



Bunch of salad with pistachio cream

Alice in the new Wonderland

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PHOTOGRAPHY by FRANCESCA BRAMBILLA e SERENA SERRANI

Alice

'But I don't want to go among mad people,' Alice remarked. 'Oh, you can't help that,' said the Cat: 'we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.'
'How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice.
'You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here.'

Alice in Wonderland, Chapter 6

I was named after the audacious girl in Lewis Carroll's classic book who follows a white rabbit down his rabbit hole to discover a magical world. *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, the title of the sequel, could be an image of my reflection. Luminous, vivacious eyes with a splendid silvery back, I see myself as thin and agile like an anchovy (or, as they say in Italian, *alice*).

I was born on the first day of spring in 2007, an auspicious beginning. Pugliese and Campano blood in my veins, I grew in the shadow of the Madonnina, Perego's famous statue that adorns the Milan cathedral. I think that my mothers, Viviana and Sandra, gave me this name because I favour these small, blue fish. We take care to present my namesake appropriately – *alice* are delicate and need to be eaten fresh. They are part of simple, humble, daily food; rustic, but rich in flavour. It's symbolic of things that go beyond established traditions and prejudices in favour of Beauty, Goodness and Taste.

I am a lovechild. My mothers created me after years of sacrifice, when they were finally ready and mature enough to take this big step in life. My world is dreamlike, a portal to hospitality. I am curious and adventurous and for this reason I have moved from Porta Romana to Piazza XXV Aprile where a famous theatre, *lo Smeraldo*, once stood.

This is a special place, with lots of room and opportunity to express myself!

Viviana Varese

Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said: 'one CAN'T believe impossible things.'

'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen.

'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day.

Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

Alice in Wonderland, Chapter 5

The vivid sun of Maiori in an ancient gaze. An authentic smile, almost adolescent, shows a rare sweetness of soul, but the handshake reveals all the strength and determination of this Salerno daughter. Hers is an intense story of self-teaching, enriched by experiences in famous restaurants both in Italy and abroad (among others, Gualtiero Marchesi's L'Albereta in Erbusco, El Celler de Can Roca in Girona, Christian Puglisi's Relae in Copenhagen, but also – as Viviana is a talented pastry chef, *universo docet* – a Masters in pastry making with Paco Francisco Torreblanca, Leonardo di Carlo and Maurizio Santin).

Her parents had a trattoria on the Amalfi coast. Both cooked, but her father was the creative half, always on the lookout for excellent local produce. Viviana was making pizzas by the age of seven. She was attracted to the wood-fired flames, the alchemy that they created, and she played with the ashes. She grew up immersed in traditional food, following her mother's every gesture. She breathed it in, observing it and making it her own, repeating it ad infinitum. She memorised all the aromas, colours and flavours of her childhood, a continuum of Mediterranean delicacies, creating a library of memories that she still dips into. After the earthquake in Irpinia in 1980 her family decided to move north.

Viviana continued to accumulate experiences until she opened her own restaurant at the age of 23, Il Girasole, in Lodigiano. She is a tireless worker whose motto has always been strength (*forza*), effort (*fatica*) and speed (*fare veloce*) in quality. The great leader of female chefs (and not only) Nadia Santini says that a real chef is the one who can also cook for three hundred people. Viviana was cooking for two hundred guests every day. The numbers were there but they were not enough for her. The sun in Van Gogh's sunflower was an eternal enticement. She was constantly falling in love with food; she lived for food, studied food and travelled for food. It was a mission for life that became a constant companion, a vocation made of dedication and infinite passion.

She was always on the lookout for something new, and then one day something important happened. She met Sandra Ciciriello, the lady of the sea. Alice was born, and became THE seafood restaurant in Milan.

Within just a few years gastronomic critics took notice and in 2011 they were awarded a Michelin star. "Cooking, for me, is a sacred act; a total gesture of love," recounts Viviana

in her garden at home with her loving bulldog Carlotta at her feet. "But it's also a kind of magic that takes me back to my childhood. My recipes take shape – sometimes they make sudden sparks from an intangible creative process that is based on my experience and my life." Viviana, through Alice, just like in the metaphorical story about becoming an adult, grew thanks to her interior musings and evolved by experimenting, always refining instinct and technique to create a well-defined identity. Hers is a recognisable signature. In her dishes we find an essence, a supreme dedication to excellent raw ingredients and an elegance of taste. It is lightness and imagination, but intellectual waffle for its own sake is banned. These are culinary preparations that are easy to understand, taste that is easy to decipher and flavours that are reassuringly balanced as they create pleasure on the plate. It's a colourful palette of taste experiences that express a particular rhythm, delicacy in the innovative pairings, respect for seasonality, calibrated re-interpretations of great Mediterranean classics.

