


**Uncanny:** Sardines get the sea salt treatment at Foreign Cinema.



# Our Little Local Fish

BY MOLLY WATSON PHOTOS BY NADER KHOURI



**Super Salad:** Baby farm beets with fresh sardines at Luce.

Sardines are a fine-flavored alternative to tuna and salmon: ubiquitous, easy to prepare, and nutritious.

My son was banished from the kitchen to keep his grabby fingers away from the home-cured sardines steadily piling up on the counter. I begged my husband to please stop eating the filets as I skinned them, even as I snuck the odd chunk into my own mouth. The silky texture, slight saline tinge and mellowed fishy taste of cured sardines is remarkably like lox.

Most of what is written about sardines focuses on how healthful and sustainable they are. They are full of omega-3

fatty acids (1 to 1.8 grams in a 3.5-ounce serving, an amount comparable to salmon) while also being low in mercury, PCBs and other toxins that build up in larger fish—like swordfish and tuna—that we humans so love to eat. Their populations are thriving and the purse-seiners that catch them snag little, if any, by-catch and do minimal environmental damage along the way (no dragging the ocean floor, for example).

All of this goodness combined puts sardines not just on the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch "green" list for best choices; sardines are on the organization's new Super Green list of sustainable fisheries that are also notably high in omega-3's and low in toxins.

Even Oprah gave them the nod as a "25 Super Foods to Incorporate Into Your Diet Now" in a recent *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

What gets mentioned all too rarely, however, is how they taste.

Civilized people can disagree on matters of taste, of course, but the best thing about sardines is their flavor. They have some. All oily fish—those with high omega-3's, like salmon, tuna and mackerel—have a strong flavor. We've gotten used to the strong flavor of salmon and tuna—so much so, it ends up,



## HOME-CURED SARDINES

*Curing softens the flavor of sardines and makes the texture of the fish more dense and a bit silky. Use them as you would any smoked or cured fish—on crostini, in salads or on bagels with cream cheese. These sardines are particularly lovely topped with a mixture of grated hard-cooked egg, capers and a squirt of lemon. Cured sardines can be stored, covered with oil (a decent but not too fancy olive oil works great), for up to a week in the fridge. This recipe scales up (or down) very easily.*

### 12 Pacific sardines

#### ½ cup sea salt

Use a sharp knife to cut off the heads just past where their gills are. Cut a slit down their bellies almost to the tail (you can also simply lay them flat on one side and cut off a thin edge down the length of their belly-side), open them up, and (I like to do this part under running water) sweep out their guts with your finger.

You can, of course, ask the fishmonger to do the beheading and gutting for you and leave the guts out of your kitchen. Sardine guts are, however, about as innocuous as fish guts get, so if you know how to clean fish or want to give it a try, this is a good place to start.

Rinse the fish clean and pat them dry (do this when you get them home even if you have the fishmonger clean them).

Lay the fish in a baking pan or similar vessel (you can put them on a rack in the pan to encourage even curing, but it isn't necessary). I like to put mine in a neat row because they look like little soldiers ready for duty, but you can arrange them as you see fit. Sprinkle them with about half the salt; turn them over and sprinkle with the

remaining salt. There's no need to open the fish up and salt the flesh directly on the inside. They will cure nicely through the skin, and this method will help them from becoming too salty in the end.

Cover the pan with a layer (or two or even three) of plastic wrap and tuck it away in the fridge for two days.

After two days (in the realm of 36 to 48 hours), uncover the pan and rinse off all the sardines under cool running water. Open up a sardine and lift out the spine. The other bones should lift right out with the spine. Then —this part is really amazing—use your fingers to work the two filets (one on each side of the fish) away from the skin. In most cases, the filets quite easily pull away from the skin. Some bits of skin may remain on the fish, but they are perfectly edible and you don't need to worry about them.

What you have now are lox-esque versions of sardines. Give them a taste. If yours are quite salty, soak them in cool water for about an hour to leech out some of the salt. They are totally and completely and deliciously edible. They become even silkier and milder if you let them sit covered in olive oil for a few days.



Gayle Pirie of Foreign Cinema finishes sardines with green olive tapenade, roasted peppers, radish sprouts, and crostini.

that we're eating those populations to death. The clear taste of sardines makes them excellent to cook with—they can stand up to bold flavors and spicy treatments. Sardines also offer a shockingly meaty texture for such a small creature.

