

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

THEY ascend from the depths, blowing audibly like porpoises and staining the emerald sea black with their ink. Pulsing with colour, changing hue in an instant—this is 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 deckhands 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 what I wanted, so it's the least I can do for them.' We head home, spume from the bow spraying salty refreshment into our faces. A few short hours later, it's 7am and I'm slurping fresh oysters in the gleaming Veasey fish shop in Forest Row.

The pretty little village is fiercely proud of its newcomer. In January, the shop was awarded Best Food Shop in Sussex, and as I enjoy the oysters and revel in the comfort of solid ground beneath my feet, shop manager Dan Howes works up his

masterpiece. His canvas is the shop's slab; an ice-encrusted, living sculpture, wares of the sea displayed in technicolour swirls, mackerel tiger stripes, livid tuna crimson and the glitter and gleam of fish scales. Each day, Dan artistically fills the slab with *Le Belhara's* freshest catch.

'I love doing this,' he says, joining in the breakfast oyster feast in between wedging plump John Dory, mullet, ling, hake, cod and more into the ice.

'It's actually very therapeutic and it also serves as a reminder to me of what the boat's caught this week and what else we might need to order.'

Cornish oysters and mussels are imported, as is Scottish salmon, Arbroath smokies, Manx kippers and several other 'foodie' delicacies that complement the fresh fish *Le Belhara* supplies.

Housed in a former butcher's shop, this fishmonger's is a delight to the senses. It smells bright and fresh, rings with the happy murmur of animated customers and the eye is captured by the myriad colours of cabinets stocked with bright-red cooked lobsters, brown cock crabs and green seaside samphire. 'It's the best thing that's happened to this village for years,' declares one lady who comes in for a pair of mackerel, freshly butterflied by Dan's colleague, Dave Hussell. 'The fish is superb and we all

‘This operation is a model of how to make fishing work in the 21st century’

(From left to right) Skipper John Griffiths, self-styled 'first mate' Mike Shaw and owner Chris Veasey make up the crew of *Le Belhara*—their catch is sold at the award-winning Veasey & Sons fish shop, in East Sussex

feel very, very lucky to have such a treasure of a shop on our doorstep.'

Dan beams in response, but he's a big part of that treasure. Formerly a trained chef, he's swapped the sink and the oven for the slab and the cold store. As well as cleaning and preparing fish expertly, Dan is able to offer advice and recommendations and encourage customers to try new and unfashionable fish. He also keeps tabs on the paperwork—and eats a lot of seafood along the way.

'At least one meal a day is seafood,' 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
1tspn fine sea salt
A few grinds of black pepper
4tbspn 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.