Viviana likes the cinema. Some of her legendary dishes are inspired by films, like 'Carpaccio and Fantasia', drawn from the classic Italian film *Pane, amore e fantasia* or the fried pizza 'Homage to Sofia', inspired by *L'Oro di Napoli*. 'Swept Away by an Unusual Sandwich' echoes the film title *Swept Away* by Lina Wertmüller, with a slice of umbrine cooked in a batter of water, salt, thyme, egg, smoked black tea and ash from burnt lemon prunings. It's a material dish dedicated to the lemon in all its parts: tree, leaves, skin and flesh. "The lemons from the Amalfi coast are the fruit I mostly identify with," explains Viviana. "Here the burnt prunings give a sense of barbecue, the leaves wrap the umbrine, the zest gives that citrus note and the fennel salad combines with octopus in small pieces. And to accompany everything there is a potato cooked in an artisan potato cooker and a roll made from burnt wheat that forms the treasure chest for the fish."

Her personal film, however, will be shot on location in her new Milan restaurant at Eataly. Every aspect of her newly opened restaurant (it opened on 18 March) has been thought out and studied in detail. There are tables without tablecloths, made with recycled Venetian timber (oak posts from the lagoon of Venice that were replaced because they were old and broken) for an atmosphere that is natural and minimal. Napkins are painted by hand to emphasise the tactile senses. The kitchen, designed by Viviana, doesn't need a glass for separation – no filters or transparent barriers between the dining room and its authentic noises. A table with ten places is dedicated to "friends", either dining alone or in company who don't mind sharing their table with others, even strangers. It's a kind of exchange and familiarity that is assisted by the passing of trays, like eating in days gone by in a familial and relaxed atmosphere.

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Sandra Ciciriello and Viviana Varese

Sandra Ciciriello

“Then you should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on. ‘I do,’ Alice hastily replied; ‘at least — at least I mean what I say — that’s the same thing, you know.’

‘Not the same thing a bit!’ said the Hatter. ‘You might just as well say that “I see what I eat” is the same thing as “I eat what I see”!’

Alice in Wonderland, Chapter 7

The lightning struck at the age of 19, the first day she started work in the Milan fish market. She saw the counter full of colour, of different forms, the sea creatures still moving, with all those scales reflecting the light. She fell in love, and found a lifelong vocation.

Almost thirty years have gone by and the emotion still vibrates in her voice. *Nomen omen*: sandra or the zander is a kind of fish and so is the cicerello, similar to the lancelet with silver scales. Snorkelling is one of her passions, but it is almost impossible for her. The excitement of seeing all those fish leaves her breathless and she must return quickly to the surface.

Sandra, with her unmistakable hat and flashing eyes under white glasses, is a well-known character at the Milan market. She carves a wave through the crowds who greet her in loud voices under the neon lights of a day that starts at 4 am. Everyone knows her (but if you show them photographs of some Michelin-starred chefs they’ll tell you they haven’t seen them for years) and they know she never fails to choose the very best. It’s educational to accompany her as she does the shopping, watchfully prowling around the stalls, ready to grab her fish (it’s years that she hasn’t slept more than three hours a night). She looks and touches the product with extreme naturalness.

A woman of great character, it’s no surprise they call her the ‘Magnani of the Market’. She has a unique story to tell that’s worth hearing. It’s a life made up of sections – moments of extreme passion, sacrifice and dedication. But it’s also spirited and amusing because Sandra is an ironic and funny woman. Her comic vein would never go unnoticed! Let’s start from the beginning and the encounter with wine. At the age of five, already a kid on the go, she found her first flask of wine. She had always liked good things and didn’t hold back. Alcoholic coma. Until the age of 27 she couldn’t stand even a drop of wine.

She is the daughter of a fruit and vegetable merchant. At the age of seven, with a megaphone in hand, she sat on a watermelon in the back of the truck and accompanied her father on his rounds. From the ages of 15 until 18 she worked in the fruit and vegetable market, developing skills also in that area (try and catch her as she whips on her bicycle through the stalls...) and not by accident at Alice they use hundreds of herbs.

At the age of 19 she was lovestruck. Thanks to her first teacher (Felice, the most important wholesale fish dealer in the Milan market, who at the beginning did not want Sandra at his side because she was a woman) she quickly learned the tricks of the trade. She showed she was capable, not afraid of hard work and that she had a good eye. She earned respect. She then changed jobs and went to work for one of the largest prawn producers in the world where she learned salting, fishing and smoking techniques. The new owner sent her around the most important wholesale seafood markets in Italy to find the best suppliers for the Milan market. Manfredonia, Trieste, Chioggia, Sanremo and San Benedetto del Tronto: with her ‘fishy’ knowhow, including precise manual gestures, she participated in auctions and negotiated masterfully. She continued her learning process and increased her knowledge of the sea.

