

*Gifts of the Forest* was supported by extensive programming which helped to realize the exhibit's holistic theme. These programs included a number of special events, workshops, and demonstrations. Many of the contemporary artists featured in *Gifts of the Forests* were brought into the gallery to discuss and demonstrate their skills as basket makers and woodcarvers. Exhibit programming also featured traditional native stories of the eastern woodlands.

In addition, a curator-led gallery tour and special dinner complemented the exhibit. The dinner was the first in what has evolved into a very popular series of themed dinners. The *Gifts of the Forest* dinner featured a menu that re-interpreted traditional woodland foods such as, caribou, elk, wild mushrooms, maple syrup, and smoked trout in a modern museum setting. The museum chefs coordinated closely with the curation and research staff to develop a menu which included traditional foods while allowing for creativity in presentation. An important aspect of the dinner was the opportunity for guests to tour

the exhibit with the curator who provided a “behind the scenes” perspective.

Although *Gifts of the Forest* included a wide variety of Native American art derived from wood and bark materials, a significant number of exhibit objects were food-related. The key concept of unifying cultural, social, and aesthetic components from a Native American perspective relates directly to the interpretation of how food was viewed. Meals and feasts were a complete sensory and emotional experience, where the physical act of eating played only a small part. Carved and decorated spoons, bowls, and other vessels were a constant reminder of important cultural values associated with the spiritual forces that surround the community. In order to more fully appreciate Native American objects, it is necessary to understand them in a holistic context that recognizes art as a sociocultural construct. The same can be said for all human action, regardless of time, place, or circumstance.

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## A Fine Kettle of Fish

**H**istorically, fish has been a problem food in America. We have serious and persistent objections to eating it, which the fisheries industry has always had to overcome in order to market its supply successfully. Technological advances in both fishing and the production and distribution of fish products developed more quickly during the 19th century than the average consumer's desire to eat it. By 1900, the fishing industry caught a great deal more fish than anyone wanted.

The origins of America's difficulty with fish are both technical and cultural. The technical objections to fish are based on its lightness, perishability, boniness, and the delicacy of its flesh. The cultural conflict arose because fish was often associated with poverty and Roman Catholicism, and that fish (and fishermen) were perceived as undomesticated.

Objections to eating fish seem deeply seated in northern European culture and are probably rationalizations for other deeper fears. Are we troubled, for example, by something that breathes and bleeds as we do, but lives in an element where we cannot? Is a fish too ambiguous a creature, neither one thing nor another? We know fish isn't meat, but as one 19th-century seafarer asked, “What are fish? Are they vegetables or wot?”

### *The Lightness of Fish*

“As a food fish ranks between meat on the one hand and vegetables on the other. It is not so nutritious as the former...and it is thought that a diet in which fish predominates produces deficient vitality,” said Todd Goodeholme. In his *Domestic Cyclopedia* (1885), Goodeholme further cites the authority of Dr. Edward Smith who wrote, “It is not desirable, that fish should be the sole kind of animal food eaten by any nation; and even if milk and eggs be added thereto, the vigor of such people will not be equal to that of flesh-eating nations.”<sup>1</sup>

Generations of Europeans ate fish when they fasted. Consuming meat was considered pleasurable and promoted carnality, while fish

was suitable for mortifying human flesh because consumers believed it was light, boring, or even unpalatable unless richly sauced. Throughout the 19th century, it was generally understood that fish was best for people who wished to be economical, wanted to keep their weight down, were of nervous disposition, or who did “brainwork.” Sarah Hale, editor of the popular *Godys’ Ladies Book*, even stated that fish was not as nutritious a flesh.<sup>2</sup>

By the 20th century, nutritional science acknowledged that meat and fish compared favorably with respect to relative nutritive value. Yet in 1914, Dr. Harvey Wiley wrote, “Fish as a continued diet would soon pall upon every appetite. It, therefore, should not be used at every dinner,” lest the cook overstep the bounds of “gustatory propriety.”<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, the undesirable lightness of fish could be overcome by high calorie cookery. In New England, for example, salt pork scraps and fat were poured over codfish and rich butter and egg sauces accompanied salmon.

