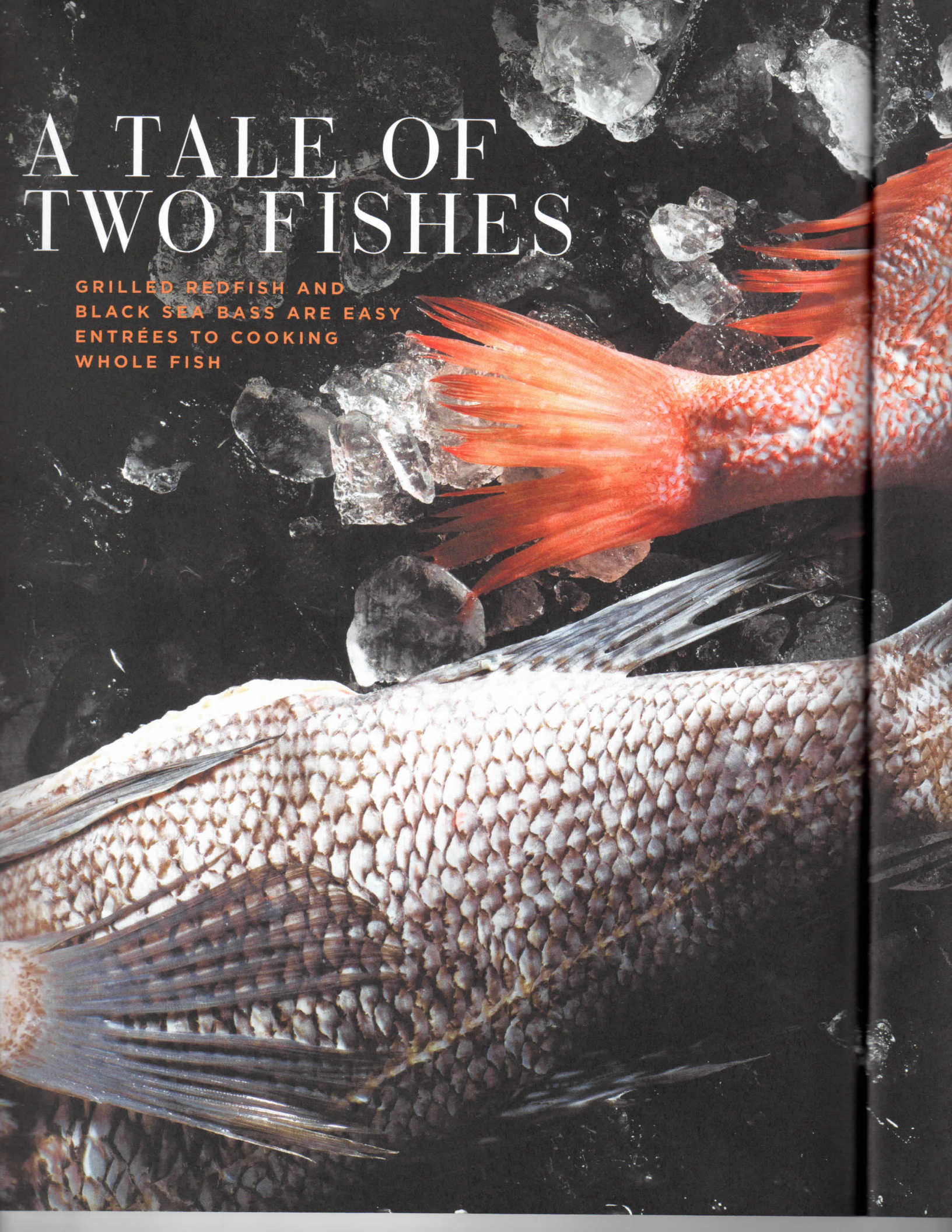
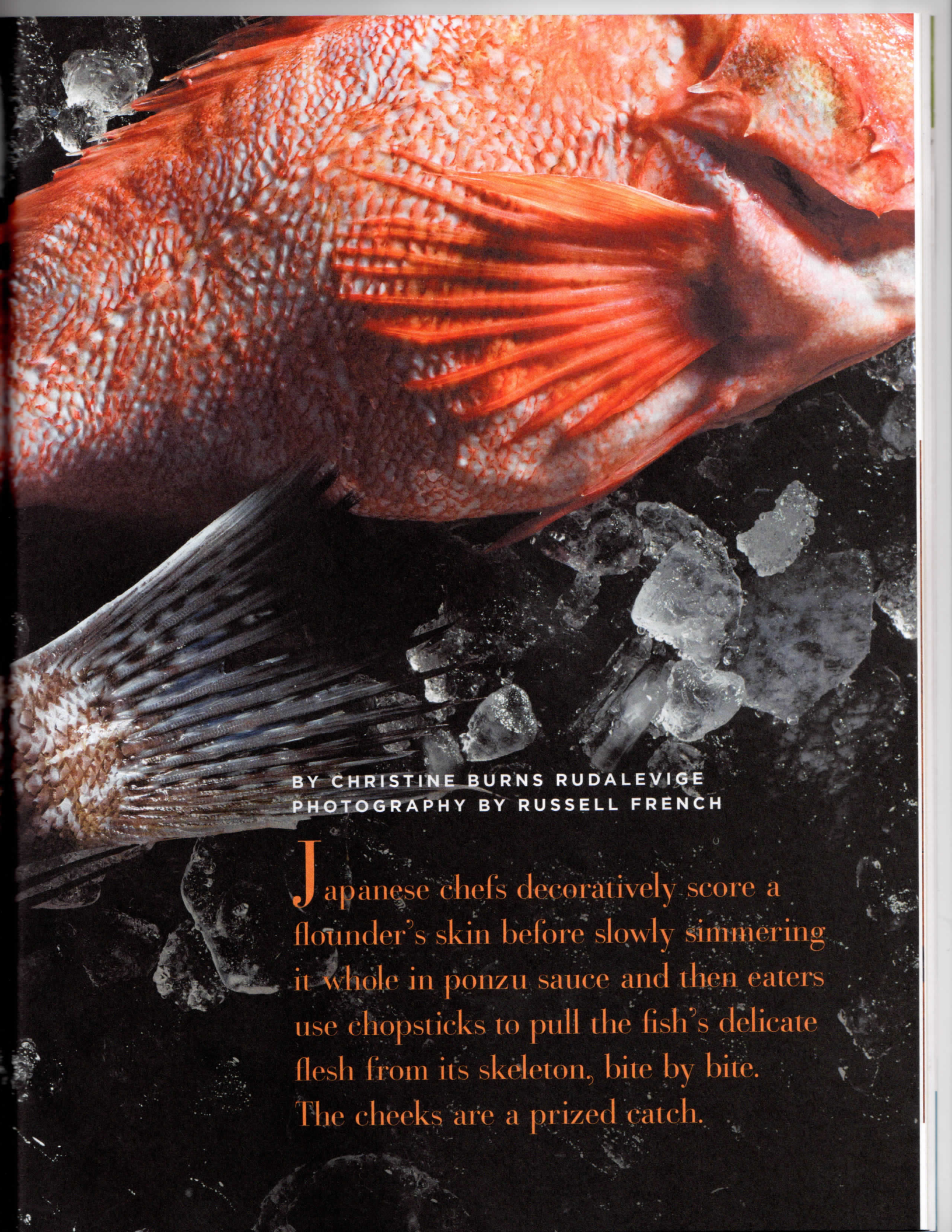