Then came the day when “I looked at the fish,” Sandra says with her characteristic humour, “and I said to it: ‘You show me you love me like I love you, or I’m going to give you up.’ The next day I found a business of my own to manage.” She bought a licence and began her work as a dealer, selling fish in five district markets. She conquered her clients and liked to surprise and stun them, walking in with a big fish in her arms, caressing it as if it were a baby and then with studied nonchalance she would grab the hatchet and fillet it with force. If you want a good laugh, ask her to tell the story of her exhilarating fishing adventures (two tiny fish in a whole day) or the canoe outing to catch octopus.

At Eataly Sandra will also manage the first floor fishmongers, guaranteeing a step up in quality, careful research and ingredients for new culinary experimentation. Who knows, she might even pension off Wolf, the truck that carries her fabulous fish.



The team

Viviana and Sandra: one of those encounters of destiny that changes your life. They met at the Girasole trattoria. Sandra was looking for a new challenge as she evolved in the world of seafood. She began in the kitchen, because she also likes to cook and wanted to one day open up her own restaurant. Then for San Valentino in 2004, by chance, she began work in the dining room. She became the alter ego of Viviana, able to transfer knowledge of the high-quality raw ingredients and the art of each recipe competently to customers. Her sommelier's diploma helped to suggest the right accompaniments. Then, together, they decided to confront the new challenge of Alice. They were ready to play in the big league, putting their complementary skills and knowledge to the test.

The essence of this professional feminine duo is unique in Italian food. They have a mix of roles and competencies that are part of a continuous osmotic exchange. It's a winning

combination of harmonies that is perceptible in the dishes and also in the atmosphere. In the kitchen there is a respectful and collaborative climate. The brigade is mixed; feminine and masculine, yin and yang, and multi-ethnic because, according to Viviana, "it fosters diverse perspectives and ways of understanding, that bring about innovative solutions. We talk a lot and grow together like a big family. More than half of the people here are the same that were here when we opened. I'm not interested in super résumés; I believe in people and in their approach and their desire to do. A female chef in the kitchen aims for cooperation, harmony. She doesn't have to show her muscles or command like in a military regime." They in fact organise Cooking Team Building. Similarly, the dining room under Sandra's rule is composed of the same people who have been there for years, since the beginning. Gentility and savoir faire; competence and a vigilant eye are in their professional DNA.



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Linguine with sea urchins, parsley sauce, whipped butter and chilli

For the parsley sauce

2 bunches of parsley

Strip the parsley and boil in salted water for a few instances then cool in water and ice and drain. Place the parsley in a blender together with a glass of ice. Blend and strain with a Superbag.

For the linguine

*300 g linguine
2 kg fresh sea urchins
30 g extra virgin olive oil
2 garlic cloves unpeeled
1 fresh chilli
1 fresh sliced chilli
30 g whipped butter*

Open the urchins and place meat and water aside. Fry the garlic and half of the chilli in oil, then remove the garlic and chilli; add in the water from the urchins. Cook the linguine in salted water and when it is two thirds cooked, add to the pan, adding in the sea urchin meat and whipped butter.

To complete the dish

Pour the parsley sauce on the whole plate, place the linguine on top and decorate with butter and the sliced chilli.



Calamari stuffed with vegetables and prawns, parsley sauce, rustic purée and anchovy cream

Serves 4

For the calamari with vegetables and rustic purée

4 large calamari
12 prawns
2 potatoes
1/2 red capsicum
1/2 yellow capsicum
1 zucchini
6 beans
1 large carrot
50 g extra virgin olive oil
1 clove garlic
wine vinegar to taste
salt to taste
black pepper to taste
1 sprig thyme

For the fish stock

3 l water
10 g fine salt
500 g white fish bones (ray, cod, sea bass, sea bream, dentex)
5 whole black peppercorns, crushed

For the anchovy sauce

80 g extra virgin olive oil
100 g salted anchovies
100 g pine nuts
250 g vegetable stock
180 g of boiled potatoes
1/2 clove garlic

For the parsley sauce

50 g parsley
30 g extra virgin olive oil
20 g of boiled potatoes
50 g vegetable stock
1 clove garlic
salt to taste
pepper to taste

Cut all the vegetables except the potatoes into thin strips of the same length as the calamari and 1/2 cm wide. Braise with 20 g extra virgin olive oil and the unpeeled garlic glove, then sauté with a sprig of thyme for 2 minutes, adjusting for salt and pepper. Clean and peel the prawns and season with a pinch of salt and pepper.

For each calamari, lay out a sheet of plastic wrap 25 cm long. In the centre of each piece of plastic, create a rectangular base of mixed vegetables and lay 3 prawns in the centre; roll the vegetables up inside the prawns. Slide the roll into the calamari, removing the plastic wrap.