### ***Perishability***

The most intimidating thing about cooking and eating fish was knowing how to discern freshness. Fish and shellfish spoil more quickly and dangerously than other animal foods. The story of market fish in the 19th century is dominated by strategies for resolving the freshness quandary. There were three traditional solutions: selling fish alive, selling fish promptly, and preserving fish by a variety of methods.

Consumers could make a live purchase by selecting from fish swimming in a tank. These fish were often transported to markets in specially-designed live-well vessels. Today, high-value lobster is usually sold live and upscale supermarkets may offer tanks of live trout.

Customers could also select from an array of recently caught, but certainly dead and gutted fish. The buyer was then responsible for consuming this product as quickly as possible. Cookbooks in the 18th and 19th century offered advice to housewives for identifying the freshness of fish and cautioned against tricks used by unscrupulous fishmongers to foist off less-than-fresh products. Such warnings fostered the idea that fish was a dangerous and unpredictable food. Even fish product distributors played on the public’s fear of tainted fish. For instance, Frank E. Davis, when listing reasons for buying his canned and salted fish products explained, “The fish you

see in a dealer’s store has probably been dead some time, exposed to the air, to germs, to flies, and other contaminating influences,” and, he further asserted, “fish, more quickly than anything else, transmits poison into your system if it is in any way tainted...”<sup>4</sup> A marketing approach that was hardly reassuring to an already dubious public.

Most fresh market fish were caught in-shore, that is, within a day’s sail of the market. Consumers in coastal towns had access to the freshest fish. Nineteenth-century New Englanders living in urban centers learned that buying fish on Friday was a good idea because sellers made every effort to respond to the demand of Catholic immigrants who refrained from eating meat on that day. With increased supply, many Protestant New Englanders, who a century before had switched to a Saturday consumption of salt fish, switched back to eating fresh fish on Friday. Railroads and artificial refrigeration helped promote sales considerably in the 1800s, matching an effort at sea to develop fast vessels which took the catch to port rapidly, thereby fetching a higher price.

Icing fish, resisted at first by a suspicious public, expanded the market fishery to off-shore grounds, i.e., further than a day’s sail, into territory once monopolized by the salt fishery industry. This broadened the range of product available in the market at any given time and diminished somewhat seasonal differences in fish availability. It was only a small jump from icing fish to actually freezing them, the principle of which was understood long before there was a technology to implement it cost-effectively.

Developed by 1900, artificial freezing met the usual consumer resistance to innovation. Some concerns were justified. In 1898, Charles Stevenson observed that some producers tended to freeze fish only after they noticed signs of decomposition.<sup>5</sup> Icing fish kept them safe and edible for only eight to ten days. Prompt freezing extended that time. By the 1880s, refrigerated train cars carried frozen fish to the nation’s interior with as few as ten days passing from ocean to a family’s table in Kansas. Fifty years later, there was minimal difference between the fresh and frozen fish businesses. “For all practical purposes fresh and frozen products are interchangeable on distant markets, and access to a freezer has become indispensable.”<sup>6</sup>

However, as was typical of the period, Maria Parloa in her *Kitchen Companion* (1887),

cautioned that the flavor of frozen food did not compare to fresh and that the homemaker should buy it only “when it is impossible to obtain anything better.”<sup>7</sup> Treating frozen fish as a choice of last resort certainly did not inspire confidence in the product.

For centuries, salting was the standard method used for preserving fish. New England’s colonial economy was built on the salt cod fishery which conveyed great quantities to Europe and the West Indies to feed Catholics and slaves. Other preservation methods included pickling, smoking, cooking, and canning. In the early 20th century, the popularity of canned tuna fish and salmon created a highly successful fishery on the West Coast. The Pacific Ocean industry gave Gloucester and the other New England seaports quite a run for their money. Since consumers preferred canned tuna to salt cod, Gloucester expanded and diversified with canned chowder, codfish cakes, and frozen fish sticks in order to save its fish-dependent economy. Fish sticks brings us to another of fish’s problems—numerous, small, dangerous bones.

