



REEL

Chef Laurent Tourondel, owner of BLT Fish in Manhattan, knows that the striped bass he prepares at his East Hampton retreat is fresh. He catches it himself.



FOOD



FOR REAL MEN

YOUR GUIDE TO CATCHING, COOKING, AND EATING
THE HEALTHIEST FOOD IN THE WORLD
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ASK ANY ANGLER WHY HE SETS TO SEA,

and he'll almost invariably say "peace and quiet"—a fantasy of lazy summer afternoons and unbroken horizons with nothing but rolling ocean waves for distraction. But that's only half the answer. The other half is contained in the stories told back on land, stories tinged with predator-versus-prey electricity that pit man against fish—big fish, preferably, but actual size can be adjusted once the evidence is filleted.

It's precisely that dichotomy—intermittent chaos amid extraordinary calm—that draws chef Laurent Tourondel to the sport. That and the fact that there's nothing more satisfying than stalking and catching your own supper.

"My God, it feels like I have a Volkswagen on my line," shouts Tourondel over the hiss of the ocean, all 5'7" of him struggling against a bent graphite pole. Sixty feet away, a glimmer of silver splashes to the surface.

"Slowly, now," yells Captain Lou Rosado, who's springing down the ladder from the bridge to join the excitement on the aft deck. "Turn the handle *slooooooowly*. If you reel too fast, you'll jerk the hook out of its mouth."

Tourondel has traveled 120 miles due east of Manhattan to Montauk, Long Island, to cast his line for one of the most popular game fish in North America: the striped bass, a species that's as prized for its fight as it is for its flesh. In so doing, he's joined the ranks of 40 million other fishing fanatics who head to the water each year to make fishing one of the top leisure activities in the United States—a sport even more popular than golfing or jogging. And

like many of those who reel one in, he plans on keeping his catch.

But no matter how skilled the angler, rare is the one who masters the crucial next step: cooking the catch. "It's easy to ruin a nice fillet," says Tourondel as he finally wrestles a 25-pound striper onto the boat. "This is really unfortunate, because it's also easier to achieve greater flavor with fewer ingredients in less time with fish than with any other food."

I wouldn't know. Like most men, I've spent most of my adult life professing a certain mastery of grilling. I can cook a steak to perfection—vegetables, too. My barbecued chicken has a small but flatteringly loyal following. And my German-American background has made me an expert in everything ending in "wurst." But my backyard culinary skills still possess an inherent chink: I haven't yet met a fish I didn't manage to overcook.

I bet you can relate. But here's the good news: "We're going to change that today," says Tourondel.

Tourondel grew up in the south of France, where he spent his summers trolling for bonito and mackerel in the Mediterranean with his father and grandfather. At day's end, he would adjourn to the kitchen to help his mother and grandmother turn the catch into dishes like skate *au beurre noir* (with brown butter sauce) and sole *au persil et citron* (with parsley and lemon). As he became older, he began traveling the globe, expanding his fishing to include



Striped bass taste best when they're between 14 and 25 pounds. (Leave the skin on if you plan to grill them.)



everything from shark off Long Island to sailfish off Puerto Rico. Ultimately, Tourondel translated his passion for seafood into a string of award-winning restaurants, including the critically acclaimed BLT Fish in New York City. *Food & Wine* honored him as a Best New Chef in 1998. *Bon Appétit* named him restaurateur of the year in 2007.

"Restaurant cooking is very different from home cooking," says Tourondel, who prefers the latter. "To experience what fish is truly supposed to taste like, you have to catch it, fillet it, and cook it yourself," he adds. "Pulling a fish from the sea with your own rod and reel adds a flavor you just can't buy in a store."

Striped bass occupies a special place on Tourondel's menus. It's not the biggest fish in the sea, or the most exotic one, but with its spiked fins, razor-sharp gills, and an average top weight of 35 to 40 pounds, it's formidable prey. "And it's well worth the fight," says Tourondel as he hands

me a rod, pats me on the back, and directs me to the rear of the boat. Most other amateur saltwater anglers agree: They haul in nearly 29.8 million pounds of striped bass each year, more than any other recreationally caught fish, and place a premium on its mild, sweet meat. Even so, "stripers are not overfished," says Tim Fitzgerald, a marine biologist and the director of the Environmental Defense Fund's Sustainable Seafood Program. "They're one of the most well-managed fisheries in the United States."