Put the calamari into a pot with 20 g of extra virgin olive oil, salt and pepper and 50 g of fish stock (see next recipe). Bake at 200°C for 10 minutes. Boil the potatoes and prepare a purée with 10 g of extra virgin olive oil, salt and a drop of wine vinegar.

Clean the fish bones thoroughly, removing all the blood. Cover with water and boil for ten minutes; remove all impurities in the water. To this add 3 litres of clean water and salt and cook for about an hour. Filter, cool and place in containers in the fridge or freezer.

Wash the anchovies of the salt and remove any spikes. Fry the garlic in the extra virgin olive oil, add the anchovies and cook for a minute. Remove from heat and blend with an immersion mixer together with the other ingredients.

Blanch the parsley in lightly salted water, drain and cool in water and ice, then dry. Cut the garlic clove in half, removing the centre and fry in the oil. Take out the garlic and fry the parsley, salt and pepper for 2 minutes. Remove from the heat and blend together with the potato and the stock. Filter and cool. (The leftover sauce can be frozen in small containers or vacuum sealed bags).

To complete the dish

With the help of a square form, place the purée on the dish and the calamari on top, cut into slices and dressed with the cooking juices. Decorate with a few thyme leaves and 40 g of parsley sauce and 40 g of anchovy sauce..

Alice's friends



"Where mullet, lobster, eels, squid and inky cuttlefish come up for air, marine delicacies are set free, banishing every kind of Bad Taste and Boredom. They enter the soul through the nostrils with fantastical rivers and fountains, liquid choirs of mermen and mermaids with endless swarms of fish of all kinds of flavour..."

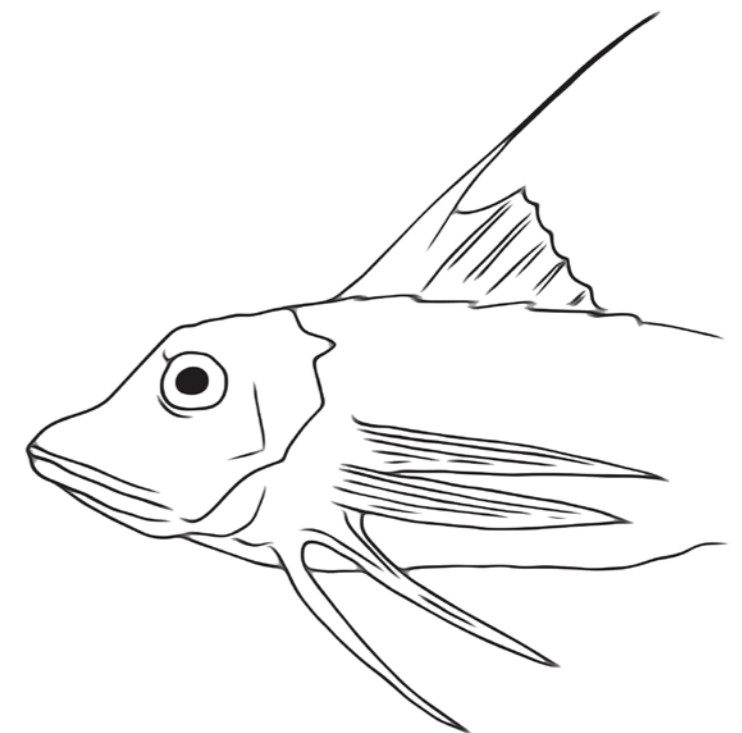
The Marvels of Italy by Carlo Emilio Gadda

Alice's playmates are many. Some are unknown, such as the Imperial blackfish. Others, like the sting ray, have probably only ever been used here in the whole of Milan. Let's get to know them together.

Imperial blackfish: a sea giant that can be fished only in the Mediterranean. Gastronomically speaking, it is a new entry, and is served almost exclusively at Alice thanks to Sandra's influence. The imperial blackfish can grow to around 80 cm and 12 kilos. It has a greeny-brown colour, with a blue-black dorsal fin, silver on its flanks and dark fins. Its tasty flesh is milky white, with a similar consistency to the grouper. In its raw state it has a pleasant almond aftertaste. It's well suited to stewed dishes, for example 'in guazzetto' with cherry tomatoes and olives. It's very tasty also fried in fillets, but is not suited to roasting.

