

A gentleman's guide to the art of trout fishing

By Jolyon Nuttall

Since the proof of the pudding is said to be in the eating, I am devoting this month's column to the gentleman's art of cooking trout. With two months of the closed season still to go, you can practise the recipes I describe on a chunk of stockfish so that by the time September 1 comes, the rare and delicious genuine article will not be endangered.

Let me establish at the outset that the methods of cooking trout which I intend to record will not be found in any Blue Ribbon chef's repertoire. And this brings me to another preliminary point: a gentleman angler would rather be burnt at the stake than eat a commercial trout. He will shudder at the mere sight of trout listed on a glossy hotel menu, for as like as not it has been fished out of some dank tank with a large net half an hour before dinner is served. Give it the most inspiring label - trout Meniere, trout thermidor, trout a la fiddle-de-dee - he will not touch it.

In fact, the only trout a true angler will consider eating is one caught according to all the rules, either by himself, a relation, a friend, or an admirer.

I once studied the face of a fisherman as he sat in a Swiss restaurant watching fellow diners pointing out to waiters the trout they fancied as the fish swam about before their eyes. His agony increased as the trout were plucked from their tank and carried off to be cooked. When finally they were returned and deposited - garnished - before those who had claimed them, he was apoplectic. He gave me the clear impression that he was not sure whether he was attending a public execution or Billingsgate Fish Market.

There are only three ways of cooking trout that merit any real consideration: for two of them you need a stove, and for the third a river bank.

Method No. One:

Fry as many rashers of bacon as you require. Pour off the bacon fat and add a generous quantity of butter to the pan. When the butter is heated, add the trout. Do NOT under any circumstances remove the head or tail before cooking: such a deed would be similar to serving fresh oysters out of their shells. If the trout is too large for the frying pan, get another frying pan. If you consider this too extravagant, cut the trout in half.' Fry the trout from five to ten minutes on each side until the skin is crisp and the flesh soft. Salt inside and out before doing so.

Serve with the bacon and, say, green peas and iced asparagus.

Simple, what?

Method No. Two (fully patented and known as Nuttall's Trout Pie):

Fry the salted trout as described above. Flake, carefully removing all the bones.

Beat an egg in a casserole dish. Chop an onion into fine pieces and grate a quarter pound of cheese. Add the onion, the cheese and the trout to the beaten egg. Cover with milk and stir all the ingredients together.

Gently lay slices of tomato on top and cook in an oven at 375 degrees for 20 minutes or so.

Serve with a dry French wine or whatever you can afford.

Footnote! This recipe is intended for use when you have had trout for dinner (and breakfast) several days running and you feel like a change from Method One.

Method No. Three:

If you have not eaten manna from heaven, and would like to, try this recipe. In addition to a river bank, you will need a few twigs, newspaper or a tuft of tinder-dry grass, matches and - vitally important - a small phial of salt.

Arrange to meet your companion at one o'clock. Fish in the rapids and catch your lunch fish, 5 or 6 ozs, in weight.

At the appointed hour, gut your trout and make a fire. When there is plenty of smoke, drop your little trout on to the twigs. Discuss the morning's fishing briefly with your companion.

Five or six minutes later, remove the trout from the fire, peel off the charred skin, salt and eat - and all the kings and queens of Europe will envy you.

The wood smoke, the fresh air and the trout combine in one delicate and unforgettable taste.

One more point: know how to open your trout or you will get a mouthful of bones. When the fish is on its side (which it is when it is cooked and served), you will notice a line running down its body from head to tail. This is the demarcation line, so to speak. Station yourself at the tail and peel the flesh off with your knife and fork, in movements to left and right from this line.

When you have eaten one side, turn the trout over and start on the other. Even with this method, a bone or two may still come away with the flesh so chew carefully before you swallow and all will be well.