Striper season lasts from April 15 to December 15 in the waters off Long Island. "Fall is when it's really good," says Captain Rosado. "The fish become aggressive when the water turns cool."

Early fall is also when Atlantic striped bass begin their annual migration from Canada to the warmer waters off North Carolina, closely following their favorite baitfish—mullet, bunker, and herring. This ancient pil-

Opening spread: PLAMEN PETKOV (fishhook)

grimage takes them past the eastern-most tip of Long Island and, with any luck, right past a few waiting hooks.

"Only googans [rookies in the striper game] leave fishing entirely to luck, though," says Captain Rosado as he maneuvers our boat, the *Dorado*, over a section of breakers. "I'm stacking the odds in our favor. Welcome to the northern rips."

The rips, as they're known by local fishermen, are underwater streams caused by current passing over a raised section of sea floor. As the current collides with the rocky outcropping, it's directed upward, creating a kind of natural conveyor belt. Stripers congregate on the calmer, down-current side of the underwater plume and wait patiently for baitfish to sweep in front of their noses.

"We catch the biggest fish out here," says Rosado. In fact, the largest striped bass pulled from these waters weighed an impressive 76 pounds (2 pounds shy of the world

Taste the Summer

Chef Laurent Tourondel loves to use food as an excuse to gather with family and friends. And there's no better time to do that than in the waning days of summer, when fresh fish and first-class produce are in abundance. The four-course meal he suggests on these pages combines the best seasonal ingredients with simple techniques to produce a feast as impressive to serve as it is easy to pull off.

Grilled Striped Bass with Lime-Ginger Broth

3" knob of ginger (to make 2 Tbsp ginger juice)
1/2 cup dry white wine
3 cups vegetable stock
6 shiitake mushrooms, stemmed and thinly sliced

2 Tbsp ginger, cut into matchsticks
4 Tbsp (1/2 stick) cold butter, diced
2 Tbsp lime juice
4 scallions, thinly sliced on the bias
2 Tbsp chopped cilantro, plus more for garnish

Pinch of cayenne pepper
Grated peels of 2 limes
Salt and pepper
2 Tbsp olive oil
6 portions of striped bass, skin on (6 oz each)

To make the ginger juice, peel and then grate the ginger knob. Wrap the grated ginger in a thin cotton kitchen towel. Hold it over a bowl and twist until enough juice drips into the bowl.

In a medium saucepan, bring the wine to a boil and let it cook for 2 minutes. Add the vegetable stock, ginger juice, mushrooms, and ginger, and cook for 3 more minutes. Strain the broth through a fine mesh strainer, reserving the vegetables.

Using a hand blender, blend the cold butter into the strained broth. Return the reserved vegetables to the mixture, along with the lime juice, scallions, cilantro, cayenne, and grated lime

peel, and continue to cook for 2 minutes. Remove from heat and warm before serving.

Preheat a grill on medium high. Season the bass pieces with salt, pepper, and olive oil. Place them skin side down on the grill and cook for 2 minutes before rotating them a quarter-turn to cook for 3 more minutes. Flip the pieces and keep them cooking for an additional 3 to 5 minutes, until they can be easily pierced with a knife. Remove them from the grill and place them on a large oval platter. Spoon the sauce and vegetables around the fish and garnish with cilantro sprigs. *Makes 6 servings*

KNOW YOUR FISH

How to eat from the sea without endangering the oceans—or yourself

With species populations dwindling and health concerns in the news, selecting a fillet for dinner can be a daunting task. Here are the most eco-unfriendly fish you'll encounter, according to the Environmental Defense Fund—and a handful of healthier alternatives.

Grouper

CONCERNS
Mercury, overfishing

BETTER CHOICE
Mahi mahi

Salmon (farmed, Atlantic)

CONCERNS
PCBs, water pollution from commercial net pens

BETTER CHOICE
Wild-caught salmon, farmed rainbow trout, farmed arctic char

Swordfish

CONCERNS
Mercury toxicity; bycatch of seabirds, sharks, billfish, and endangered sea turtles

BETTER CHOICE
Mahi mahi, farmed striped bass



Tourondel preps with Amy Eubanks, a chef at BLT Fish.



For dessert: honey-lavender roasted peaches.



Make sure your fillets are of uniform size and thickness so they cook evenly.