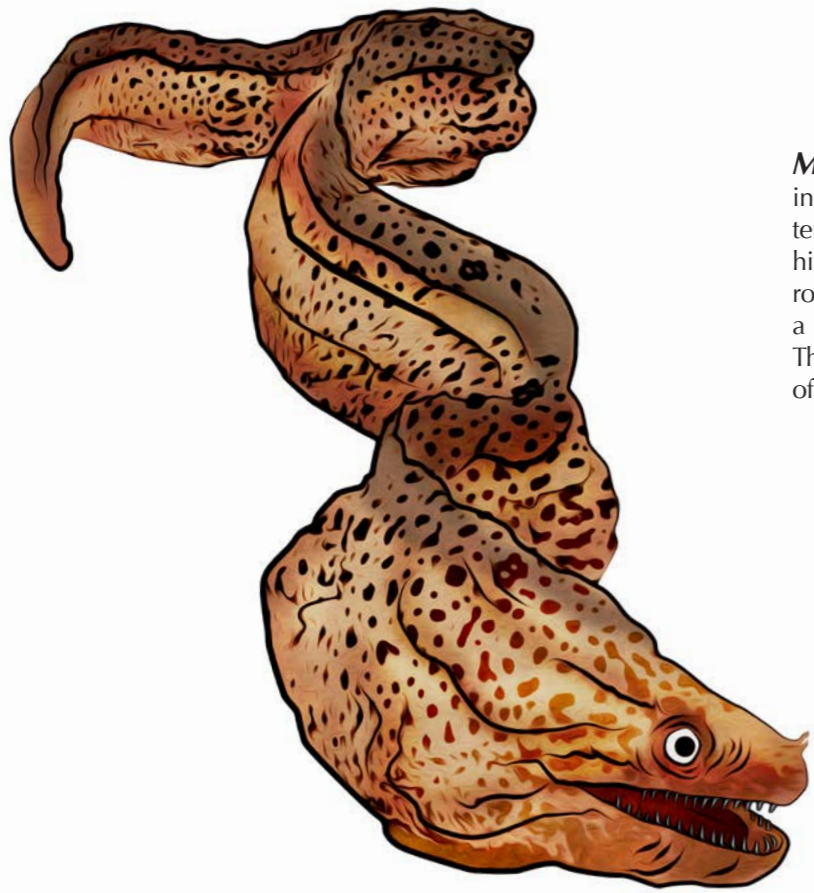
Common Dentex: from the Sparidi family, this fish is easy to distinguish from the numerous other fish in this group by its robust lines of canine teeth. It grows up to a metre and is widespread throughout the Mediterranean and the eastern Atlantic, as well as being extensively farmed. It is a favourite with sports fishermen for trawling or underwater fishing as well as with professional fishermen using nets. Common species in Italian markets include the Dentex Gibbosus (Dentice Gibboso) or the Dentex Macropthalmus (Dentice occhione). The first is easy to identify from the hump on the front of the head, the second for its big eyes. Other species come from the African Atlantic. The flesh is lean and tasty and is highly prized. It can be cooked with various techniques, both whole and filleted. The large size of the fish makes it suitable for baking, in a salt crust, in fillets or thin strips.

Sea Robin or Tubfish: from the Triglidi family, it has a different name in every region, which makes for some confusion at times. The common characteristic is the large head, covered by bony armour and a cone shaped body, very tapered in the rear section with thin scales and few bones. It is easy to fillet (and from the bones and head one can make a fine stock) and it is particularly suitable for stewing. It's a must-have component of Adriatic soups.

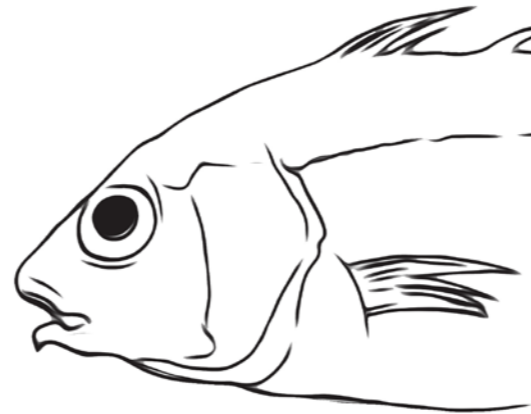


European Conger Eel: belongs to the family of the Congridi in the eel family and can reach up to three metres in length. It lives near the coast in temperate or warm waters up to 2,000 metres deep. Conger eels are voracious carnivores and they live essentially on a diet of other fish. They are grey in colour, either dark or light on the dorsal section and lighter in the centre. Their flesh is tasty and an essential ingredient in fish soups.

Mahi-mahi (lampuga): from the Corifenidi family, it can reach up to a metre in length. It has a lumpy head with some of the most beautiful colours in the water, but after death it takes on a yellow-grey colour. It has a large mouth, and both jaws have small teeth that are also present on the tongue. They are strong and fast swimmers that live either in shoals or alone. They have a varied diet and eat other fish, crustaceans and cephalopod molluscs. They can be stewed with tomato, grilled in fillets with the traditional Sicilian samoriglio sauce or baked in the oven.

