

Think outside the box of pescatarian stereotypes



*For Despina, Irene, Teresa and Giorgos.
Beginning, Continuation, Family.*

MARINOS SOURANIS



fish and aging

A MANUAL FOR THE CORRECT AGING
AND HANDLING OF FISH

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Evelyn Foskolou (pp. 13, 17, 22-23, 25, 73, 110, 159, 168)

Marinos Souranis (pp. 24, 27-31, 61-63, 65, 72-76, 81, 89, 114, 136, 150, 159)

Drawings: Dimitris Kourtis (pp. 33-55, 70, 85, 117, 162, 172)

Scientific Collaborator: Ioannis G. Kakos

Design and Typography: Periklis Douvitsas

Translation: Chris H. Sakellaris

Editing: Orfeas Apergis

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In lieu of a prologue

My teacher, in the beginning of *Marathia's* journey, was a fisherman, an exceptional human being, authentic and real, a proper hotshot with street cred, one of those people who one only has to gain from meeting and hanging out with.

In my first steps as a fish-tavern owner, Pavlos Keladitis, or 'Boras' (a moniker meaning 'Stormy', inspired by his explosive temperament) took note of my willingness to learn and taught me the beginnings of aging, curing, sun drying, smoking, brine, and all the old methods of conserving and keeping fish, which were to form the basis of *Marathia's* evolution, to this day.

Throughout this journey, my colleagues and I met with many people: fishers – professional and amateur – from whom we gathered all this knowledge which we are now able to use. We can be proud of the fact that most of the sea workers operating in the Aegean know *Marathia* – Lilis, Parianos, Halkidaïos, Saroukos, Skevos, Hatzidakis, Koukouvas, Mytilinios, Flitzanis, Kotsidas, Angelos, Antonis, Vagos, Galanakis, Hronis, Yianentas, Varypatis, Faroupos, Siakos, Andreas, Alvanos, Zoumperis, Sklias, Spyros, Pappas, Kouvas, Nionios, Bill, Mikros, Tonis, Aegyptios, Skalkotos, and so many others whom I might be forgetting. If you ask me, actually, I think I've forgotten if all these are surnames or nicknames...



Introductory note by the author

Have you ever been in a situation where you've bought the most freshly caught fish, straight from the boat, yet discovered it to be bland when cooked or even unpleasant in its texture and taste?

Have you ever observed the differences in flavour, for example, between two fresh golden groupers caught by two different fishers?

I imagine you might have heard from an experienced fisher or a chef, when they bring you a dusky grouper or when you buy it, that the fish should 'sit' in your fridge for a few days before you cook it. Have you ever wondered why?

Have you ever thought that it would be a good idea to have these same fishers as steady partners, and what the criteria should be for choosing them?

What makes a fish unique, even if it's not fresh?

How does the anaerobic glycolytic process affect the flesh of a caught fish, and what should a handler (a cook, a chef) expect from this natural chemical chain reaction?

How might this specific chemical process taking place at the cellular level of a fish's body be related and dependent on the above?

And how does it affect the final result (the dish) on a restaurant menu or the dining room table of one's home?

In the end, is an aged fish 'spoiled'?

In the pages of the book you are now holding in your hands, we will try to expand on the above questions, along with many other things, such as going through details which are important for more specialised handlers (such as chefs) with regards to aging (dry or wet) and its application to different fish types.

At the same time, in order to transmit all our knowledge correctly and comprehensively, we will be presenting, after a couple of brief but necessary chapters, the types of seabed where the fish we use in our kitchens live (that is, their homes), their diet and feeding, the ways in which they are caught, which species are appropriate for aging processes, what time of year is best for catching different fish, and lastly, we will meet the fish – rather, most of them – that live in the Greek seas.

Our aim is this: we want to challenge the perennial stereotype which suggests that fish must be eaten fresh.



A couple of lines about *Marathia*

18 August 2003

We set sail for oceans of flavour, and a childhood dream becomes a reality. Our first order: stuffed vegetables and a Greek salad. We had six tables, twenty-four chairs, many challenges, countless obstacles, and very limited funds. Yet, we were in such a great mood, keeping our characteristic optimism and morale as high as could be! Slowly, we overcame the obstacles, and the challenges became a little bit easier. Patience and persistence are rewarded!

Our ingredients always came from the island, our recipes based on the culinary memories of our childhood and the traditions of our land.

Experimentation, whether successful or not as such, is never absent, and our menu changes regularly. The lead role is always given to fish, in all its forms!