Yet sardines have gotten a bad rap. In response, a group called the Sardinistas has formed to promote sardines' positive attributes. Skin-on canned versions of this herring variety have won few fans over the years. American tendencies for mild, "tastes like chicken" flavors haven't helped matters either. As Alton Brown has widely observed, our collective preference for meat and seafood cut into steaks or sold as filets makes embracing sardines a challenge for many Americans. To prepare a fresh sardine is to know it was once an animal: Unless you buy them canned, the 11-inch fish are sold whole with head, tail and guts intact.

Canned sardines from Europe can be several different species of the herring family that are small and soft-boned—including what some people consider "true" sardines, *Sardina pilchardus*, which are caught off the coast of Sardinia. On the West Coast, our fresh sardines are *Sardinops sagax*, also a member of the herring family, distinguished by six black dots on both sides of their bodies.

San Francisco was home to the first sardine cannery on the West Coast in 1889. At the turn of the 20th century, the nearest canneries to the prolific Monterey Bay were in the Bay Area—a fact that inspired Frank Booth, who canned salmon in Pittsburg on the Sacramento River, to build a canning plant in 1902 on what would become Cannery Row in Monterey. The bulk of the California canning industry quickly relocated to Monterey and San Pedro. Demand for the protein-rich fish full of flavor, as well as calcium and vitamins D and B-12, only increased over the course of two World Wars.

Sardines were the tuna of the early 20th century: ubiquitous, easy, nutritious.

Then two things happened. First, the sardine population collapsed. The catch in Monterey went from 234,000 tons in 1944 to less than 10,000 by 1947, a drop that compelled the fiercely competitive canneries to join together to hire a plane to scout for sardines offshore in a desperate attempt to find the newly elusive fish. Second, a new method was developed for canning tuna, which cooked out the strongly flavored—and healthy—oils first and made it less “fishy.” The price of sardines skyrocketed, tuna became more palatable and the “chicken of the sea” ushered in a new age of American eating.

The canneries closed and the Pacific sardine disappeared from our diets. By the 1990s, restaurants on the revitalized Cannery Row served canned sardines from Europe, even though the sardine stocks had replenished and schools of the silver-skinned wonders again filled the outer Monterey Bay.

Recently, sardines have started coming back to our plates.

“Five years ago we didn’t sell any sardines,” says Paul Johnson of Monterey Fish Company in San Francisco and Berkeley. “Now we sell 300 to 400 pounds every week.”

As with so many food trends, the increase demand for sardines is being driven by chefs.

## MARINATED HOME-CURED SARDINES

*This is but one way to use home-cured sardines. Feel free to play around with this marinade, adding aromatics and herbs as you see fit. Marinated home-cured sardines are delicious served with a warm potato salad, on a mash of root vegetables or—my favorite—on top of a bed of lacinato kale gently cooked until quite soft. Leftovers—if you’re lucky enough to have such a thing—are delicious alongside scrambled eggs for breakfast.*

**12 home-cured sardines (24 filets)**

**¾ cup olive oil, divided**

**1 small red onion, halved and thinly sliced**

**2 cloves garlic, chopped**

**¼ to ½ teaspoon red chile flakes (optional)**

**cup agrodulce (or white wine vinegar plus 1 teaspoon sugar, stirred to dissolve)**

Lay sardine filets in a casserole dish or wide, shallow bowl.

Warm ¼ cup of the olive oil over medium heat in a large frying pan. Add red onion and cook, stirring, until onion is soft, about 3 minutes. Add garlic and chile flakes and cook, stirring, until the garlic is also soft, about another 3 minutes. Remove from heat and add remaining ½ cup olive oil and agrodulce or vinegar.

Pour still-warm mixture over sardines. Let sit at least 30 minutes and up to two days. For overnight marinating, cover and chill, but bring to room temperature before serving.

“We have sardines on the menu every day,” says Gayle Pirie of Foreign Cinema. “They’re our signature, our little local fish.”

Size and source may be compelling, but Pirie’s real interest in sardines is culinary. “I’m always hunting for that wonderful, addictive combination at the restaurant and sardines have an inherent richness, protein and salt that pairs beautifully with a minerally rosé, a slate-like Sanceree, or balances out a boozy martini or Manhattan.”

Sardines are always salt-cured at Foreign Cinema. “Curing mellows the flavor,” explains Pirie, “and they get super buttery

if they sit in olive oil for a few days.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a grilled sardine,” she observes, “but I personally just don’t want to work that hard when I’m eating.” Plus, Pirie notes that “a clean, finished bite is a much easier sell than a whole fish, even a small one.”

