“Fear death,” wrote the Greek comic poet Philetaerus, who lived around the beginning of the fourth century B.C., “for when you’re dead, you cannot then eat eels.”

While Philetaerus may have been stretching a point, eel is a rich, flavorful fish, worthy of the many culinary encomiums that have been heaped on it over millennia. Although eel has virtually disappeared from tables in the United States, it was one of the nation’s founding foods and is still highly valued in many places outside the States. Hard as it may be for North Americans to believe, Parisians do not blink twice at forking over twenty-eight euros for a plate of eels, and Europeans, in general, are willing to pay top dollar for them. It is hard to assign a reason for why the eel has been shunned where it was once loved. It’s a mystery, one more in a long list of unresolved questions regarding a creature that is both literally and figuratively impossible to grasp.

The eels found in North American rivers, lakes, and ponds belong to the species *Anguilla rostrata*, and those in European fresh waters are *Anguilla anguilla*, but the two are virtually identical, differentiated by only a few small anatomical details. Both are serpentine, muddy brown fish that can grow up to a yard long. Both species have a robustly flavored flesh, as well as one of the most unusual life cycles of any animal in the world. They are believed to hatch in the Sargasso Sea, a deep, two-million-square-mile sea in the Atlantic Ocean, between the Azores and Bermuda, bordered by strong currents. The eel larvae, shaped like tiny leaves, drift on a journey that can take years, toward either Europe or North America. Finally, for reasons still unknown, they will choose to enter a river where they take on an eel’s form and head upstream to

Left: Common Eel. Hand-painted drawing (number VII) from Mrs. T. Edward Bowdich, The Fresh-water Fishes of Great Britain (London: R. Ackermann, 1828). Mrs. Bowdich notes: "From the quantity of slime which covers the body of the Eel, it is difficult to ascertain its colour. The best way, however, to arrive at its true tints, is to keep it in a tub for some hours, the water in which is to be frequently renewed from the stream whence the fish was taken: after this it will become much cleaner, and its flavour thereby be improved. The Eel here represented was caught in the Thames, at Henley, in Oxfordshire, and may be considered as a type of the general colouring."
reside for up to a score of years as adults, before returning
downriver to salt water. When they reach the coast, they jet-
tison their digestive systems and swim for months without
eating, until they reach the Sargasso. There, they mate and
die. The eel’s natural history has fascinated and mystified
thoughtful observers from Aristotle to Freud, and despite
more than a millennium of study, little is known for sure
about it. Scientists are convinced that the theory of Sargasso
Sea reproduction is correct, because the larvae captured
there are so small that they must have hatched nearby. But
a live adult eel has never been captured in the Sargasso.  

For all their mystery and movement, eels have never
proven elusive to fishermen, and their ease of capture has
ensured that people would sample them. 1 Once people eat
eel, they are likely to do so again. Eels have been held dear
for a long time. The eels of the Hellenic world were prized
and sold at high prices, as attested by a number of Greek
writers. 2 As the centuries passed, the price of eel came
down, but not its popularity. It was one of the basic food-
stuffs of Europe and North America, an inexpensive and
accessible provider of protein for the multitudes who did
not have the wherewithal to put meat on the table. Eel was
among the first ready-made foods, sold on the streets of Paris
at the beginning of the 1400s as a small eel pie. In this same
form, it became a mainstay of Londoners’ diets. Eel was
cheaper than meat, English rivers held lots of them, and
even those that were imported to London aboard big Dutch
trading ships were usually less expensive than home-grown
beef or lamb. Fish like eel and cod were common. The
streets of sixteenth-century London were full of people
selling eel pies from small portable ovens. 3