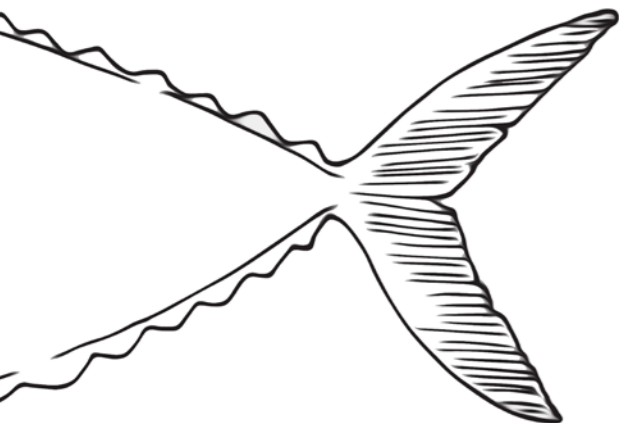


Moray eel: from the Muraenidae family, these live mostly in shallow tropical waters but are also present in the Mediterranean. They prefer areas of rocky outcrops where they hide. They are carnivorous fish, with a long, serpent-like and robust body. They have a head with a small frontal lump and a long pointed nose. Their teeth are thick, long and sharp. They have a white oily flesh with a delicate taste and are one of Viviana and Sandra's more surprising discoveries.



Umbrine: from the Scienidi family, present in the Mediterranean and in many other seas of the world in unusual, numerous species. Those present in Italy are no less prized than others with their white, firm flesh. The golden mouth umbrine (ombrina boccadoro), thus named for its golden yellow oral cavity, is highly sought after. Umbrine farmed intensively are common in the markets, both the cirrosa and boccadoro varieties, in standard dimensions of 50 centimetres. They are suitable for many types of cooking: baked, poached, boiled or vapour cooked, grilled and particularly for stewing.

Pandora: from the Sparidi family, these are also commonly called pezzogna or occhialone. They are characterised by their big eyes and large black mark above the pectoral fin at the beginning of the flank. It is present in the whole Mediterranean and can reach a length of 70 centimetres. The 'little strawberry' pandora is the most common variety of pandora. It is highly prized for its delicate white flesh and can be cooked in the same ways as a sea bream and also used in soups.



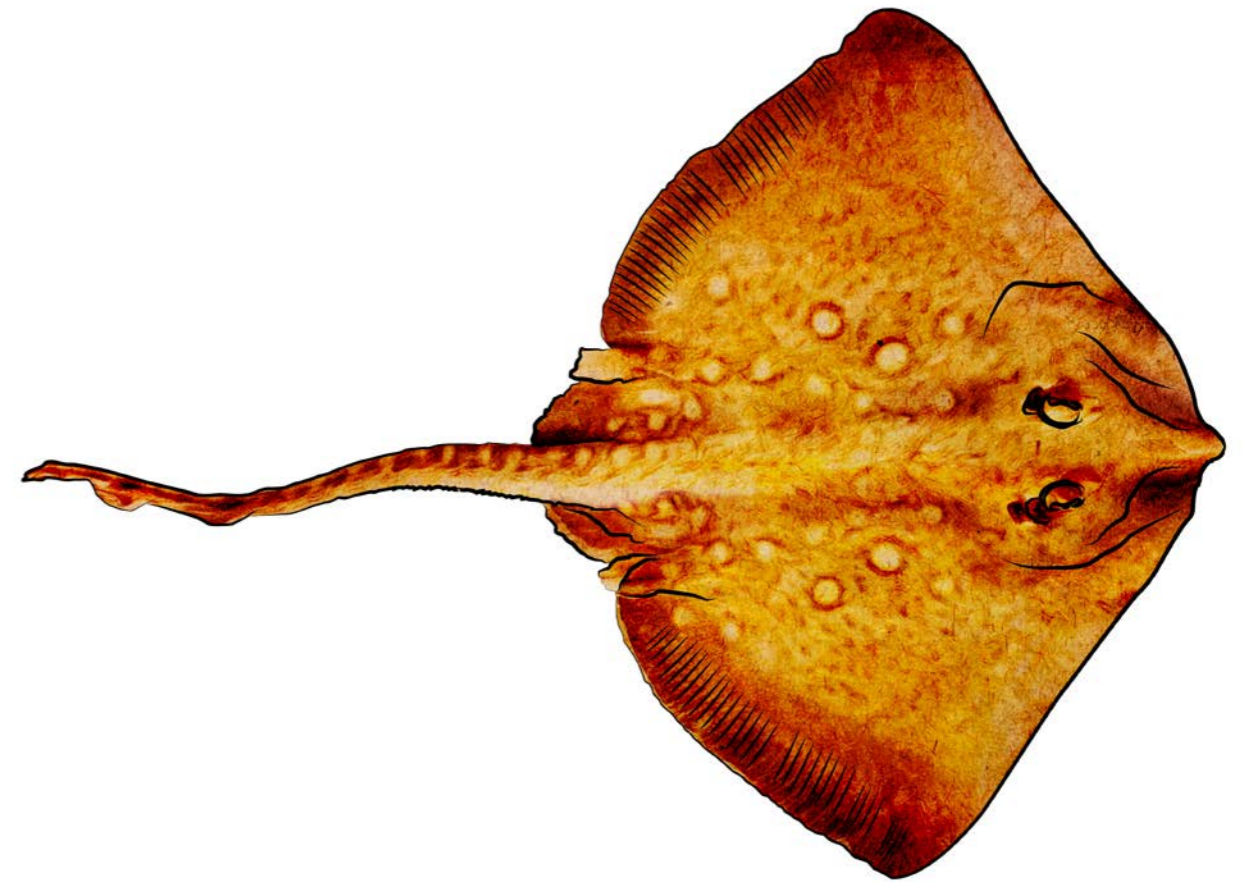
Atlantic bonito: from the Sgombriidi family, it is a fish similar to tuna or mackerel. It has a steel blue colouring on the dorsal area and flanks, silver on the lower areas and belly with 5-10 dark oblique lines that start from the dorsal area and run forwards. It has a tasty flesh, rich in fats, with a grey-brown colouring, and is compact and decisive in taste. It needs short 'sweet' cooking. There are various ways to do this: boiled, vapour, baked, grilled, raw, marinated, and it can also be conserved in oil.