A TALE OF TWO FISHES

GRILLED REDFISH AND
BLACK SEA BASS ARE EASY
ENTRÉES TO COOKING
WHOLE FISH





BY CHRISTINE BURNS RUDALEVIGE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUSSELL FRENCH

Japanese chefs decoratively score a flounder's skin before slowly simmering it whole in ponzu sauce and then eaters use chopsticks to pull the fish's delicate flesh from its skeleton, bite by bite. The cheeks are a prized catch.





DIMINUTIVE BUT
SWEET-FLESHED GULF
OF MAINE REDFISH
READY FOR THE GRILL.

Romans encrust whole Mediterranean branzino in salt and theatrically crack it open with the back of a spoon tableside to diners' delight. The Portuguese munch on whole grilled sardines, about six inches long, with only the biggest—and boniest—heads left on the plate.

But modern American cooks and eaters shy away from dishes involving tails that hang over the plate and eyes that stare back. Esthetics, retail availability, and lack of kitchen experience have fed this aversion to whole fish.

Colles Stowell is principal of One Fish Foundation, a Yarmouth-based nonprofit organization that teaches Maine eaters of all ages about sustainable seafood. He pulls double duty as director of education for the Gloucester, Massachusetts, Cape Ann Fresh Catch, the largest community-supported fishery (CSF) operation in the country. A CSF works like a community-supported agriculture model in which customers pay in advance for a set amount of product weekly and agree to accept the species that can be pulled from the sea at that point in time.

“Only 15 percent of our shareholders buy whole fish, and the majority of those have roots in Asian cultures. They waste little while saving money, which is standard in their home countries,” says Stowell.