Eels also frequently graced the tables of the “better fam-
ilies” of medieval Europe, including England, because
non-meat days, as prescribed by the religious calendar,
accounted for almost half the days in any given year. All
Saturdays and Sundays, the forty days of Lent, and a host
of other saint’s days and holy days meant that fish would be
the only flesh on the table for many meals during the year,
and eel fit the bill. It appears in many of the earliest English
cookbooks. Robert May, a chef to English nobility, included
sixteen eel recipes in his 1588 volume, The Accomplisht
Cook or the Art and Mystery of Cookery. 4 Time passed,
but the English taste for eels remained. C. David Badham,
in his Prose Halieutics or Ancient and Modern Fish Tattle,
penned a description of the animated state of eel con-
sumption prevalent in London in 1853:

London, from one end to the other, teems and steams with eels,
alive and stewed; turn where you will, hot eels are everywhere smoking
away, with many a fragrant condiment at hand to make what is in itself
palatable yet more savoury; and this too at so low a rate, that for one
halfpenny a man of the million may fill his stomach with six or seven
long pieces, and wash them down with a cupful of the glutinous liquor
in which they have been stewed. 5

But London is no longer devouring eels at historical
levels. “It’s a dying industry,” Mick Jenrick told me in his
broad East End accent, and he ought to know. He is pretty
much the king of what is left of the eel wholesalers. A short,
pugnacious, barrel-shaped man with a nearly shaved head,
Jenrick has a stall in the Billingsgate Market, the new mar-
ket out by the waterside Docklands development in East
London. His is the only eel stall in the place. He also has
a plant close by, where he turns live eels into chunks of
jellied ones, which he then sells wholesale by the dish
—thirty-five pieces of jellied eel packed into a round,
plastic, Tupperware-like container. He offers both these
and live eels for sale at Billingsgate.

Mick Jenrick began selling eels when he was seventeen;
when I talked to him in March 2000 he had been in the eel
business for thirty-six years. Eels are what he knows. His
father had sold jellied eels from a stall at a race track near
their small house. His mother would clean the eels, cut
them into chunks, and pour the liquid gelatin around
them. Then she would pack a dish of them in ice, and
they would jelly. Then, as now, individual portions of
jellied eels were bought in a cup, doused in regular or
hot vinegar, and eaten.

“These days, it’s a different generation,” Mick told me
one morning, as he hosed down the concrete floor around
his stand at eight a.m. He had been up, as every morning,
since two-thirty a.m., and selling eels since four. “Before, on
Friday, Saturday, or Sunday, they had little barrows outside
public houses and in the markets, with a bit of ice and jell-
ied eels for sale, and the people queued up to buy. Long
queues. Now, kids can eat fast food at a different place every
day. Six years ago, I was selling 2,200 dishes of jellied eels
a week, and now I’m selling half that. In another six years,
it’ll be half again as few. And live eels? Forget it. There’s
probably not more than a dozen people in London who
can sell you live eels.”

The principal customers for live eels are the owners of
the city’s eel and pie shops, sometimes called pie and mash
shops. In 1995, there were eighty-seven of them scattered
throughout greater London, according to the Pie ’N’ Mash
Club of Great Britain—a figure not greatly reduced from
the 110 or so estimated to have been serving at the end of
the 1800s. Many still have interiors with a nineteenth-
century decor of dark wood and white tiles. Often they seat
customers on long wooden benches with backs, at a single,
long, wooden table. The menu is limited: meat pies or stewed eels, served with mashed potatoes in a big bowl, with a ladle of “liquor” from a big tin kettle poured over them—a viscous sauce made from chopped parsley, water, and flour. To this, the customer adds plain or hot vinegar from bottles on the counter. In their discussions of whether the liquor should be thick and dark green with parsley, or more liquid and lighter, devotees of pie houses are as animated as wine aficionados discussing a vintage. Pie and mash is a quintessential London working-class meal, but it is also served quickly and is filling, so many a London office worker lucky enough to be employed close to a pie and mash shop will go there for lunch.