The years go by, and we gain experience, the work becomes more demanding, while at the same time new partnerships fully contribute to the entire enterprise.

By now the menu changes daily, always in conjunction with what we find available in the local market, the fields, and the sea around us. Our partners bring us their daily harvest of the best from what the arid landscape of Tinos can provide. Farmers provide us with fresh vegetable produce. Fishers moor their boats offshore in front of us and bring us all the treasures of the sea.

Decency, honesty, industriousness and, most importantly, conscientiousness: taking care to always have enough left for the future.

Our demand for excellent primary ingredients brings us collaborations. Local producers come to show us the results of their daily toil and to discuss ideas, possibilities, ways to develop, the 'next stage'. The effort pays off!

We ask locals to demonstrate old recipes; we learn different curing and conservation methods trying to include them in a modern catering and hospitality environment; we evolve and develop just like food does with the passage of time. Oh, this delightful back-and-forth!

We also work with the local association for environmental protection, 'Tinos Green', and, in collaboration with the 1st Primary School of Tinos, we tend to the school garden where vegetables are grown and consumed by the children. We cook the produce with the young chefs on educational visits to *Marathia*. The best kind of experiential learning!

We work together with the 2nd Primary School of Tinos on lessons of Career Exploration and the Environment, and we talk to sixth grade students about the need to reduce our environmental footprint and how this could be achieved.

We collaborate with the artistic team Un.Processed Realities, a member of which is Tinian Yannis Delatolas. The team create the platter series Cargo I for us, using moulds and casts from stones, in abundance on our island's beaches. Using pieces from this series of products, we present cutting edge pescatarian approaches in our unique way.



We work with Oliverse and Panayiotis Papanikolopoulos on our olive oil bar, fusing the taste of the oil with the fish aging in our facilities. And so, the platter series Cargo 2 is born!

We work with the 3rd Primary School of Tinos to clean the beach of Aghios Fokas, in the context of the 'Clean Up the Med' campaign under the auspices of the Hellenic Society for the Protection of Nature, duly following the responsibilities stemming from the 'Green Key Global' and 'Blue Flag' certifications we have been awarded. From recyclable waste, we make the Cargo 3 platter; on which we serve what we would normally throw away from the fish used in our kitchen.

In this way, the tasting menu Marathia Cargo I, 2 and 3 is created, as a conceptual intervention on the themes of innovation, locality, sea resource economy, and environmental sustainability.

We take part in international expos organised by HORECA, presenting alongside Italian partners the first micro-climatic cold room exclusively for fish, introducing new, pioneering technologies for the safe conservation, preservation, development, and presentation of fish and seafood dishes; we love this so much, and it serves as the natural evolution of our experience up to now. Things of the future!

We create and facilitate the first educational experiential workshop for hospitality/catering professionals to take place on our island, with great success and participation from around the world. The workshop is repeated successfully, and our effort to showcase the connection between a restaurant and the land, and vice versa, is starting to become an institution. This is our vision!

A few years ago, a few outstanding people, hierophants of the sacramental mysteries of our land, lovingly gifted us their knowledge. This constituted a milestone in our journey, to this day. We learnt to craft, to not source ingredients 'contractually', to experiment, to innovate, to not let our work depend on other people. Our word is a seed!

Marathia has sprouted from the Tinian land and bears fruit and flourishes for it. The toil is constant and daily, the thirst for knowledge inexhaustible, and our skiff small yet sturdy. We have oceans ahead of us, and we can't wait! In the famous words of Greek admiral Kountouriotis, 'We are sailing with unwavering momentum'.



*Thoughts, observations, research,
and experience related to fish,
their handling, and aging*



Introduction

Knowledge is power. Constant study, experience, and practical application help us to better understand everything we occupy ourselves with – not just with regards to fish but with whatever activity one engages in. Deep knowledge of the subject is the secret leading to success. Fish is generally not to be found on the daily household table, due to the fact it's not very easy to have frequent access to it, or, at least, to good-quality fish, while also being considered a hassle to handle until it can reach our plates. That's why it's important to have, at the very least, a sufficient knowledge of fish.

Forgotten methods, tradition, and knowledge that has been lost are crucial factors in the correct understanding of the handling of each fish. If these principles form the basis, development is more easily achieved. It's extremely important to accept the value of ancestral knowledge and the role this has played in the traditions, customs, and mores of the world's people. Combined with modern technology and scientific assistance, the understanding of the traditional applications and methods followed in each land can lead to the evolution of gastronomy.

