



Wild garlic and variegated mint are sprouting on the riverbank and swallows swoop overhead. My waders aren't wet yet. Instead, Stuart Wardle is teaching me the importance of reading the river. "There's no point fishing where there aren't any fish," the expert angler points out, as we happily tramp along the bank looking for clues — a hatch of mayflies or birds divebombing for insects bobbing on the water.

"Everything in nature is linked," Wardle explains. Warm weather coaxes insects out of hibernation. They feed on the new leaves, and they, in turn, become a juicy meal for the fish. "I look forward to every season, but there's something special about late spring — everything is bursting into new life, and the trout are in prime condition."

Just as different fruit and vegetables have seasons, the same is true for Britain's native fish. Springtime isn't just about asparagus and rhubarb — crabs are becoming more active, trout have finished spawning and flatfish such as turbot and plaice are fattening up.

Generations back, when all fish were native and wild, a fishmonger's display changed with the seasons much like a greengrocer's. Now, supermarket aisles are more static: 80% of the fish we eat falls into a group known as the Big Five — cod, haddock, salmon, tuna and prawns — 40% of which is farmed. And the demand for year-round availability means that 68% of our seafood is imported.

The seafood displayed at the Chelsea Fishmonger in London tells a different story. Its street-front counter is an ode to

HOW TO MATCH YOUR CATCH TO THE SEASON

Just as fruit and vegetables have an optimum time to be eaten, so too do Britain's native fish. *Rachel Walker* explains what we should be serving when



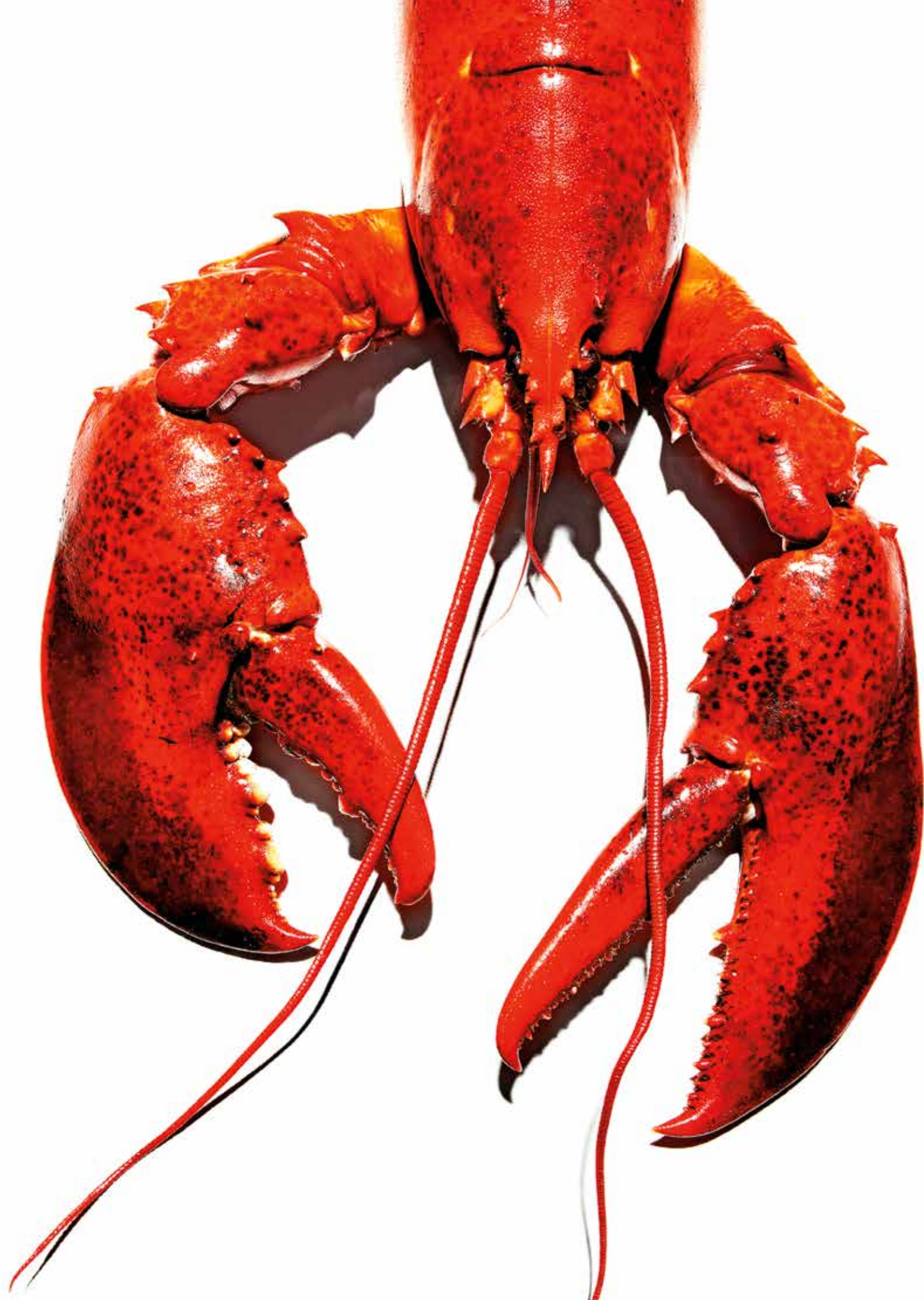
British springtime: Scottish lobster, turbot, sea trout, plaice, brill and crab. "It's nice to look forward to the seasons," says Rex Goldsmith, the owner, who celebrates the arrival of spring by roasting the first trout of the year, serving it with Jersey royals, new-season asparagus and homemade mayonnaise.

