAFOOD

Over half of UK seafood is exported, but a new initiative, England's Seafood Coast, funded by VisitEngland, celebrates the fishing industry of the English Riviera from boat to plate. Mitch is one of many passionate Seafood Coast ambassadors raising awareness of this region's great diversity of seafood. 'The best seafood in the world is undoubtedly caught here off the south coast of England,' says Mitch who lives in Brixham and runs family-friendly Rockfish restaurants serving up locally-sourced, sustainable seafood in five coastal towns, from Plymouth to Exmouth.

Ever since he had his first seafood café in Bath over 20 years ago, Mitch has believed British seafood is world class. 'It tastes amazing, the variety of species is vast and the conditions are perfect for seafood,' he says, explaining that the limestone belt in the fast-moving English Channel from Dorset through to South Devon creates deep, cold, clear waters ideal for shellfish to feed. 'Our seafood industry has previously been hidden away in small fishing towns with fish getting sold at auctions then transported off in lorries so you don't really see what's going on, even





in places where fish is landed.' For him, transparency is essential, so his restaurants are all situated in waterside locations. 'People from all over the world come and enjoy this stretch of coastline for its abundance of amazing seafood, and we want to establish England's Seafood Coast as an international seafood destination. April is a great time for scallops, lemon sole, crab, skate, Dover sole, hake, gurnard, John Dory – there's an amazing diversity of seafood in season,' says Mitch, who has used the same fish buyers for over 20 years. At the crack of dawn every weekday these buyers bid for prime fresh fish at auction at Brixham Fish Market, the UK's second biggest fish market by value.

WHITE FISH NATION

British fishermen catch a huge diversity of fish species – more than 40 species are landed at there, predominantly prime flat fish such as turbot and Dover sole. However, Britain traditionally favours the white meaty flakes of cod and haddock over shellfish, which may seem trickier to prepare and messier to eat. Mitch describes us as a 'white fish nation' but the North Sea only produces a small percentage of the total cod catch, so Britain has always imported more white fish from Iceland and the Barents Sea to meet demand and provide continuity of supply.

'Seafood is the most globally traded food product, and this includes wild caught and farmed product. Fishermen are the last hunter-gatherers so bad weather can make sourcing fish locally difficult,' says Libby Woodhatch, head of advocacy at Seafish, the public body that works to raise standards across the seafood industry. She explains that as a nation we consumed over 490,000 tonnes seafood last year, and we import around 70 per cent of the seafood we eat, predominantly as 'the big five': salmon, cod, tuna, prawns and haddock.

Although there is a huge diversity of species off our shores, when it comes



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP **Rockfish Brixham** overlooks the harbour; sea bream is one of the species landed regularly at Brixham; fishermen haul in a catch of anchovies FAR LEFT **Chef, author and restaurateur Mitch Tonks** is an ambassador for the Seafood Coast



to langoustines, lobster and scallops for example, the majority is exported to countries where these are seen as delicacies and people are prepared to pay a premium for them. 'There is a growing domestic market but it will always be limited, so we need the export market,' explains Libby. In 2015, 442,726 tonnes of UK seafood was exported and this makes up approximately 35 per cent of our annual catch, worth a total of £1,338m. The UK's top export is farmed salmon, which goes largely to the US, prawns go to France, Spain and Italy, and oil-rich fish such as mackerel is exported to the Netherlands, Eastern Europe, Africa and Japan.

Consequently, when you're holidaying in Spain for example, you may not realise that the langoustines in a pan of seafood paella actually came from Scotland, and you'd be forgiven for not noticing that the French dish up scallops from the southwest of England in a creamy sauce with white wine, shallots and mushrooms for the classic Coquilles St-Jacques. 'Most British seafood is exported to the continent where seafood is much more a part of their culture,' confirms Mitch. 'Preparing fish from scratch comes more naturally to them.'

However, Libby describes fish as the ultimate convenience food: 'It's so quick and easy to cook, plus it's healthy, low in fat and full of vitamins but with literally hundreds of



species, buying fish can seem overwhelming compared to choosing between chicken, beef, pork or lamb.' The biggest problem, according to Libby, is fear of handling and lack of confidence in prepping fish from scratch – but this is where fishmongers come in. 'Find a good fishmonger who knows what's in season and can prep the fish for you and advise on how to cook it,' she says.

CHANGING APPETITES

Barry Young, chief auctioneer and managing director of Brixham Trawler Agents, runs early morning tours of Brixham Fish Market to demystify the fishing industry. 'There's a massive "wow" reaction when people glimpse behind the scenes. It's about educating people regarding the seafood we have on our





ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT It was important for Mitch Tonks that his restaurant Rockfish be located in the harbour where the fishing boats come in; a huge variety of fish is landed in the UK's ports every day; South Devon crab is a local delicacy; mussels are on the menu at Rockfish

doorstep,' he says. More than half Brixham's catch gets exported to Europe where our neighbours tuck in to delicacies such as spider crabs, octopus and anchovies. 'Brixham is the UK's biggest fish market for cuttlefish (3,000 tonnes were landed in 2016) and 80 per cent of it goes abroad – because the French, Italians, Portuguese and Spanish know what to do with it,' explains Barry, who calls it 'Brixham squid' because it makes perfect calamari.

'Cuttlefish is such a wonderful fish to eat, you can braise it, grill it, all sorts, but it is a different texture to what we are used to and it may seem a bit scary to prepare,' adds Mitch. 'But our appetite for seafood is changing – fish is in much higher demand these days, it's just a case of opening it up to people.'

Mitch believes simplicity is key to cooking fish: 'Put your fish on a layer of parchment paper on top of tin foil with a little butter, some wine, some thyme and garlic and maybe some dried chilli. Wrap it up and cook it in the oven for 10 minutes, then eat it from the parcel, fantastic!'



NEED to KNOW



FIND OUT MORE

Connect with the #SeafoodCoast campaign on Twitter (@Seafood_Coast) and Facebook (@EnglandsSeafoodCoast); or browse the website, seafoodcoast.co.uk. Join the Twitter campaign to eat more fish at #FishistheDish and fishisthedish.co.uk or go to seafish.co.uk.

TOUR BRIXHAM FISH MARKET

With a 6am start, the Brixham guided tour runs from 19 April then every alternate Wednesday morning until October, and costs £15 per person, including breakfast at Rockfish.

Brixham Fish Market, New Fish Quay, Brixham, Devon, TQ5 8AW. To book, email bfmt2014@gmail.com.

COOK FISH WITH CONFIDENCE

- Book onto a seafood/fish cookery course to improve your culinary skills. We like Manna From Devon, Kingswear (mannafromdevon.com), Rick Stein's Cookery School in Cornwall (rickstein.com/school), and Exeter Cookery School on the city's historic quayside (exetercookeryschool.co.uk).
- Invest in some good recipes, these are coast's top five fish cookbooks: *Everyday Seafood* by Nathan Outlaw (Quadrille, £20); *Fish & Shellfish* by Rick Stein (BBC Books, £26); *The River Cottage Fish Book* by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Nick Fisher (Bloomsbury, £20); *Fish: Recipes from the sea* by CJ Jackson (Phaidon Press, £29.95); *Fish: the complete fish & seafood companion* by Mitch Tonks (Pavilion Books, £25).