### ***Bonyness***

One solution adopted by fearful consumers was to prefer fish with big identifiable bones, for example, halibut or salmon, or those with exterior bones, such as sturgeon. Nineteenth-century cookbooks usually provided instruction on how to remove bones before sending a fish to table; one described it as being like taking pins from a strip of paper, all lined up in a row. True filleting, done domestically, often created waste as much flesh stuck to the bones as an inexperienced cook drew the knife down the back and ribs.

Boneless salt cod products rescued the salt cod fishery from extinction in the face of iced and frozen fish. Boned cod, packed in wooden boxes, appeared as early as 1869. Pre-picked cod chunks and fluff ready to be dunked in hot water and blended with potatoes followed shortly. The fish was white, sanitarily produced, and cleverly marketed. Shute and Merchant’s line of Absolutely Boneless Brands of Fish were named Diamond Wedge, Gold Wedge, Silver Wedge and Wedge. There was also Swan’s Down Tid Bits, Barberry Brand Threaded Fish for Fish Balls, and Cream of Fish—No Cooking, No Odor, No Waste, Heliotrope Fibered Codfish, and the frankly labeled, Not-a-Choke.<sup>8</sup>

Bonelessness became a necessity around 1900 when the Bay State Fishing Company built

a new fleet of steam powered otter trawlers and created for themselves an alarming marketing dilemma. It was now possible to catch many more fish than Americans wanted to eat. What the fishing industry perceived as essentially a problem of “under-consumption” by the general public soon led to a particularly creative solution to the bone phobia, that is, the marketing of pre-cut fillets.<sup>9</sup>

Bay State is credited with being the innovator who made “fillet” a household word and with “supplying those living inland with fish of sufficiently high quality to make it popular on menus more than a hundred or so miles from salt water.” Bay State’s Forty Fathom Fish was boneless, touted to retailers and homemakers as wasteless as well as “sweet and odorless.” The fillets were shipped wrapped in parchment paper, placed in tin containers, which in turn are packed in wooden boxes with ice surrounding the tins. With this marketing resourcefulness, Forty Fathom Fish company not only solved the fear of bones, but also the freshness problem.<sup>10</sup>

Prepared fillets paved the way for Clarence Birdseye and his quick-freezing process to develop fish sticks as the ultimate solution to the fish dilemma. Fish sticks were fresh, breaded for frying to give them caloric punch, were odorless (and largely flavorless, which was probably an advantage), convenient, and boneless.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, filleting made fish look like other meat products from the butcher’s shop. A fish in the round looked like the creature it was and virtually no other meat in America’s market resembled the animal from which it was derived. As the 20th century progressed, with very few exceptions, the public preferred it that way.

### ***Cultural Objections***

Social prejudice was close to the surface in 19th-century America. Historical research indicates that many New Englanders associated fish eating with Catholics, immigrants, and/or the poor. Occasionally all these traits could be found in one population group, such as the Irish, but clearly others as well, particularly as wave after wave of Europeans moved to New England to work in its industrial cities.

Roman Catholics ate fish. Before the Reformation, many days in the year were designated for fasting on which only fish or dairy products could be eaten for protein. In addition, each Friday was traditionally a meatless day.

Puritans in New England continued this once-a-week habit of eating fish as a standard practice and thereby provided variety in the weekly menu. But the Puritans and their descendants, in order to avoid identification with their Roman Catholic past and persecutors, shifted their custom to a different day in the week, often Saturday.

