

ALUMNI BOOKS

Catch of the Day

Ben Pollinger's cookbook takes the mystery out of preparing fish BY CYNTHIA K. BUCCINI

"Anything that inspires more people to cook is a good thing," says Pollinger.



KRISTIN TEIG

Most of the recipes in Ben Pollinger's debut cookbook, *School of Fish*, are what you'd expect from the executive chef at the Michelin-starred Manhattan restaurant Oceana: crisp-skinned striped bass with tomato-basil risotto; flounder barigoule with artichokes and potatoes; poached scallops with pea shoots, sugar snaps, walnuts, and orange vinaigrette.

But nestled among the instructions for fish fumet and soft-shell crab saltimbocca is a version of that mainstay comfort fare of family meals and potluck suppers of decades past—the tuna noodle casserole, Pollinger's favorite food as a kid. "My mom was a '70s-era cook who learned from recipes on the back of boxes and cans," says Pollinger (CAS'95). "Almost all of her repertoire included a can of Campbell's soup. This one was a staple—a box of elbow macaroni, two cans of tuna, two cans of cream of mushroom soup, and topped with crushed potato chips."

Pollinger gave his mother's recipe a reboot a few years ago, when he was asked to cook an iconic dish from childhood for a charity event. He whipped up a mushroom sauce from scratch (mushrooms, butter, onion,

garlic, flour, milk) and used fresh, poached tuna steak. It was a hit, he says.

The casserole is one of more than 100 recipes in *School of Fish* (Gallery Books). Organized by technique, the cookbook's chapters progress according to degree of difficulty: from baking and roasting to braising, broiling, steaming, poaching, grilling, and finally searing and sautéing. (Pollinger recommends that cooks make their way through it in that order.) In addition to advice on buying, storing, and seasoning fish, there are sections on preparing stocks, flavored oils, and vinaigrettes; raw fish dishes; appetizers, salads, pasta, and rice; soups and chowders; and vegetable side dishes.

"I wanted to give people a base to build on and a starting point," he says. "The goal is to make people comfortable handling fish in their own kitchen....My model reader was my wife, Christine, who takes care of and feeds our three kids while I'm at the restaurant—after her own hard day of work—and doesn't often have a lot of time to cook dinner. Most people need good, tasty, accomplishable, everyday recipes that they can use to create a meal in a reasonable amount of time."

Pollinger has worked in some of the finest restaurants in the world. After graduating from BU and the Culinary Institute of America, he apprenticed at Le Louis XV in Monaco, under celebrated chef Alain Ducasse. He worked at Lespinasse, Union Square Cafe, and now-closed Les Célébrités and Tabla before joining Oceana in 2006.

Bostonia spoke with him about buying fresh fish, his favorite recipe, and the benefits of poaching in beer.

BOSTONIA: Why do a cookbook?

POLLINGER: For as long as I have been the chef at Oceana, people have told me that they love to eat fish and to cook at home, but are intimidated tackling seafood in their kitchens, mostly for a lack of knowledge. I had never cooked before cooking professionally, so I, too, had to learn how to cook at home, which is different from in a restaurant. I felt I could help people by sharing my experiences. Cooking brings people together, and anything that inspires more people to cook and come together is a good thing.

What were the biggest challenges?

We often cook by eye in the restaurant—a pinch of this, a little of that—but this method doesn't exactly translate the same way to all readers. This means I had to use standardized measurements, which meant cooking by eye, but also intercepting everything I was adding with a measuring spoon or cup so it could be properly quantified.

Why do home cooks have trouble with fish? We tend to overcook it, even though we know it's more delicate than meat.

Fear. Again, for lack of knowledge. *School of Fish* provides many helpful answers, including how to tell when your piece of fish is done.

Have you served these dishes—or variations—at Oceana?

Many variations of the recipes in the book have been served at Oceana, but very few recipes in the

cookbook are exactly the same as the recipes used in the restaurant. Again, the goal was for you to



be able to cook at home, without the benefit of all the toys and resources we have in a professional kitchen.

Fluke tartare with cashews, mango, and coconut is a great example where the recipe is very close to what we prepare in the restaurant and is still very easy. Grilled swordfish with black olive bagna cauda and grilled escarole is another.

Give us some tips for buying fresh fish.

Buy your fish somewhere reputable and, when possible, from your local fishmonger. Don't be afraid to have a conversation about the fish. Ask to smell the fish—all fish should smell like the sea, and smell a bit sweet. Yes, it can smell like fish, but shouldn't smell "fishy." It should look bright

and moist. If you're buying a whole fish, the eye should look full, clear, and moist; the gills should look bright red; and the fins should look whole and not dried out. If it's a filet or steak with the bloodline, then the bloodline should look red as well.

What's the most forgiving method of cooking fish, and why?

I think steaming is the most forgiving method. There is very little variable in the cooking environment—you either have steam or you don't, and the fact that it is such a moist process ensures that there will be some moisture left in the fish even if you slightly overcook it.

Your favorite method is broiling. Why?

Broiling is a pretty easy and mess-free at-home method, and it also imparts its own flavor, similar to a grill, with the little bit of charring and browning. It

also works beautifully with caramelizing glazes and other toppings that brown up nicely.

I love the idea of poaching in olive oil—even beer. What are the benefits?

Poaching fish in olive oil keeps the fish really moist and lets the natural sweetness of the fish shine through. And it isn't really greasy or oily, despite the way it sounds. Beer is such a natural match for shellfish; it can't be beat. And it evokes great summertime memories for me—simply cooked lobster and clams on the grill down at the beach house.

Do you have a favorite recipe?

Poached scallops with pea shoots, sugar snaps, walnuts, and orange vinaigrette is one of my favorites in the book. When I developed the recipe for the book, it became clear very quickly that it belonged on the menu at Oceana—it's so good and elegant without

even trying! It was one of the top-selling appetizers last summer.

Which recipes will allow children to develop a taste for fresh fish, rather than fish sticks?

Parents might be lucky enough to get their kids to try dishes as they are, but I think the best approach to getting kids to eat fish is to offer the simply prepared fish on its own, paired with something that you know they like.

I recommend following a baked or grilled recipe. Baked New Jersey fish 101 is the perfect example. I had already gotten my kids hooked on simple baked fish when one day I brought them into the restaurant. They wanted to—or thought they wanted to—try something "fancy." Well, they didn't go for it. I asked them what they wanted and they responded, "New Jersey fish!" I asked what that was, and they said, "You know, fish like you make back home in New Jersey!"

The Ambiguity of Life, Examined

Sue Miller's new novel explores themes of class, home, and love in midlife BY JOHN O'ROURKE



THERE ARE FEW CONTEMPORARY WRITERS MORE adept at charting the intricacies of modern love and marriage than Sue Miller. Ever since her best-selling debut novel, *The Good Mother*, was published nearly 30 years ago, Miller has brought her considerable observational skills to bear on matters of the heart.

Her new novel, *The Arsonist* (Knopf), explores what Miller (GRS'80) describes as "the ambiguity of life, the unresolved quality of so much of life and somehow learning to live with that and to make peace with it in some way or another." The story opens with the arrival of Frankie Rowley, a 40-something relief worker who has just returned to her parents' home in the fictional town of Pomeroy, N.H., after 15 years in Africa. Frankie is



Miller is drawn repeatedly to the subject of marriage in her fiction because it represents "a deep and difficult and complicated encounter between two people."

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