Balsamic-Glazed Grilled Radicchio

1/3 cup lemon juice
1/2 tsp red-pepper flakes
1/2 cup balsamic vinegar

2 tsp salt
1 tsp ground black pepper
1 cup extra-virgin olive oil

Mix the lemon juice, red-pepper flakes, balsamic vinegar, salt, pepper, olive oil, and honey in a medium mixing bowl. Place the radicchio in a shallow baking dish and pour the marinade on top. Marinate for 15 minutes.

Remove the radicchio wedges (reserving the marinade) and grill them until crispy, about 1 to 2 minutes on each side. Place them on a serving platter, drizzle them with the reserved marinade, and keep everything warm. *Makes 6 servings*

record), but such monsters are good for little else than hanging on a wall. From a taste standpoint, stripers are at their best between 28 inches (about 14 pounds) and 36 inches (about 25 pounds). Once they grow heavier than 35 pounds or so, the meat becomes coarse. Plus, “the bigger fish tend to accrue more mercury and PCBs,” says Fitzgerald.

The accumulation of toxins is especially problematic for striped bass, a species that occupies a high position on the Atlantic food chain. “Heavy metals such as mercury and environmental toxins such as PCBs [a known carcinogen] can increase tenfold for every step you take up the predatory ladder,” says Jane

Hightower, M.D., a San Francisco internist and the author of *Diagnosis: Mercury—Money, Politics & Poison*. Size and age also play a role, with larger, older fish typically accumulating the highest levels of contaminants. “As with everything in life, however, moderation and variety are key,” says Fitzgerald. “As long as you’re eating a variety of fish from lower on the food chain, the health risks should be minimal.”

The maximum recommended intake of striped bass caught in Block Island Sound, where we’re fishing today, is one serving a week, according to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Not that Tourondel is worried. It’s all

the chef can do to contain his excitement as we speed toward Montauk Harbor, past the meandering cruise boats crammed with tourists (who paid \$70 a head to catch the same fish we used as bait) and the “mosquito fleet” of light-tackle skiffs. Our menu for this evening: grilled little-neck clam *pizettas*, marinated salmon salad with snow peas, creamed local corn with asparagus, and the pièce de résistance, grilled striped bass with lime-ginger broth. “For dessert, I’ll prepare honey-lavender roasted peaches with amaretto Chantilly,” says Tourondel with a flourish as he jumps onto the dock to fillet our catch. “Meet me at my house in an hour.”

located 14 miles west of Montauk along NY 27, East Hampton is a migratory stopover for New York money. It’s the place where Jackie O spent her childhood summers and where Jackson Pollock created his most famous paintings. And on a quiet road 6 miles northeast from the center of town, it’s where Tourondel will teach me how to grill the perfect fillet.

“The first rule of grilling is to make sure the grate is clean,” says Tourondel, waving me toward his grill with a wire brush. “There’s really nothing worse than biting into a fish and tasting hamburger.”

The second rule is just as easy to follow: “The ingredients should never mask the flavor of the fish,” Tourondel says. For a classically trained French chef, to make such an admission is heresy, but it makes sense when you consider what we’re cooking. “From a culinary standpoint, there’s an inherent difference between fish and every other type of meat you can use,” he explains. “There’s only a handful of varieties of beef, poultry, and pork, but there are hundreds of types of edible fish

in the sea, and each one brings a different flavor to the table.” In other words, the fish itself contributes the primary flavor to the dish, so you don’t want to overwhelm it with spices or sauce.

“Just the other week I was fishing with my father in France, and all we did was brush the fillets with a mixture of olive oil, garlic, soy sauce, and capers,” says Tourondel. “It was delicious, and it took all of 15 minutes to prepare and cook.”

In addition to keeping the recipe simple, it’s essential to keep the grill

Creamed Summer Corn with Asparagus

12 stalks asparagus, halved lengthwise and cut into 2” pieces
2 Tbsp butter

1 small onion, finely diced
2 sprigs thyme
6 cups sweet corn kernels (cut from

fresh ears of corn)
1/2 cup heavy cream
Salt and pepper

Fill a large bowl with ice and water, and bring a pot of salted water to a boil. Add the asparagus and cook for 2 minutes or until the color turns bright green. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the stalks to the ice bath and let them cool. Drain.