New Englanders strongly resisted popish ideas. Many Calvinists associated the Catholic Church with the celebration of Christmas, finding aspects of the holiday disturbing. Yankees eventually softened their attitude toward Christmas, but they did not lessen their attitude toward Catholics, especially as that population increased. The prevailing Puritan, and eventually Yankee, prejudice against Roman Catholics was subtly extended to fish. In her preface to the *New Cook Book* (1857), Sarah Josepha Hale wrote, "A greater variety of receipts, for preparing Fish, Vegetables, and Soups, is given here, than can be found in any other book of the kind; these preparations, having reference to the large and increasing class of persons in our country who abstain from flesh meats during Lent, will be found excellent; and useful also to all families during the hot season."<sup>11</sup>

Another common 19th-century perception was that fish, especially salted, was the food of the poor. Since the product was little esteemed for its nutritive abilities, it had a low market value. Eating fish was what you did when you could do no better, and in the popular mind it was associated with fasting and penance.

Timothy Dwight, describing Newport in the late 1700s and early 1800s, said "The poor people catch fish for their sustenance, and lounge and saunter for their pleasure." And "The men of wealth live by loaning their money without entering in any great degree into active, useful business... (T)he poor catch fish. This state of things is unnecessary and unhappy."<sup>12</sup>

Even the perceived character of the men who caught fish affected the reputation of the product. The fisheries workers in early New England were, as Daniel Vickers has called them, a "peripheral" group of people.<sup>13</sup> Early settlers tried unsuccessfully to recruit fishermen into community life. Some colonists engaged in the fisheries business used it as a springboard to merchant life, rather than making it their life's work. The farmer-fisherman generally caught seasonally for a family supply with little left for market.

Full-time fishermen were usually itinerants and often Catholics. They eschewed the Puritan church, community, and a settled family life, and were considered more likely to indulge in a rough existence of drinking, carousing, and violence. Colony leaders tolerated them in order to populate the fishing fleet. Similarly, the fishermen who settled in Maine, beyond the reach of Massachusetts society, were by reputation a rough, irreligious group, described by one as "a dull and heavy moulded sort of people" without "either skill or courage to kill anything but fish."<sup>14</sup>

The nature of fishing itself mitigated against its respectability. Catching fish was seasonal, market-oriented work, an affront to Puritans who believed "work was pleasing to God only when performed in a regular and disciplined manner" and that the "alternation of frantic activity and idleness to be rooted in moral failing."<sup>15</sup> By the end of the 18th century, many fishermen did settle down in communities and have families, but since they were still largely unable to capitalize their own voyages, a fisherman's life was characterized by chronic indebtedness to vessel owners and merchants and economic marginalism.<sup>16</sup>

In the 19th century, the fisheries worked to increase their productivity and their standing in the community. Efforts to extend the working season helped. Vessels were refitted seasonally for different fisheries and were idle only in winter. Some fishermen continued to labor through the winter, either by risking weather in the north or going south to work in the red snapper fishery. By the end of the century, fishing was more mechanized, even industrialized, and more of a real "job." Even so, fishing was dangerous hard work and many New Englanders discouraged their sons from making it their lifework. However, itinerant fishermen from Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, following a century-old pattern, continued to toil at sea. Other immigrants, particularly Portuguese and Italians, entered the New England fisheries, often owning their own vessels and hiring men from their own communities.

George Brown Goode, in his government-sponsored study on fisheries of the United States, drew detailed comparisons between the industrious modern fishermen of Gloucester and the tradition-bound fishermen of Maine. The Maine fishermen, he said, were victimized complainers, had little access to credit, were poorly educated,

and generally lacked enterprise, either in fishing or taking care of their homes and gardens both of which usually showed neglect. “A larger return than common from selling fish is usually spent as fancy may first dictate or serves as a reason for deferring, as long as possible, the next fishing expedition.” Their families, he said “subsist, for the most part, upon the products of the sea—fish, lobsters, and clams—and upon the vegetables from their gardens.”<sup>17</sup> From his point of view, the late 19th-century mariners from Maine weren’t very different from itinerant fishermen a century and a half earlier.