Harder sell or not, Dominique Crenn at Luce always has whole grilled sardines on her menu.

“I love mackerel and sardines,” says Crenn. “I grew up with them. Both of my parents are from Brittany, which is really fishermen’s country, and we would get sardines and just grill them with some herbs and eat them like that—tasting of the woods and the ocean at once.”

“At first customers weren’t into it,” admits Crenn, “so I just kept offering it. It was important to me to have those tastes



Dominique Crenn precisely plating her beet and sardine salad in the kitchen at Luce.

## GRILLED SARDINES

*Fresh sardines, simply cleaned and thrown on a hot grill with just a coating of oil and a few herbs stuck in them, are an easy, delicious way to eat sardines and a super-simple spring dinner. If you like everything spicy, you can always add a minced serrano in with the herbs.*

*Always look for ultra-fresh sardines—ask your fishmonger when they came in and walk on by any sardines with bloated bellies (they will burst and it's gross). Buy sardines the same day you plan to use them.*

### 12 Pacific sardines

About 1 cup mixed chopped fresh herbs—mint and flat-leaf parsley are a particularly lovely combination

Olive oil

Lemon zest

Sea salt

Lemon wedges

Clean the cooking grate on your grill and brush it with vegetable or canola oil. Heat a grill to medium hot. You want anything put on the grill to sizzle immediately, but you should be able to



hold your hand about an inch above the cooking grate for at least a minute without having to pull it away.

Gut the sardines by cutting a slit down the belly and rinsing out the guts under cold running water. You can also nicely ask the fishmonger to do the gutting for you.

In a medium bowl, mix the herbs with about 2 teaspoons of olive oil and ½ teaspoon of lemon zest. The mixture should still be very herby, but held together a bit

by the oil. Add salt and more lemon zest to taste.

Fill the sardines with the herb mixture. Brush both sides of the fish with oil.

Set sardines on the grill and cook (covered if a gas grill) until seared and cooked through on one side, about 4 minutes. Flip them over and cook on the other side until cooked through, about another 4 minutes. The skin should be golden and a bit crispy. Serve with lemon wedges for people to spritz the fish themselves.

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on my menu. Food isn't just about cooking something, it's also about traditions and the stories behind them. I may not serve the typical salmon or tuna tartare, but I'll tell you why things are on the menu."

Pirie and Crenn aren't alone. Matthew Accarrino at SPQR regularly features sardines, and Contigo chef Brett Emerson writes a blog entitled In Praise of Sardines. Judy Rogers has featured sardines at Zuni Café for years.

Might all this sardine love eventually lead to another crash in the sardine population, like the one that decimated Cannery Row in the late 1940s and early 1950s?

The short answer: no. Scientists widely agree that the sardine population crash 60 years ago was a natural fluctuation. Measures of fish scale deposits in ocean sediment revealed nine major sardine collapses over 1700 years—about one every 60 years. Each collapse was followed by a steady 30-year recovery period. The intense pressure from commercial fishing in the mid 20th century simply exacerbated a natural phenomenon.

For decades the sardine population was left alone—sold only as incidental catch found in nets aimed at squid and mackerel. Today the sardine fishery is well managed and thriving. Yet what if that more demanding pressure for sardines returned?

"Most sardines we catch—up to 90 percent—don't ever go to feed humans. They're being used for fertilizer or animal feed

or pellets at salmon farms," explains Sheila Bowman of Seafood Watch. "If we were to continue catching what we're catching but eat them directly, that would be a great trade."

When sardines are used to feed farmed salmon or net-raised tuna, it takes anywhere from 8 to 20 pounds of sardines to produce a single pound of salmon or tuna.

"If everyone would give up eating one pound of salmon and eat one pound of sardines instead, that would actually be a lot of extra food," Bowman points out.

I like the idea that eating the luscious cured sardines now sitting in my fridge is, through some alchemy of the whacked-out contemporary food system, somehow creating more food. What I like more is what they do to a toasted slice of rye.



Molly Watson still remembers the first salmon she ate – grilled and basted with beer – when she was six. Good as it was she vastly preferred the wild mussels she picked from the rocks herself which were then steamed in white wine by a glamorous French woman. Home-cured sardines give her the same rush. When not curing fish, Molly writes The Dinner Files and Local Foods.

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