The first eel pie shops were established in the mid-1700s, a famous one being the Eel Pie House, which began life as an inn on Twickenham Island in the river Thames. It was a favorite of pleasure-boat parties on day outings from London. The picnickers would buy the pies at the Inn and enjoy them beside the river. The grand old inn ended its days occupied and “liberated” by hippies in the late 1960s. Another well-known shop with a reputation for good eel pies was the Eel Pie House on New River in Highbury, built on the river bank outside of North London. This shop seems to have had a reputation for more than its eel pies. In the late 1700s, it was known for putting on such entertainments for its customers as dog fights and rat-killing matches. One journalist of the time described its clientele as “the lowest order of people.”

The English penchant for eels traveled to the New World along with the one hundred and two people who left England in September 1620 aboard the World along with the one hundred and two people who left as “the lowest order of people.”

Once people eat eel, they are likely to do so again. Eels have been held dear for a long time.

so large-spirited that he was willing to help them, even though other Englishmen had mistreated him. In the early 1600s, Tisquantum (known in Euro-American history books as Squanto) was captured by Englishmen who lured him and sixteen other Pawtuxets on board the ship with which they were exploring the New World’s coast. Tisquantum eventually served years in virtual slavery to an English merchant-ship owner. When he finally got back to his homeland in 1619, he found his tribe’s villages gone and not a Pawtuxet alive, all wiped out by the influenza the English had introduced. He was the last Pawtuxet. He went to live with the neighboring Wampanoag tribe.

In March 1621 Tisquantum presented himself to the Mayflower colony along with Samoset, a Wampanoag. Although he knew all about the dark side of the English, still he was merciful enough to open the land and water to the Plymouth settlers, to read them the North American book of survival. Tisquantum was the first real American hero of record, a forgiving, compassionate man. He gave the Plymouth colony his grain—corn—along with the secrets of growing it. He taught the colonists which fruits and berries were edible, how to hunt meat and harvest wild vegetables, and how to fish. And the very first thing he showed the colonists, before anything else, was how to fish for eels. According to John Goodwin’s *The Pilgrim Republic*, on April 4, 1621, “Samoset and Tisquantum were still guests of the Colony. In the afternoon, the latter went to Eel River, apparently, and by treading in the mud caught, with his hands alone, as many fat, sweet eels as he could bring back to his entertainers.” It was not long before the colonists were treading up eels themselves.

In Two Voyages To New England, published in 1675, the Englishman John Josselyn wrote: “I never eat better Eals in no part of the world that I have been in, than are here. They that have no mind or leisure to take them, may buy of an Indian half a dozen silver bellied Eals as big as those we usually give 8 pence or 12 pence a piece for at London, for three pence."

There are notable similarities between Native American eel preparations and those found in other parts of the world. Jesuit missionaries in New York discovered the
Iroquois using eels as a staple in their diet. The Iroquois particularly liked to spit eels on twigs and grill them over a fire, much as the Italians loved to do during the Middle Ages with their eels at Lake Commmachio, the large body of estuarine water below Venice, then and now Italy’s prime eel-fishing grounds. The Algonquin tribes smoked them, just as the Dutch, Germans, and Scandinavians were doing at the same time across the Atlantic.

A popular way to prepare eels in Native American kitchens across New England was in a thick fish soup. In his Historical Account of the Indians, first published in 1677, Daniel Gookin wrote: “Their food is generally boiled maize, or Indian corn, mixed with kidney-beans, or sometimes without. Also they frequently boil in this pottage, fish and flesh of all sorts, either new taken or dried, as shads, eels, alewives, or a kind of herring ... These they cut in pieces, bones and all, and boil them in the aforesaid pottage.”

Waverley Root wrote that among Northeastern Indians there was a “fish soup from which the fish had disappeared before the dish was served, like a French soupe de poisson, described summarily as ‘fish of any kind boiled in a quantity of water. It is then removed and coarse corn siftings stirred in to make a soup of suitable consistency.’ The Indians called it u nega’geri.” Root does not comment on the similarity between this Native American word and the Japanese word for eel, unagi.