Sword fish: from the Trichiuridi family, this is also commonly called spatola or bandiera and various other names. It can reach more than two metres in length and has the shape of a ribbon. The more silver it is, the fresher it is and it has very tasty flesh that is highly prized. It can be fried, grilled or stewed or even cooked alla pizzaiola (with tomatoes and capers), sautéed in the pan, cut into steaks or filleted.

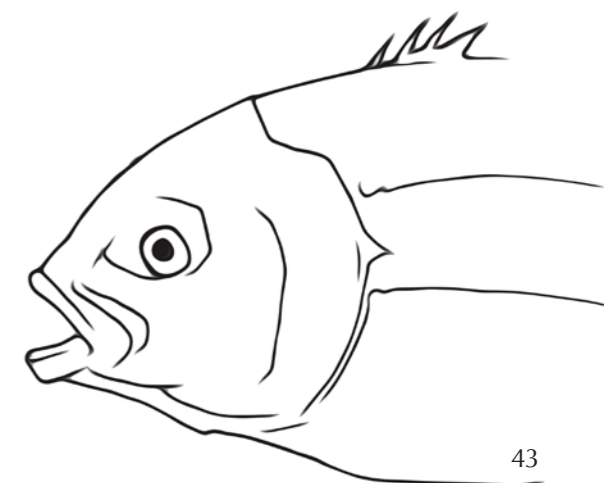


Monkfish: from the Lofidi family, it is an unusual looking fish with a large head covered in crests and spines that are usually cut off before it is sold. The streamlined body that has skin without scales has a dense flesh without bones and is sold as 'coda di rospo' (toad's tail). It is considered one of the highest quality fish in Italy and has flesh similar to that of the lobster. It is mainly stewed, but also sautéed in a pan, baked or broiled. The liver is particularly tasty while the head is rich with fleshy pieces and excellent for soups, broths and ragout. Even the tripe is delicious.

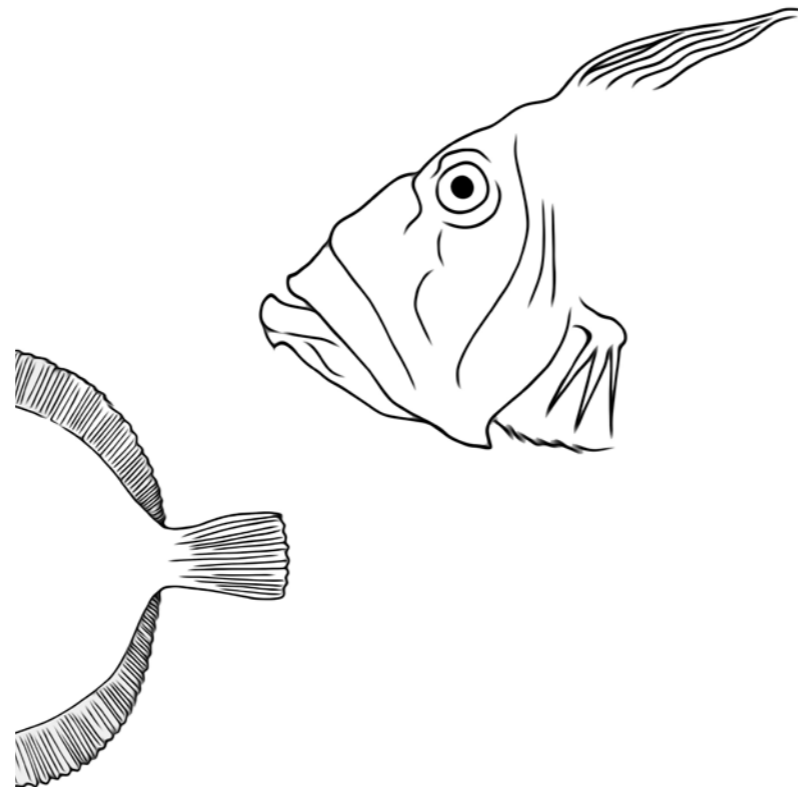
Thornback Ray: from the Rajidae family, there are 200 different species and several live in the Mediterranean. Special trawling nets and deep bottom lines are used to catch this fish. It's a very fatty fish with cartilage that makes good stock. The flesh is white and very tasty. Its 'wings', the pectoral fins, can be used to made excellent dishes. Sandra and Viviana love this fish.



