

### *Mackerel and Tuna: the Family Scombridae*

Some families of fish are defined by characteristics which the layman might fail to discern; but this family looks like a family even to the least tutored eye. All its members are powerful swimmers, with muscular and beautifully streamlined bodies. Day put it well. 'Carnivorous and exceedingly active, their shapes are well adapted to enable them to glide rapidly through the water: while to obviate the least impediment, we even find in some depressions for the reception of the pectoral fins.' They all perform migrations of considerable extent. They all have deeply forked or crescent-shaped tail fins; and a row of dorsal and anal finlets to the rear of the dorsal and anal fins. Their scales are small (and those of the tunas cover only part of the body, in what is called a corselet) and their coloration is like a uniform with only minor variations – blue or blue-green back, silvery sides and belly.

The ability of these fish to make long migratory journeys has resulted in many of them being represented right round the world, or at least on both sides of the Atlantic.

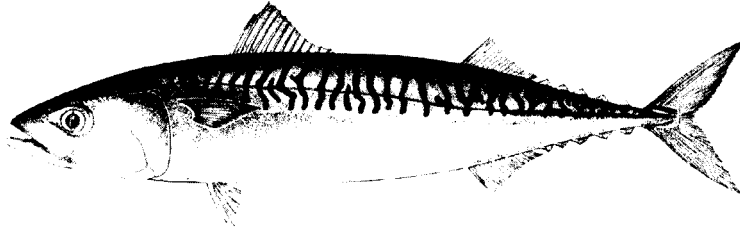
The mackerel and tuna catalogued in the following pages are those which are most common in North Atlantic waters. But others, which only live in the warmer waters further south, sometimes stray north as far as the Bay of Biscay or the English Channel and up to New England. These include the so-called frigate mackerel (or frigate tuna), *Auxis thazard* (Lacepède), a small fish of no particular merit; the little tunny or false albacore, *Euthynnus alletteratus* (Rafinesque), of which the specific name alludes to the scribble-like markings on its back; and the yellowfin tuna, *Thunnus albacares* (Bonnaterre). Any of these may leap out of the water, a favourite piece of behaviour on the part of mackerel and tuna, in waters far to the north of their usual haunts; but they cannot be counted as North Atlantic species.

The same applies, with a qualification, to *Scomber japonicus* Houttyn, the chub mackerel. It is common in the Mediterranean, but may be found off the Iberian and French Atlantic coasts. On the other side of the Atlantic, however, it occurs every now and then off the New England coast, but is virtually unknown from New Jersey southwards. It is a smaller fish than the Atlantic mackerel (see overleaf) and has more delicate markings on its back; but fish-mongers have no reason to distinguish between the two. It is cavala in Portugal, estornino in Spain, maquereau espagnol in France and, sometimes, Spanish mackerel in Britain; but the name Spanish mackerel is better reserved for the species on pages 128 and 129.

MACKEREL,  
ATLANTIC MACKEREL

Family *Scombridae*

*Scomber scombrus* Linnaeus



REMARKS Maximum length 50 cm or even more ('giants' of exceptional dimensions are sometimes taken in the western Atlantic); market length 30 to 35 cm.

I suppose that everyone is familiar with the appearance of this handsome fish, with its brilliant greeny-blue back marked with dark curving lines, its metallic sides and its white belly. The French name maquereau also means pimp, no doubt in allusion to the brilliance of the colours. Lemery, however, observes that 'some pretend' that the name was given to it 'because as soon as the Spring comes, he follows the young Shad, that are commonly call'd Virgins, and brings them to their Males, and so they make a Bawd of this Fish.' This would be a highly satisfactory, because so precise, explanation, but it does not seem to be true, at least not of modern mackerel.

The mackerel has an extensive range, from the Mediterranean to Iceland and the north of Norway, and from Cape Hatteras to Labrador on the American side. They are ocean fish, which swim in very large shoals. The long spawning season (spring and early and even late summer) brings them to the shallow waters of the continental shelf. During the winter they retreat to deeper water and go into a state of near-hibernation, fasting and waiting for the spring, when they can resume gobbling copepods (what the fishermen call 'red seed', the subject of the note on the next page) and sporting about in laying their numerous eggs (up to half a million from one female). Sometimes they can be too playful: Pontoppidan relates how a Norwegian sailor was destroyed by a shoal of mackerel who set upon him while he was having a swim in the port of Laurkulen. His shipmates could scarcely beat the mackerel off his body when it surfaced, such was their voracity.

