

Mackerel escabeche

This recipe is adapted from one by Thomasina Miers. Escabeche usually refers to a technique of frying fish and then marinating it in a vinegary liquid with onions, spices and herbs. Flavourings vary enormously from country to country; escabeche is popular in Italy, Spain, Latin America and the Philippines.

This dish is a relative of good old fish and chips, which is not as British as one might think. They share origins in a dish beloved of the Shahs of Persia some 1500 years ago - sikbāj - sweet and sour stewed beef. This later made its way around the Arabic world, with fish replacing beef in Christian parts. The amazing history is told by Prof Dan Jurafsky on his blog, 'The Language of Food'.

Dan writes: "The word escabeche came to Spanish from Catalan, which acquired it from its neighbour, Occitan, who got it from the Genoese, who stole it from the Neapolitans, and so on, back eventually east to the Arabic of Baghdad and the Persian of Ctesiphon." And the story continues with the Jews being expelled from Spain and Portugal and going to northern Europe, taking their fish dishes with them. Finally, in England, Belgian frites were married with battered and fried fish doused with vinegar: fish and chips.



Serves: 8 as a starter or 4 as a main

4 tbsps + 4 tbsps olive oil
2 large red onions, sliced into half-moons
4 garlic cloves, finely sliced
200ml white wine + 100ml stock or water
4 tbsps sherry vinegar (or use balsamic, cider or white wine vinegar)
4 bay leaves
1 large dried red chilli, or a few small ones, finely chopped
a pinch of saffron, crumbled
75g pitted green olives, quartered (optional)
75g raisins, sultanas or currants
4 very fresh medium-large mackerel, cleaned, filleted and pin-boned
approx 3 tbsps polenta, matzo meal or flour
4 tbsps pine nuts, lightly toasted
parsley leaves, roughly chopped (optional)
salt and pepper

1. Heat 4 tbsps olive oil in a frying pan and fry the onions and garlic until softened and starting to colour, 10-15 minutes. Add the wine, vinegar, herbs and spices and bring to a boil. Add the olives, if using, and raisins and simmer gently for 5-10 mins, seasoning with salt and pepper. Set aside.
2. In another frying pan heat the remaining olive oil. Pat the mackerel fillets dry if they are wet and season them well with salt and pepper. Dredge them in the polenta and fry (flesh side first) for a couple of mins each side until starting to colour. Don't worry if they're not quite cooked through.
3. Lay the fish in a wide shallow dish and pour over the sauce. Let sit for an hour, or, even better, chill overnight and then bring to room temperature before serving garnished with parsley and pine nuts.