A sucker for cuttlefish

Rather than considering it a treat for the budgie, we should be eating more of the mysterious mollusc that’s regularly caught off the south coast and is just as tasty as squid and octopus, says Nick Hammond, who joins a fishing boat in search of these creatures of the deep

Photographs by Jake Eastham

The common cuttlefish, landed off our waters by a day boat from Eastbourne, East Sussex.

On this dazzlingly clear, early-summer morning, I’m travelling with the crew of Le Belhara to pull and set 10 lines of cuttlefish pots. Boat owner Chris Veasey, skipper John Griffiths and self-styled ‘first mate’ Mike Shaw scamper eagerly across the catamaran’s deck, while photographer Jake Eastham and I cling to the nearest available support.

As far as a day in the life of a fisherman goes, it’s a breeze; warm sun and the occasional white-horse wave forms a benevolent sea view, which stretches from Beachy Head on one side of the 30-mile bay to Dungeness on the other. And as we haul pots from the seabed, these incredible alien creatures are brought up spluttering inside them, spraying deck and deck-hands alike with their coal-black ink.

“They come inshore to breed,’ shouts Chris above the noise of the winch. ‘We bait each pot with a female and that attracts the males in. See here? These are cuttlefish eggs.’ He points a blue-gloved finger at the mesh of the pot, where clusters of shiny black, kelp-like parcels hang. ‘They come inshore to spawn and die shortly afterwards, so we’re only reaping them at the end of their lifecycle. Once the mating season’s over, they retreat back to deeper waters and we stop catching them.’ He hauls the cumbersome pot onto a stack of its brethren, ready for re-baiting and re-setting. ‘It’s very sustainable fishing.’

It’s also a relatively new method of fishing. The pots were first pioneered by Eastbourne fisherman Graham Doswell 20 years ago, the type of lateral response to changing stock levels that is so crucial today. Day boats in particular face persistent pressure from large trawlers, which can move in one day, vacuum the seabed and move on to pastures new the next.

“The margins are so small, it’s very difficult to make a decent living out of fishing,’ Chris admits, as we head for the next line of pots. ‘I wanted to find a way around the middle man, so that we could sell local fish caught by local people. And that’s how we came to open the shop.’ The shop is Veasey & Sons fishmonger in nearby Forest Row, and it has revolutionised the way Le Belhara fishes. I’ll be visiting it tomorrow, as long as I make it safely back to shore first.

For the next five hours, we haul line after line, pot after pot, and most of them come up empty. This is fishing, after all, not catching—and you never know what’s in the pot until it’s on deck. Chris simply turns his face to the sun, shrugs his shoulders and gives a lopsided smile, which he’s quick to do throughout the day. In his late forties, windblown

Fishing with cuttlefish pots during the mating season, the method pioneered by Eastbourne fisherman Graham Doswell and employed by the crew of Le Belhara, has only been in use for the past 20 years and is very sustainable.
and yellow-wellied, he’s a familiar sight around Eastbourne’s Sovereign Harbour. He’s been obsessed with fishing since he was a lad. ‘I watched them pull the old boats up onto the shingle from my bedroom on Royal Parade over there,’ he says, pointing in the general direction of the distant seafront.

‘I loved everything about fishing. As soon as the boats came in, I’d be down there, seeing what they’d caught, chatting to the fishermen as they unloaded. They started taking me with them as soon as I was old enough to get in the boat. I’ve never wanted to be anything but a fisherman, but my kids get seasick and they’ve got no interest in carrying it on.’

Does that bother him, the thought of the family business disappearing in the sands of time? ‘Not a bit,’ he smiles again. ‘My dad let me follow the sands of time? ‘Not a bit,’ he says, popping in a morsel of oak-smoked salmon to prove the point. ‘I like to try out new recipes with unusual fish so that I can then advise customers. And I have the finest raw ingredients I could ask for right on my doorstep.’

The shop, the boat and Chris Veasey’s entire operation is a model of how to make fishing work in the 21st century. His produce is caught locally and sustainably and sold locally and reasonably to local communities. As well as having the shop, he travels weekly with his octogenarian father, John, to sell his fish at nearby farmer’s markets.

He’s found a way to make his lifelong passion pay and others need to follow suit if our ancient fishing fleets are to weather the storm. Long may they ply their romantic, dangerous and vital trade around our coastlines. Veasey & Sons, 17, Hartfield Road, Forest Row, East Sussex, is open Monday to Saturday from 8.30am to 5.30pm (01342 822906; www. veaseyandsons.webs.com)

How to cook cuttlefish
Ingredients
About 700g cuttlefish, flesh and tentacles, cleaned
2 cloves of garlic, finely chopped
1 tspn fine sea salt
A few grinds of black pepper
4 tbspn olive oil

Method
Cut the flesh of the cuttlefish into bite-sized pieces and score with a criss-cross pattern. Whisk together the garlic, salt, pepper and oil and add the cuttlefish to the bowl, tossing with your hands and making sure everything is very well coated. Heat a barbecue (or a cast-iron griddle or heavy-based ridged pan) until very hot. Cook the cuttlefish for about a minute each side, until just beginning to char — you need to cook it very quickly over a very high heat, or it’ll become tough. Serve immediately.

To cook it over a barbecue, preheat your barbecue in the usual way until it reaches the correct temperature, then cook the cuttlefish on the grill, turning once, bearing in mind you may have to adjust the cooking time slightly, depending on how hot your barbecue is or how near the heat source the food is placed.