In New England, we’re spoiled by a history of large fish—cod, halibut, swordfish, and Atlantic salmon—being processed into fast-cooking fillets, explains Susan Tuveson, seafood lover and owner of Acorn Kitchen, a commercial community kitchen facility in Kittery Foreside. “We need to get used to eating the smaller fish that swim in the Gulf

of Maine. There are some delicious choices,” says Tuveson. Those include American butterfish, herring, mackerel, plaice, and whiting, to name a few.

A growing variety of whole fish is surfacing in retail outlets like Harbor Fish Market, and Browne Trading in Portland, Jess’s Market in Rockland, Fisherman’s

CHILI LIME MARINATED ACADIAN REDFISH

SERVES 2

2 fresh, dressed, Acadian Redfish, each about 1½ pounds

½ cup packed light brown sugar

⅔ cup fresh lime juice

3 tablespoons rice vinegar

2 tablespoons sesame oil

1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon fish sauce

1 tablespoon lime zest

2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced

2 tablespoons minced cilantro

1 tablespoon grated ginger

1 tablespoon sliced lemongrass

1 tablespoon sliced red Fresno chili pepper

1 tablespoon sliced green serrano chili pepper

PREPARATION — Lay the fish in a non-reactive pan.

In a large measuring cup, combine brown sugar and ⅔ cup warm water. Stir to dissolve sugar. Add all other ingredients to the measuring cup. Stir, and pour half of the sauce over fish. Set the rest of the sauce aside for serving. Refrigerate fish for at least 1 hour but no more than 2.

Preheat grill to high. Clean grates and oil them well. Lift fish out of the marinade and place on the grill over direct heat. (Discard fishy marinade.) Cook for 5 minutes.

Then, if using a charcoal grill, rotate the grate so the fish are opposite the hot coals. If using gas, turn the heat element under the fish off and fire up the one opposite the fish. Use tongs and a fish spatula to gently flip the fish over. Cover grill and cook fish until skin is crispy and top fillet flakes away with a little pressure of your thumb, about 10 minutes. Transfer to a warm plate and serve with reserved sauce.

Buying a whole fish

Look it in the eye and give it a good sniff.

The eyes should be clear and bulging.

Sunken cloudy eyes means it’s been on ice too long. It should smell like the sea and not at all like ammonia or bleach. Having the fishmonger scale and cut it on his fish counter spares you the mess on yours.

MEDITERRANEAN STUFFED AND GRILLED BLACK SEA BASS

SERVES 2

1 2-2½ pound fresh, dressed Black Sea Bass

Olive oil

Flaky sea salt

1 lemon, sliced

½ red onion, thinly sliced

1 bundle aromatic herbs on the stem (parsley, thyme, oregano)

Kitchen twine, optional

PREPARATION — Rub olive oil all over the fish, inside and out. Sprinkle salt inside the fish’s belly. Stuff the belly with layers of lemon slices, onion slices, and herbs. If you’re worried about losing the stuffing while grilling, cut three 6-inch pieces of cooking twine and tie them around the fish at 2-inch intervals, securing them with a tight knot. Place the fish in the refrigerator for at least 1 but not more than 2 hours.

Preheat grill to high. Clean and oil grates well. Place fish on the grill over direct heat for 5 minutes.

If using a charcoal grill, rotate grate so the fish is opposite hot coals. If using gas, turn the heat element under fish off and fire up the one opposite. Use tongs and a fish spatula to gently flip fish over. Cover grill and cook fish until skin is crispy and top fillet flakes away with a little pressure of your thumb, about 15 minutes. Transfer to a warm plate, drizzle with olive oil and serve.

Catch Seafood Market in Damariscotta and even some Hannaford's fish counters. Fishmongers willingly offer to dress the fish by removing guts, scales, and spiny fins. They'll take the head off, too, if the buyer really can't stomach that, but Stowell and Tuveson agree with the Japanese—the cheeks are the best part of any fish.

Redfish and black sea bass are two prime examples of smaller, more widely available smaller fish.

Acadian redfish, also known as ocean perch, have a storied history as lobster bait. Their spiky fins prick lobstermen and smelly racks attract lobsters. But fresh, these small fish—between one and a half and three pounds—are a sustainable choice year round because of their abundance in deep Gulf of Maine waters. Happily for us, with their clear big eyes, pretty

skin shading iridescent red to orange to white, and firm, sweet, snow-white flesh, they are also a grilling delight.