Most of the fish in Goldsmith's display have recently finished their spawning season, and are now back on his counter after months of absence. For a lot of native British species, the mating period falls over the start of the year, which is why May signals a springtime bounty — the fish have finished replenishing their stocks and are in prime condition for the table.

"You don't want to eat fish during the spawning season. They're full of roe [eggs] and the flesh is a bit flabby," Goldsmith explains. "Straight after the season ends, their flesh still isn't in great nick because they've put all their energy into spawning, so you want to leave them a few weeks to fatten up," he says, pointing to a particularly plump turbot.

It seems straightforward enough: avoid fish when they're spawning. The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) has a seasonality table and app (mcsuk.org/goodfishguide/app) that outlines roughly when this is. It's a useful guide, but unlike fruit and vegetables — which experience less seasonal shift — fish are wildly unpredictable and loath to stick to schedule.

The Michelin-starred seafood chef Nathan Outlaw, who is based in the southwest, knows just how erratic wild fish can be: "Unlike meat and poultry, seafood is highly seasonal, so it is variable and it isn't always available when ➤➤➤"



JAMIE CHUNG/TRINK GALLERY/STOCK, BETTY

you'd like it to be," he says. "We've actually noticed less consistency in the seasons of certain species, so it's now not as easy as it used to be to predict what's coming up."

"We've always relied on talking to the fishermen, and responding to what they're catching as opposed to trying to anticipate the seasons," he adds. "Some of my most successful dishes have been born out of adversity — for instance, when a particular fish hasn't been landed due to bad weather."

It's an approach that he recommends to home cooks. Instead of picking a recipe, and then shoehorning in out-of-season fish, Outlaw says it's best to go to the fishmonger with an open mind. If a particular fish isn't available, then a good fishmonger should be able to recommend a substitution from the same category: "oily fish", "flat white fish" or "round white fish".

Availability aside, what further complicates buying is that a fish being in a fishmonger's shop doesn't necessarily mean it's in season. CJ Jackson, CEO of the Billingsgate Seafood School, explains that fish often get caught in a mixed net and are landed out of season. "Something like plaice will crop up in fishmonger's year-round. Whether it's the right time of the year to buy it and eat it is another thing," she says.

Jackson says it often requires an expert eye to spot the giveaway signs, such as the firmness of the fish's flesh or sacks of roe, which is why it's always best to speak to the fishmonger. "There might have been plaice available in fishmonger's for the past couple of months, but if you'd asked about it, they might have said that it's 'a bit skinny', which would mean that the fish was in roe and losing weight."