Eel rapidly became a staple in the colonists’ diet. One of the basic ways that the Mayflower pilgrims prepared it was as an “eel stifle,” a dish still occasionally served on the Massachusetts island of Martha’s Vineyard, and found in New England cookbooks. A stifle is basically potatoes and onions layered with eel in a pot, with a little flour sprinkled between the layers. Some salt pork and pork fat are placed on top, water is added nearly to cover, and the whole shebang is cooked until the meats are firm but tender.

The nation’s first big-selling cookbook, the one that for many a year set the standard for those to follow, was Mary Randolph’s The Virginia Housewife, first published in 1824, when its author was sixty-two years old. It contained the first recipe for beaten biscuits, as well as three for eel: grilled, broiled, and “pitchcocked,” meaning that the eels were skewered through their length, laid across a grill, and served as a kind of eel kebab, much as the Jesuits had reported the Iroquois tribes doing a couple of centuries earlier.

Throughout the nineteenth century, eel continued to play a substantial role in the cuisine of the East Coast and was found in most of the cookbooks of the period—fried, grilled, boiled, broiled, smoked, and stewed. Eel soup and eel stifle. Eels for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Eels apleenty, but after the Civil War some of the cookbook entries began to adopt a different tone. The recipe for stewed eels in one of 1874’s popular self-help books, Common Sense in the Household, by Marion Harland, managed to be both defensive and cautious. It began: “Inquire, before buying, where they were caught, and give so decided a preference to country eels as to refuse those fattened upon the offal of city wharves.” And concluded: “The appearance and odor of this stew are so pleasing as often to overcome the prejudices of those who ‘Wouldn’t touch an eel for the world! They look so like snakes!’”

In 1884, the U.S. Department of Fisheries released a report called The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States, compiled and written by George Brown Goode, which reviewed the nation’s individual fisheries and their economic importance. The report’s statistics are preceded by a long section titled “Natural History of Aquatic Animals,” in which Goode devotes almost thirty pages to the eel’s life cycle and the history of eel reproduction research. He also looked at fisheries state by state and recorded, for instance, that in Massachusetts, out of twenty-eight species of fish taken commercially in 1880, the eel ranked sixteenth, with almost 400,000 pounds reported. A little over a century later, in 1989, that figure was down to 29,900 pounds, and less than a decade after that, in 1997, eel fishing had practically disappeared in the state, with its entire commercial landings reported at 304 pounds.

The only Americans who continued to eat eel after World War II, when they were able to afford anything they wanted, were those who did so out of ethnic obstinacy: the Italians, the Poles, and the Irish, who continued to eat as they always had. Current books about North American eating habits frequently fail to mention eels at all. The classic mid-century cookbook, Joy of Cooking, contains only one eel recipe, for poached eel. The American Heritage Cookbook and Illustrated History of American Eating and Drinking, a lavish coffee-table volume published in 1964, has plenty to say about salmon, cod, and trout, as well as catfish and flounder, not to mention its instructions for two lobster dishes, four ways to cook clams, and a half-dozen recipes for crabs. But it contains nary a word about eels.

Nor does the 1988 The Great American Seafood Cookbook mention them, though it offers four recipes for catfish, over a dozen for crabs, and goes so far as to explain how to cook a dogfish. Even the 1997 American Century Cookbook, a compilation of five hundred of North America’s favorite recipes from the twentieth century, makes no mention of eels.

These days, the only place North Americans eat eel is in Japanese restaurants. Japan consumes over two billion
dollars’ worth of eels a year, much of it as *kabayaki* — eel meat steamed, dipped in a sweet, soy-based sauce, then grilled. The Japanese have been preparing eel this way since the 1600s; nowadays the *kabayaki* is vacuum packed and shipped to sushi restaurants around the world. An estimated twenty-two million pounds of eel are consumed in northern Europe alone, some of it having been caught and shipped live from the East Coast of the United States. French cookbooks often have dozens of recipes for eel, including, of course, the classic eel *matelote*, a rich stew made with wine. Belgians favor *anguilles au vert*, eel simmered with white wine, sorrel, mint, chervil, and parsley. The Germans and the Dutch prefer their eels smoked, and for this the best eels are the oldest and fattest, those returning downriver to the sea, which have stored up as much body fat as possible for the long swim to the Sargasso. While each country has its preferred method of eating eel, they all pay the highest respect to this toothsome fish.

