



PHOTO: CHRIS TERRY

A sense of scale

MANOR's food editor *Anna Turns* gets up at the crack of dawn to go behind the scenes at **Brixham Fish Market**, the capital of England's Seafood Coast.

On route to Brixham, I listen to the 5.20am shipping forecast. It's rough out at sea and gales are on their way. It's quite a job, being a fisherman. As I arrive at the fish market, the biggest by value in England, I meet Barry Young, who takes me into the market hall just as the auction begins at 6am. It's busy and noisy – buyers and auctioneers are speaking a different language, bartering prices for fish landed just a few hours ago.

"The rough weather means we haven't got a lot of dayboat fish today," explains Barry, chief auctioneer and managing director of Brixham Trawler Agents. "Five or so beam trawlers landed here about 9pm last night, so all the fish was hand-graded by the night shift so it's ready for sale this morning." Each box of fish is labelled: "It tells you who we are, Brixham Trawler Agents, the boat code and name, PLN port letters and numbers to identify

the boat, the fish species, grade of the fish (1 is biggest, down to 7), weight and freshness – there's nothing that isn't 'A' quality freshness in here." Barry explains that fish can be caught and stored on beam trawlers for up to five days: "You can see by the label it has been caught in the North Atlantic, which includes the English Channel, and the production date is the day of grading, i.e. last night, not the day of capture."

The Brixham fleet includes 22 beam trawlers, 35 dayboats and a dozen rod-and-line boats; on average, about 70 tonnes of seafood is landed here every day. Brixham is a prime flat fish market and we're surrounded by turbot, Dover sole, monkfish and brill on ice. One of these huge turbot caught by the *Emilia Jayne* is worth about £200: "These are the sort of fish that never used to get eaten," Barry tells me. These are the freshest, brightest-looking fish I have ever seen and the demand

for today's catch goes global: 60% gets exported and 40 or so buyers have come from Plymouth, Newlyn, Looe and London, plus some live in Brixham. Because they're dealing with a perishable good, which can be so variable in size and quality, they need to see first-hand what they're buying. Alex Passmore from More Seafoods exports to Beirut and China: "We send scallops predominantly and some fish on ice twice a week from Heathrow as wild cargo. It's pretty streamlined – we've got it down to 30 hours door to door from my boat to the Shanghai terminal."

Barry first worked as a fisherman from the age of 16, then came ashore aged 22 to grade the fish and worked his way up the ranks, so he's seen how the business functions from every aspect. "I set my alarm clock for 5am and I don't mind getting up because I love the job I do," he says. "This seafood is the best in the world. There is nowhere else that has as rich a fishing ground as we have here. There's such huge diversity of species – brill, mixed with red mullet, sea bass, squid, plaice." More than 40 fish species are landed at Brixham throughout the year. "Lemon soles are kicking in now, they're my favourite fish and I always buy from the local fishmonger to support the industry, and whenever I go to restaurants I choose fish. If every housewife cooked fish once a week, we wouldn't have to export as much as we do."

Without the fishing industry to support it, this would be little more than a tourist town. There are about 300 fishermen working out of Brixham, and Barry tells me that every fisherman creates three to four jobs ashore here. The politics of the fishing industry are complex, and fishermen have so many rules and regulations to contend with, so it's understandable that the majority are frustrated and voted for Brexit. "First, there's the discard ban, and we feel we got an unfair share of fish quotas – we have 30% whilst the French have got 60% of the quotas for the English Channel," says Barry. "Plus, big French boats can come to within six miles of our coast, but big British boats are only allowed up to the 12-mile limit on both sides of the Channel. Twelve miles is the territorial limit for any country generally, but these grandfather rights are an unfair historical legacy and the French have more rights to our waters than we do." Barry explains that the fishing industry wants to find a way to move forward and get a fair share of what's on the doorstep. "We won't go out and rape the seas and leave nothing left for tomorrow – it isn't like that. There's a long, long future in this industry and we are the people that are going to make this happen." He adds a reminder that it's one of the most dangerous vocations: "Just two nights ago, two of our fishermen were taken to hospital, one with a crushed hand and one with a broken shoulder from one of the beams."

We move on to the dedicated cuttlefish market, separate to the other areas so the black ink doesn't

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These are the freshest, brightest-looking fish I have ever seen and the demand for today's catch goes global.



PHOTO: ANNA TURNS

Barry Young carefully shows off the colourful tub gurnard, a beautiful fish that has become much more popular in recent years



Rockfish Brixham serves fish landed that morning at the market just a few steps away



PHOTO: ED OGDEN

Brixham Seafish



PHOTO: CHRIS TERRY

Mitch checks out fresh gurnard at Brixham Fish Market

contaminate the other fish. Today, about 20 tonnes of cuttlefish, worth £80k, gets sold, mainly for export. This is 'black gold' – Brixham's hidden gem – and Barry has nicknamed it: "We call it 'Brixham squid' because it tastes just like squid but hardly any of it gets sold here. It's an untapped resource and nobody seems to know it's available so it gets sent to France, Spain, Italy and Portugal, where they cook it just like normal squid."

Lastly, in the dayboat market, there's a mix of plaice, some lemon sole, and white fish; on days when the weather isn't so bad, Brixham can get up to 40 dayboats landing. Barry is encouraging more of a hake trade here: "The hake fishery has tripled in the last three years, and the quotas have been doubled because it is such a flourishing industry and hake's a versatile fish."

Chef Mitch Tonks's fish buyer is Josh Perkes, who is here at 6am, five mornings a week: "My job is to find the freshest fish, then I take it to my factory just down the quay, and I weigh it out, remove skin, trim the sides, and at 9am our delivery driver takes it to the Rockfish restaurants that same day, so it's on their lunch menu." Josh's business, Brixham Seafish, also supplies to The Seahorse in Dartmouth, the Pullman Carriage on First Great Western trains, and Hawksmoor in London, and has taken links out of the supply chain by selling direct to chefs who trust Josh to be their eyes at market. "I am picking the individual fish, shiny fish that I would like to eat. I don't really care what it costs – I want it. When we send fish off, I want them to see how good it is when they open our box. It's like a present."



PHOTO: CHRIS TERRY

Brixham harbour is the capital of England's Seafood Coast

That's as simple as it gets: he takes huge pride in his work and he's making it cheaper for the end client while keeping the fish fresh by shortening down the time it takes to deliver.

Josh buys dayboat fish, and his business partner, Nigel Ward, buys Dover sole and monkfish from beamers. "We buy what's in season – that's when fish is cheaper because more is being caught and we can pass that price difference on," says Josh. "If fish are full of roe, as plaice are at the moment, the quality isn't as good. When the weather is stirred up and horrible, there aren't any dayboats fishing and the chefs we deal with understand that. It's a hunter-gatherer business out there."

After just 50 minutes, today's auction comes to a close. When the weather's calmer, it can take a couple of hours, and by 9am the whole market will be closed down and sanitised, once fish starts going through its

supply chain. The shortest supply chain from 'boat to throat' has to be fish bought here and then served up just a few yards away at Rockfish Brixham, owned by Mitch Tonks: "The best seafood in the world is undoubtedly caught here off the south coast of England, but we are predominantly a white fish nation," says Mitch. "I want the English Riviera to be known as an international seafood destination and celebrate what is landed at Brixham, which is the capital of England's Seafood Coast." **M**

Visit seafoodcoast.co.uk for more information. To go on a Brixham Fish Market tour, on alternate Wednesdays from April through to October, contact bfmt2014@gmail.com (£15, 6am, TQ5 8AW, booking essential).