By contrast, Goode reported that most New England fishermen from Gloucester or Cape Cod were educated; well-read, even dipped into Shakespeare and Dickens, and lived in neat, comfortable homes. Though not religious, “a high tone of morality prevails” among fishermen and in most fishing towns, and while profanity was prevalent “in other respects moralists would in general find little to criticize,”<sup>18</sup> particularly in light of the effect of temperance reform after 1876.<sup>19</sup>

The identification of fish eating with fishermen may have exerted some influence on people’s choice of fish as food. During the colonial period, fish was a food produced outside the New England landowning and agricultural norms of a population who were members of church and community. Going fishing was seasonal work which did not require the diligence and discipline of farming. Fishing, like hunting, was opportunistic, something farmers did for sport. It was dangerous work, required risking life and limb, and frequently unsuccessful. All anyone got for the effort was fish, simply not valued as food in proportion to the effort required to obtain it. Conversely, beef was the benchmark of land-bound agriculture and stability and, additionally, was a satisfying meal. Fish were slippery, elusive, and had to be caught with cunning in dangerous conditions. Preparing and eating an “insubstantial” fish supper was a bothersome affair.

Overcoming all these objections to fish as a food staple required creative marketing to convince American consumers to regard fish more highly. Consumption spiked twice in the 20th century during wartime rationing, but our eating habits have continued to show a strong preference to meat. Not until the 1970s and 1980s, with growing concern for a heart healthy diet and curiosity for ethnic fare (where fish is often fea-

tured in new and delicious ways), did fish finally get the respect it deserves.

### Notes

- 1 Todd S. Goodeholme, editor, *Goodeholme’s Domestic Cyclopedia of Practical Information*, (New York: C.A. Montgomery, 1885), 202.
- 2 Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home*, (New York: J.B. Ford and Co., 1870), 124. Goodeholme, op. cit., 202. Sarah J. Hale, *New Cook Book, a practical system*, (Philadelphia: TB Peterson and Bros., 1857), 39,64.
- 3 Mildred Maddocks, ed. *The Pure Food Cook Book: The Good Housekeeping Recipes; Just How to Buy; Just How to Cook*, (New York: Hearst’s International Library, 1914), 145.
- 4 Frank E. Davis Fish Co., *Old Gloucester Seafood Recipes from Frank E. Davis the Gloucester Fisherman*, (Gloucester: Frank E. Davis Fish Co., n.d. (ca. 1932), 2.
- 5 Charles Stevenson, *Preservation of Fishery Products for Food, extracted from United States Comm. Bulletin for 1898*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899), 341.
- 6 Ackerman, Edward A. *New England’s Fishing Industry*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1941), 228.
- 7 Parloa, Maria, *Miss Parloa’s Kitchen Companion*, (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1887), 84.
- 8 Shute and Merchant, *Receipts for Cooking Fish*, 8th edition, (Gloucester: Shute and Merchant, 1895), 12.
- 9 *Atlantic Fisherman*, Vol. I No 1., Feb. 1921, 3.
- 10 *Atlantic Fisherman*, Vol. I No 1., Feb. 1921, 102, 127. Frank H. Wood, *The Story of Forty Fathom Fish*, Boston: Bay State Fishing Co., 1931), 5.
- 11 Hale, *New Cook Book*, op. cit.
- 12 Dwight, Timothy., edited by Barbara Miller Solomon, 4 vols., *Travels in New England and New York* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), ii:33.
- 13 Daniel Vickers, “Work and Life on the Fishing Periphery,” in *Seventeenth Century New England, A conference held by the Colonial society of Massachusetts, June 18 and 19, 1982*. Boston: The Colonial Society of Mass., distributed by the Univ. Press of Virginia, 1984, 83-117.
- 14 Barnard quoted in Lorenzo Sabine, *Report on The Principle Fisheries of the American Seas prepared for the Treasury Department of the United States*, Washington: Robert Armstrong Printer, 1853), 129.
- 15 Vickers, op. cit., 99.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 106-110.
- 17 Goode, George Brown, ed. *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*. 5 Vols., Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887. i:10-11.
- 18 *Ibid.*, i:8-9.
- 19 *Ibid.*, i:71.

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