Black sea bass, on the other hand, is an invasive species. Historically, they've been found in the highest concentrations between Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, where they are sought after by both commercial and recreational fishermen and are subject to size restrictions and tight quotas. Until about five years ago, very few hearty (or very hungry) black sea bass would venture into the chillier waters off the coast of Maine. But as if we needed more evidence of climate change—the Gulf of Maine is the fastest-warming body of water in the world—many more black sea bass are ending

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BLACK SEA BASS
READY FOR FILLETING.

WHOLE FISH — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29

up as bycatch in Maine lobster traps. Mainers should eat black sea bass—one fish will feed two people—because they prey on shrimp, crab and lobster, all of which are culturally and economically important to the state.

Plus, their flesh is delicious and “their bones make excellent stock,” chef, sustainable seafood advocate, cook-book author, and Freeport resident Barton Seaver told me. Grilling either redfish or black sea bass is a relatively easy, quick way to get them to the plate, and if you can do it outdoors in good weather, so much the better.

“A grilled whole fish has more flavor and moisture than a fillet because it’s being cooked with the bones,” says Seaver. “Like any bone-in protein, it tastes better. And as the fish cooks, the steam from the bones keeps the flesh from drying out.”

To prep a whole fish for the grill, marinate it in a favorite vinaigrette for at least an hour but not more than two. Seaver prefers to cook over charcoal, but his technique transfers to a gas grill. He places the whole fish on the grill directly over hot coals and cooks it there for five minutes. Then, he rotates the grate so the fish is opposite

the coals rather than directly over the heat (if grilling with gas, simply switch which element is pushing out flames); uses tongs and a fish spatula to gently flip it over. Then, he covers the grill; and cooks it until the skin is crispy and the fillet flakes away with a little pressure of his thumb, about 10 to 15 minutes. He does nothing more than transfer the fish to a plate and drizzle a flavored oil over it to serve.

Oh, and removing the flesh from the cooked fish’s bones is easier than you think. Buy some smaller fish to grill, and you’ll be competent if not ready to do it tableside at *Le Bernadin* with Eric Ripert looking on.

Here’s how Susan Tuveson from Acorn Kitchen explains it. Using a thin-bladed knife and starting just behind the head, cut along the backbone toward the tail. With a hand or a fish spatula, gently lift the top fillet away from the spine and serve. To get at the bottom fillet, starting from the tail end, slowly lift the spine upwards. Use a knife to flick away any remaining rib bones from bottom fillet, and serve.

“It takes a cook only a few times to perfect this skill, which is an impressive one to have,” says Tuveson.

In addition to impressing your dinner guests, by using whole fish, you’ve also honored its life. **EIM**

DESJARLAIS — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18

man brings the same language to his current craft, and it’s immediately apparent that he’s found a parallel ethos in this new universe.

“With cooking,” the craftsman says, “it’s trying to get the best possible ingredients and then keeping it as simple as possible. Leather is the perfect equivalent to food because you don’t really have to do much to it if it’s really nice stuff. You don’t have to screw with it. Like breaking down a whole pig, you have to use every part and you learn how to use every part—same thing with a side of leather. Every piece has to get used, because leather is expensive.”

Of today’s Maine restaurant scene, Desjarlais is a little leery. “Everyone I come across who ate at Bandol or Evangeline says I should reopen them because they would be accepted now. No.” He shakes his head emphatically. “Since 2010 I’ve been able to watch from the outsider’s point of view, and with the frequency of restaurants opening and closing in Portland now, it’s terrifying.”

So there’s no Erik Desjarlais 3.0 involving a kitchen

somewhere off the beaten track, a little cozy place all his own? “I have retrained my brain from chef life to this life,” he says easily, “and it’s incredible how easy it was. I don’t want to be that man any more. What a dick I was to nearly everyone who crossed my path!”

He pauses, running his fingers over a tattooed forearm. Like all chefs who have put in their time at the stove and the cutting board, it is thick and muscled, the rough skin bearing the minute white scars of a thousand grease burns. His fingers are thick, his palms equally scarred and roughened. He sits back in his chair and looks around the room, not focusing on anything in particular.

“I’m holding on to all of my restaurant stuff,” he says finally, as if making a confession. “All my favorite things, it’s so bad, I just can’t let it go, my pots and pans. My hope in a perfect world would be when I’m 50 to open up a ten-seat restaurant and serve whatever the hell I want. If I want to do a three-course meal, a five-course meal, I don’t even know. Eventually I would love to cook again, just not now. I do miss it because it’s still part of me. I miss the food, the ingredients, I miss the tools, I miss the ovens, I miss my flattop like a lost toe. I just don’t miss the life.” **EIM**