Those without the luxury of a local fishmonger can use the Marine Stewardship Council's (MSC) "blue fish" scheme. The label — a blue sticker with a white tick and outline of a fish — is awarded to fisheries that have undergone rigorous assessments taking stock control into account. It means that the seafood has been fished sustainably and can always be traced back to source.

Chloe North, a UK fisheries



WHEN FISH AND SEAFOOD ARE AT THEIR BEST

BLACK BREAM

June - March

Black bream will soon be starting to arrive in shops. Eat instead of bass as stocks are too low

BRILL

January - January

Available year round, a staple flat fish that replenishes well

COD

May - October

Once overfished, North Sea cod is back after being taken off the "red list" in late 2015

COLEY

April - December

Increasingly popular alternative to cod

CRAB

April - September

As the waters warm up, crabs and lobsters come closer to the coast to feed

DAB

June - February

Seine-netted dab from the North Sea are top of the latest MCS Good Fish Guide

DOVER SOLE

June - February

In "roe" now, back on the menu in a month

HADDOCK

May - February

Back in its prime since spawning

HERRING

May - August (Scotland)

October - December (England)

A commercial fish that once supported whole communities

HAKE

June - January

Popular in Spain, but UK stocks of this sustainable fish are

booming, making it a great choice — see the Eat More Hake campaign

LOBSTER

October - June

Ask for pot-caught and avoid females with eggs

MACKEREL

June - January

Arrives in British waters by early summer. Look for handlined mackerel from the southwest or MSC-certified northeast Atlantic mackerel

MUSSELS

September - February

Rope-grown, farmed mussels are available year round, but it's best to avoid wild mussels over the summer

PLAICE

May - December

In the southwest, there is a saying: "Never eat plaice until it's tasted May waters"

POLLACK

May - December

Look for handlined pollack, an alternative to cod, from the Celtic Sea

SALMON

Year round

Avoid wild salmon (netted June to August) and opt for farmed salmon from ethically accredited sources

SARDINES

Late August - March

Wait until late summer for sardines, or (adult) pilchards

TROUT

April - October

Both sea trout and brown trout are in season

TURBOT

May - August

Swimming close to shore for a short but abundant season

outreach officer, uses the example of North Sea cod to illustrate how each fishery has its own way of protecting species during their mating season. "Cod spawns in specific pockets in the North Sea, so the fishery closes off those areas," she says, explaining that other fisheries might implement more widespread closures over specific time periods instead.

It's proof that it's hard to go wrong if you're buying fish from a responsible source. In the basement kitchen of Evelyn's Table in Soho, the chef, Luke Robinson, is cooking fish sourced direct from Looe Harbour. "It's only day boats landing in the market, so you know the fish hasn't been out at sea for days," he says. "Most important, because the fish has been caught just off the Cornish coast, it's hyper seasonal."

He is one of a growing number of chefs whose fish supplier is listed on the menu — putting as much emphasis on seafood sourcing as the cooking. Over the next few months, Robinson is looking forward to mackerel, sardines and British octopus: "They're smaller than Spanish ones and need braising slowly in wine and garlic. Then we'll tie it up in a ballotine, thinly slice it and serve it like a carpaccio."

The promise of native octopus is just a small part of Britain's seafood renaissance. It seems there's barely a restaurant launch in the capital this spring that isn't touting turbot as its signature dish: St Leonard's in Shoreditch (wood-fired turbot with raw carabineros), Hide at 85 Piccadilly (steamed ikejime turbot with nasturtium) and Brat, whose very name is an old English word for that fish (whole turbot roasted over an open fire).

It's a reminder of how spoiled we are in Britain. "We're an island nation with a great selection of wild seafood," Jackson says. "But as the global population increases rapidly, we're going to have to focus more on responsibly sourced farmed products, which will take away a lot of the seasonality." It's a sad glimpse into the future. For now, let's treasure the wild seafood that is landed — and try to enjoy it outside the spawning season to ensure that there will be plenty more left in the sea ■