To catch a fish requires much effort. It's not easy at all, and, of course, there's no certainty that it will be found, in the first place. As a result, good-quality fish, whenever and wherever it's found, should be paid for accordingly and at the right price. When one seeks the best-quality primary ingredients to work with, on every level, one should not ponder much on the price and cost of the product, but in what condition it is with regards to quality, and in what condition it reaches the handler's hands. When a good-quality fish has been caught in the appropriate season, in the right way, without having suffered at the hands of the fisher, so that it reaches us quickly and is preserved in the right way, then, not only should we not consider its price, but we should actually aim to encourage everyone involved in the process of its catching to continue their good work.

Therefore, the importance one must give to the quality of primary ingredients is an end in and of itself and paramount to the creation of a dish. Before wondering about what dishes to include in our menu, we need to go out to the local market and seek the optimal ingredients to transform into a dish. This is precisely why the local market must play a very important role in the procurement of supplies for a restaurant wishing to offer something more than the usual. The daily goods of the local market should also set the menu of a restaurant.

The preparation of a menu, whether it's a day menu or the regular one, is a combination of elements which, when implemented correctly, might constitute the most important part – yet it is not everything. Inspiration is the parameter which will transform the primary ingredients from a well-executed recipe into a gourmet dish. When an optimal ingredient reaches our hands, it must inspire a chef to fully unfurl their creative palette. At this point, the decoration of a plate also plays a big part, its presentation and setting, the so-called art of plating, so that one can reach the desired outcome, which is to produce culture, beyond the satisfaction of the simple need for nutrition.

In attempting this, a chef or a restaurateur will need to consider something else as well, which comes to complete their evolution; namely, the influence they exert, and the importance placed on their work by people working in the field of gastronomy. These are a result of the ability of each person at the restaurant – from the chef to the waiting staff – to transmit their knowledge, in combination with the ability to develop this knowledge through their work. All the contributors in a gastronomic setting were once students, and having actually become contributors means that they learned from good teachers. We all learn throughout the course of our lives, but the ability to transmit this knowledge is the secret which can make a real difference. Using the knowledge we have accumulated and enriching it with our own insights, technique, and experience means we can in turn transmit this knowledge to other people, who will do the same to others and so forth.

Last but definitely not least is the role which can be played in all the above by the customer, through their uplifting of the morale and psychological disposition of a chef, the reward and recognition of their work and that of the restaurant staff, from the owner to the last assistant waiter. Most often, this factor may constitute, for a truly skilled professional, the most important motivation for what can be gained from their work, above and beyond financial rewards. Naturally, earning a living is one of the main aims in exercising any occupation, and it goes without saying that without this we could not talk about any of the above, yet in such a creative field as the work of a chef, it is love and passion for food and the sense of personal satisfaction that is the reward we are given by the final recipient, our judge, who is none other than the customer.

I. The art of setting a dish. It includes many aspects, such as the size and shape of a plate, the placing of the food, the colour contrast, and the choice of garnish.



Fish – A first look

A fish that reaches our hands is not just made of two fillets of clear flesh – and this is primarily why it is an 'expensive' food item. To extract these fillets, we need to carefully clean the fish, removing scales, stomach, gills, head, and bones. And yet, what happens to these? Later in this section we will demonstrate how the right handling of the 'discards' or scrap products of a fish means lower costs and a fuller menu, utilising as many fish parts as possible.

Each fish is divided into the following cuts (see diagram overleaf): Head, fish neck fillets, kama (collars), upper back meat, upper abdominal meat, middle back fillets, middle abdominal fillets, upper tail fillets, lower tail fillets, guts/innards, and gills. Therefore, if we instantly handle a fish in the same way as a piece of beef, for example, we understand that there are different parts and cuts. Keeping these parameters in mind, we can be inspired to begin to cook. Of course, you will have noticed that when grilled fish is served at a table, everybody rushes to eat pieces from the back and not from the abdomen of the fish. This doesn't mean that the latter aren't good or that other parts are better. It simply means that this way of preparing is more suited to some parts than to others. As such, there are different cuts, different tastes and textures, and different preparation methods for each creation. For example, the upper and middle back meat fillets of a lovely amberjack give us an excellent main, the abdomen a supremely buttery tartare, the cheeks and neck a tasty 'sushi' piece, and the upper and lower tail fillets a spicy cured slice or a casserole, for example a traditional Greek light stew or okra dish.