*Portuguese:* Sarda, Cavala

*Spanish:* Caballa

*French:* Maquereau

*Dutch:* Makreel

*German:* Makrele

*Polish:* Makrela

*Russian:* Makrel, Skumbriya

*Finnish:* Makrilli

*Swedish:* Makrill

*Norwegian:* Makrell

*Danish:* Makrel

*Icelandic:* Makrill

*Other:* Ronnach (Irish)

Frank Buckland recorded that at Rye in Sussex there used to be an important mackerel fishery; and that the fish were caught there in large fixed nets, called kettle nets. He suggests that this may be the origin of the phrase: 'What a pretty kettle of fish!' I find this idea plausible, although the *Oxford English Dictionary* prefers a rival explanation, that persons picnicking on the banks of the River Tweed, for example, were wont to cook fish in a large kettle and eat it *al fresco*, uttering the familiar exclamation as they did so.

**CUISINE** The qualities of the mackerel were well described by Day. 'Mackerel are much esteemed, the moderately sized more than the very large ones, but they taint very rapidly, as well as lose flavour when kept . . . Owing to the rapidity with which these fish decompose in hot weather, and the consequent deleterious results to consumers, vendors were permitted as early as 1698 to cry them through the streets of London on Sundays, an enactment which does not seem to have ever been repealed.' (Nor will it be, now that Sunday trading in Britain is allowed, a development which has robbed the mackerel of its sabbatical advantage in the market.)

The meat of mackerel is fairly oily, which is why it spoils fast. But it is firm and free of tiresome bones and has an excellent flavour. The best thing to do with it is to grill or bake it, or poach it in a court-bouillon, and to serve it with a sharp sauce. Almost every cookery book extols the combination of mackerel with the traditional (in England and Normandy) gooseberry sauce. Jane Grigson devotes a whole page in her *Fish Cookery* to describing three different versions of gooseberry sauce; *quod vide*, as authors used to say. But a cranberry sauce, unsweetened, is equally good; and inexpensive rhubarb will also provide the necessary touch of acidity.

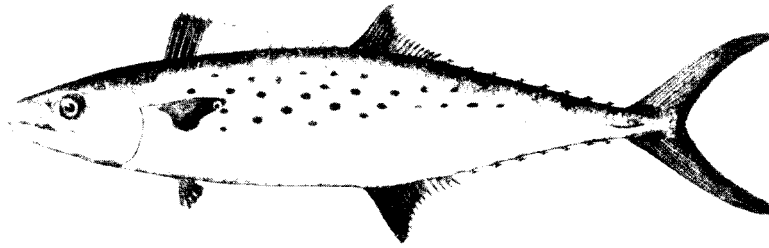
Hot-smoked mackerel, which needs no further cooking, is becoming more and more popular in Europe. It can be eaten as it is or turned into a delicious pâté. Remember, however, that mackerel is rich. Do not eat too much of it.

#### RECIPES

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**NOTE** 'Red seed', referred to on the previous page and sometimes also known as 'cayenne', consists in planktonic crustacea, minute in size and red in colour. Goode recalls that an aged skipper in Maine, Cap'n Gorham Babson – a name crying out to be used in a novel – referred to them as 'Rhode Island bed-bugs' and advised a younger skipper that whenever he saw these creatures he should stay with them, for fish would certainly arrive before long.

## SPANISH MACKEREL.

Family *Scombridae**Scomberomorus maculatus* (Mitchill)

REMARKS Maximum length about 80 cm, common length about 50 cm. The back is dark blue or blue-green, the sides marked with many oval spots, which are orange or yellowish in colour. The specific name *maculatus* means spotted.

This is the most important of the three species of Spanish mackerel which are found on the eastern coasts of North America. (The other two are shown on the facing page.) The range of *Scomberomorus maculatus* is from the Gulf of Mexico to Cape Cod.

Figures for the size of Spanish mackerel provide an interesting example of the perils of drawing on earlier books without adequate verification, or at least a critical scrutiny. Jordan and Evermann (in *The Fishes of North and Middle America*, 1896) said that *Scomberomorus regalis* reached a length of 6 feet and a weight of 20 pounds, and that the corresponding figures for *Scomberomorus cavalla* were 5 feet and 100 pounds. The discrepancy should jump to the eye. But the figures are repeated by Breder and other later authors without any apparent batting of the eyelids. The correct figures are, as it happens, elusive but seem to be roughly as follows: *Scomberomorus regalis* up to just over 1 metre and about 35 pounds, *Scomberomorus cavalla* up to 180 cm and close to 100 pounds. It is of course rare to meet specimens of anything like these dimensions.

CUISINE A fish of high quality, which may be treated like the Atlantic mackerel (page 127). Being larger, it offers more possibilities in the way of presentation. Related species are among the most highly esteemed fish of South-East Asian waters and are often served in curried dishes, for which their firm flesh is well adapted.

These remarks apply equally to the two species on the next page.