In a large sauté pan, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the onion and thyme and sauté until the onions are translucent, about 5 minutes. Add the corn and keep cooking for 5

minutes, stirring constantly. Add the cream and bring to a boil. Remove from heat and discard the thyme stems. Transfer a third of the mixture to a blender and process until smooth.

Return the corn puree to the sauté pan, add the blanched asparagus, and cook for an additional 3 minutes until well combined and hot. Season with salt and pepper and serve immediately. *Makes 6 servings*



Tourondel serves his guests the area’s signature cocktail, the Hampton Fizz.



The chef finishes the peach dessert with an amaretto Chantilly.

scorching hot. “If it’s not hot, the fish will stick to the grate,” says Tourondel as he cranks his burners to near their highest setting. “A hot grill also cooks the fish faster, and this helps prevent the meat from drying out.”

Deciding what to do with the skin is another important consideration. If you’re cooking grouper, cod, tuna, or fluke, remove it. If you’re grilling striped bass (or salmon or trout), leave it on. Not only will the skin add an extra note of flavor, but it will also help keep the meat moist and the fil-

let from breaking apart. “Once the grill is hot, brush the grate with oil,” says Tourondel. This is best accomplished by soaking a paper towel with olive oil and using tongs to rub it on the grate. (A brush with rubber bristles can melt.) Finally, spritz the fish with olive oil and place it skin side down on the grill.

How long should you cook your fish? “That depends on the thickness of the fillet and the temperature of the grill,” says Tourondel, “but a good rule is to cook it three-quarters of the way through with the skin side

down, and then flip it over briefly to finish cooking it on the other side.”

The fish is ready to flip when you can slide a spatula under it easily. Never force it. “Disturb the fillet as little as possible,” says Tourondel. “If you start flipping it back and forth repeatedly, the flesh will break apart.” That, in turn, will dry out the center of the fillet and ruin the aesthetics of your dish. To check the progress of your fish, stick a knife or metal skewer into its center for a few seconds, and then touch the tip to your tongue. If it’s warm, turn off the grill; your fish is ready to eat.

“Fish is the easiest food in the world to cook,” says Tourondel, gently plucking the fillets from the grill and walking them over to a nearby picnic table. Set among the clam *pizettas*, salmon and snow pea salad, and creamed local corn with asparagus, the bass looks like an edible work of art.

“Why do I like to fish?” asks Tourondel, placing a piece of the warm meat on his tongue, and savoring it for a moment before swallowing. “Because success has its own unique flavor, and it tastes so good.” ■

Honey-Lavender Roasted Peaches with Amaretto Chantilly

6 peaches, blanched
2 Tbsp butter
1/4 cup lavender honey

1 vanilla bean, split
1 1/2 cup heavy cream
3 Tbsp powdered sugar

2 Tbsp amaretto liqueur
3/4 cup roughly chopped amaretti cookies

To blanch the peaches, bring a pot of water to a boil. Use a knife to cut a small X on the top of each peach. Place the peaches in the boiling water for 1 minute, or until the skins start to pull away from the X’s. Remove them and place them in ice water. When they’re cool, peel them, discarding the skins.

To cook the peaches, melt the butter in a large pot set over medium heat. Add the honey, bring the mixture to a boil, and scrape in the vanilla bean. Add the whole peaches and turn the

heat down to low. Spoon the honey over the peaches until each peach is well coated, and then cover the pot and continue to cook for 10 minutes.

As the peaches cook, make the Chantilly by whipping the cream and sugar in a large mixing bowl until hard peaks form. Fold in the amaretto and cookie pieces. Transfer the peaches to a large platter and drizzle the pan juices over them. Serve with the amaretto Chantilly on the side. *Makes 6 servings*

Tuna (bluefin)

CONCERNS
Mercury, PCBs, severe overfishing

BETTER CHOICE
Albacore (from the U.S. or Canada), yellowfin (from the U.S.)

Chilean sea bass

CONCERNS
Mercury, overfishing, bycatch of endangered seabirds

BETTER CHOICE
sablefish, farmed striped bass

Shark

CONCERNS
Mercury; overfishing; bycatch of marine mammals, seabirds, and endangered sea turtles

BETTER CHOICE
Mahi mahi, farmed striped bass, farmed catfish

Snapper

CONCERNS
Mercury, overfishing

BETTER CHOICE
Mutton snapper, sablefish, farmed striped bass