Amberjack: from the Carangidi family, it can reach impressive dimensions of around two metres in length. The larger exemplars particularly are fished with sporting techniques such as the line or spear gun. In fish mongers you can sometimes find exemplars that are too small. Apart from compromising the sustainability of the population, they are no guarantee of a good result from a gastronomic point of view. The amberjack is also farmed and is characterised by its compact, firm and tasty flesh. It can be cooked whole in the oven or vapour cooked and it is also excellent grilled, cut into steaks or filleted.

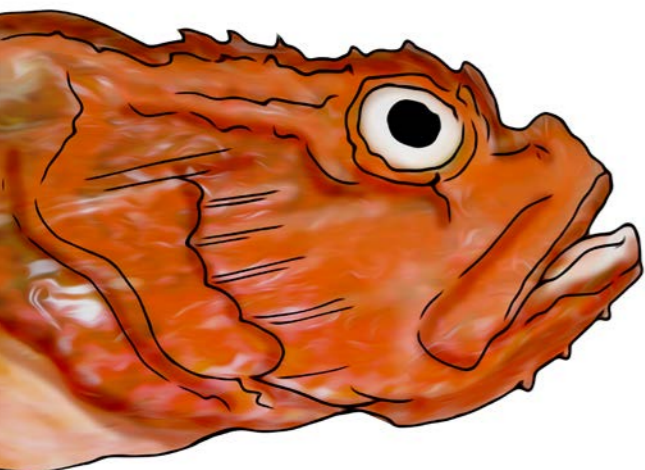


Turbot: from the Scoftalmidi family, it is fished mainly with dragnets as well as lines. It is highly prized and appreciated for its more-than-excellent flesh that is white and firm with a delicate flavour. Farmed turbot (Rombo chiodato) is common in the markets because it is the only turbot that can be farmed at the moment. It can be cooked whole in a special pot, the turbottiera, designed to fit the whole body perfectly. In this case it should be poached or braised. The cooking juice can also be used for excellent sauces. It can be grilled, vapour cooked, boiled in court-bouillon, fried, floured or crumbed, pan cooked with butter, a fantastic accompaniment, and it is excellent also paired with herbs.



John Dory: from the Zeidi family, it has a flattened body that needs filleting similar to a turbot. In the centre of its body it has a large black-purple spot with a yellow or grey border. Even though around 70% of the fish is wasted when it is cleaned, it is a highly prized fish that can be cooked in the same ways as the turbot.

Scorpionfish: from the Scorpenidi family, it is present in the Mediterranean with various species that are variously named (bottom, black, red, pink, little scorpion). It has a bizarre and graceless appearance thanks to its numerous spikes and protuberances, and it is important to pay attention when cleaning to avoid deep and painful wounds. It is considered one of the best fish for soups and is mainly used for these, although larger exemplars can also be baked or broiled.



Seabass: from the Moronidi family, it is also called spigola, branzino or wolf fish. It lives in the Mediterranean, also frequenting saltwater valleys and river deltas. It can reach noteworthy lengths (even up to a metre), but the largest exemplars found on the fishmonger's counter don't go above 50-60 centimetres. Fishing for seabass is very common and is carried out with driftnets or lines. Thanks to its popularity, seabass is also farmed intensively in vats on land or in floating cages with extensive techniques in saltwater valleys and swamps. It is very versatile in the kitchen. It can be baked whole or poached, vapour cooked, grilled or baked in a salt crust. The fillets can be pan or vapour cooked, vacuum cooked or wrapped and baked. The liver is particularly prized when sautéed in the pan with butter and sage.

Rock mullet: from the Mullidi family this is a highly prized and sought after fish. Being full of bones and scales, it needs careful cleaning and often it is preferable to fillet it and use the head and bones for stock. To recognise and distinguish it from other mullet, you just need to lift the first dorsal fin and see if it has coloured bands. It is used in various ways - stewed, in soups or pan cooked. It is also excellent grilled and, if small, fried.




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