It is difficult to say why people in the United States stopped eating eel. The fish is, as it has always been, inexpensive and tasty, high in protein, relatively abundant, and easy to catch. The most commonly heard accusations against the eel are that it is slimy and that it looks like a snake. Both complaints are indisputably true, but hardly reason enough to trash a national taste for a founding food. The slime protects the eel against predators and bacteria — the creature’s looks are only skin deep. Perhaps the fact that eels forage in the mud, or that people no longer trust the toxified bottoms of waterways, has put folks off their eel feed.

A market for another bottom feeder — catfish — was developed only when farmers trained them to feed at the surface, on floating pellets of food. This method does not work so well with eels, which are harder to train than catfish. The other, even greater, impediment to eel farming is that *Anguilla* have never produced viable young in captivity. If they do not have the depths of the deepest Atlantic in which to spawn, they will not naturally reproduce.

There are numerous operations in Europe, however, where eels are captured as elvers (baby eels) and fattened to a marketable size. Mick Jenrick sells about 150 tons of farm-raised eels a year, and another 150 tons of eels captured in the wild. He buys his wild eels from an eel fisherman’s cooperative on Lough Neagh in Northern Ireland. “They’re the best eels in the world,” he says. “They taste better than farm-raised eels, but the advantage to the farm-raised ones is consistency — they’re all the same size with just the same flavor.”

The eel’s unsettling appearance and mysterious behavior are no reason to scorn the fish, eliminate it from a national diet, or relegate it to the status of a working person’s lunch.
It is high time that the English return the eel to the place of favor on their tables that it once occupied and still merits, and that North Americans recover their taste for eel. This most wondrous and tasty of fish is even now resting quietly in the mud in a nearby river, pond, or lake, ignored by consumers who pay upwards of seven dollars a pound for farm-raised tilapia.

Consider the eel.

Stewed Eel

2 pounds skinned eel fillets, cut into one-inch chunks
4 medium Irish potatoes, peeled and diced
2 medium onions, chopped
2 quarts water
2 teaspoons salt
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
2 tablespoons bacon drippings

In a large saucepan, add eel, diced potatoes, and chopped onions to water. Season with salt, pepper, and bacon drippings. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer 45 minutes.

Serves 4.


Jellied Eel

1 pound of eel, cut into one-inch pieces (skinning isn’t necessary)
Water salted at the rate of 1 teaspoon per pint
Juice of one lemon
Bay leaf

Put the eel, bay leaf and lemon juice into a saucepan with just enough salted water to cover them. Cook at low heat for two hours. Cool the cooked eel as rapidly as possible. As it cools, the liquor should set in a jelly. Adding gelatin shouldn’t be necessary.

Eat it with a strong vinegar, or a hot pepper vinegar, made by steeping a hot pepper in a white wine vinegar.

From D. R. Berg, W. R. Jones, and G. L. Crow, The Case of the Slippery Eel or: How To Harvest, Handle and Market Wild Eels (University of North Carolina Sea Grant Program Publication, no. UNG-SG-75-20, August, 1975)

Notes

3. How to fish for eels is included in the angling advice given by the first how-to-fish essay in English, “A Treatise of Fyshyng with an Angle,” generally attributed to Dame Juliana Berners and contained in The Boke of St Albans, originally published in 1496. See also Izaak Walton and Charles Cotton, The Compleat Angler (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 168–175, originally published in 1653.
4. For instance, Aristophanes writes of the high price of eels in ancient Athens, and Aristophanes of the high regard in which eels from Lake Copaïs were held, as quoted in Radcliffe’s Fishing from the Earliest Times, 246–253.
7. C. G. Badham, Prose Halieutics or Ancient and Modern Fish Tattle (London: John Parker, 1854), 385.