

# school *of* fish

For 23 years the Sydney Seafood School – with the help of the country's top chefs – has taught us the best way to prepare and cook Australian seafood. Now the school has put all its secrets in a new cookbook and we've got the first taste.

Words **Roberta Muir** Photography **Alan Benson**  
Styling **Sarah O'Brien**



Baccalà mantecato alla  
Veneziana (recipe p129)



Goldband snapper fillets  
baked al cartoccio (recipe p129)



For a nation fanatical about seafood, a lot of us can be hesitant when it comes to cooking it at home. That was part of the reason the Sydney Seafood School was established in 1989, and it's probably why, 24 years later, it's now Australia's largest cooking school. Speaking as someone who has run the school for 15 years, I'd say it's more than a school; it's a place where our best chefs come from all over the nation to share their piscatorial culinary secrets.

And, given that chefs are a quirky, sometimes volatile bunch, our salmon skin-upholstered theatre has seen some scenes that weren't exactly in the curriculum. Our guest chefs' classes are peppered with anecdotes: Giovanni Pilu talking catching trout by stunning them with an electrical lead attached to a makeshift generator, or Ben Shewry revealing that right before he was offered his gig at Attica he was on the verge of taking a job at a local club. And while we think we do a pretty professional job, the unscripted moments bring their magic, too, whether it's David Thompson's impromptu chilli-eating lessons or Damien Pignolet lining up an entire class, apprentice-style, to have a crack at making the perfect omelette one by one.

Now we've distilled 23 years, 800 chefs' recipes and the conversations we've had with the 13,000 home cooks who visit us each year into

our first cookbook. It runs the gamut of recipes. Christine Manfield's escabeche and James Kidman's addictive Venetian-style baccalà are classics. Both the goldband snapper al cartoccio from Uccello chef Eugenio Riva and Jonathan Barthelme's seafood take on the Greek meatballs, keftethes, are easy to whip up mid-week, while David Thompson's tangy salad of lobster and pomelo will win you kudos with dinner-party guests.

Recipes are one thing, but it's often the essentials of seafood preparation that baffle people, so the book includes step-by-step photos on everything including filleting fish, cleaning abalone, stripping squid and sectioning crabs, along with tips on how to spot the freshest specimens and keep them fresh at home. Whether you want to know how to tell a Balmain bug from a Moreton Bay bug (it's the eyes), why shellfish turn red when they're cooked (a heat-stable red pigment combined with an unstable blue-green protein), discover how to devein a prawn without splitting it down the back, or learn the best way to store live clams, we hope the *Sydney Seafood School Cookbook* will become your one-stop reference for all Australian seafood. [sydneyfishmarket.com](http://sydneyfishmarket.com)



Salad of rock lobster and pomelo

## Salad of rock lobster and pomelo

Recipe by David Thompson

This is a great way to make expensive rock lobster go a long way. You can buy deep-fried garlic and shallots in Asian grocery stores, but you'll get an infinitely better result if you make your own: simply deep-fry them for a few minutes in hot vegetable oil until they turn golden, stirring with a spider to ensure they colour evenly, then drain on paper towel. Pomelo is a large thick-skinned citrus fruit; if unavailable, use green mango. To segment pomelo, use a small sharp knife to remove the skin, then cut down either side of the white membranes to release the segments. David Thompson always explains at his classes that a Thai dish such as this would traditionally be served at the same time as a number of other dishes – a curry, a stir-fry and a soup, for example – along with steamed jasmine rice.

Serves 6 as an entrée

- 1 live rock lobster (1kg)
- 8 large pomelo segments, broken into small pieces
- 4 stalks lemongrass, white part only, very finely chopped
- 4 red shallots, sliced
- 1 large handful mint leaves
- 1 large handful coriander leaves
- 8 red shallots (extra), thinly sliced and deep-fried
- 6 cloves garlic, thinly sliced and deep-fried
- Thai dressing**
- 4 coriander roots, scraped
- 1 large red chilli, seeded and roughly chopped
- A few "scud" chillies (see note)
- 3-4 tbsp caster sugar, to taste
- 3/4 cup (160ml) strained lime juice, more or less, to taste
- 4 tbsp fish sauce, more or less, to taste

- 1 Place the rock lobster in the freezer for 30-60 minutes until insensible.
- 2 Meanwhile, to make the Thai dressing, place the coriander root, large chilli, scuds and a good pinch of sea salt flakes in a mortar and pound with a pestle until quite fine. Add the sugar, lime juice and fish sauce and stir until dissolved. Taste: it should be spicy, sour, salty and sweet; adjust if need be.
- 3 Bring a large saucepan of salted water to a rapid boil. Add the chilled rock lobster and cover to return to the boil as quickly as possible. Cook for 8 minutes from the time it returns to the boil, then plunge it into iced water.
- 4 Remove the meat from the shell and cut it into 1cm-thick slices. Combine the rock lobster, pomelo, lemongrass, sliced shallots, mint and coriander and toss with the Thai dressing. Serve sprinkled with the deep-fried shallots and garlic.

**Note** David Thompson coined the term "scuds" to describe the fiercely hot tiny Thai chillies in the early 1990s, when scud missiles were being used in the Gulf conflict – implying that the use of these chillies can be almost as destructive. It's caught on and now many

people are referring to them by this name. They're available in Chinatown and Asian grocery stores, where they may be sold by their Thai name, prik kii nuu suan ("mouse-dropping chillies").

## Baccalà mantecato alla Veneziana

Recipe by James Kidman

This classic Venetian dish is one of the most delicious ways to prepare baccalà, salted cod imported from Europe. When he was head chef at Otto, James Kidman demonstrated this recipe at Gusto, the Italian festival held at the Seafood School each year, and we lived off the delicious leftovers for the next week. It is very moreish – slightly salty, fluffy and great to share from a big bowl with pre-dinner drinks. Baccalà is available from some delis and fishmongers (don't buy stockfish, which has been air-dried and is much harder). If you buy salt cod on the bone, you'll need about 1.5kg. You'll need to begin this recipe a day ahead: it's important to soak the cod well to extract most of the salt.

Serves 6 as an entrée (pictured p126)

- 1.1 kg salt cod fillets (baccalà), skin on
- 325 ml extra-virgin olive oil
- 150 ml milk
- 150 ml pouring cream
- 3 cloves garlic
- 1 fresh bay leaf
- 3 sprigs thyme
- Ligurian olives and grilled sourdough bread, for serving

- 1 Soak the salt cod, covered, in the fridge for 24-36 hours, changing the water every few hours when possible (but at least 3 times).
- 2 Drain the cod and place it in a large saucepan of water. Bring to the boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for about 10 minutes, until cooked through. Remove the cod from the water and, when cool enough to handle, break the flesh into small pieces, discarding any skin, bones and dark bits.
- 3 Place the oil in a small saucepan and heat it to about 70C; the oil should be hot but not sizzling. Cover with a lid and set aside to keep warm.
- 4 Combine the milk, cream, garlic, bay leaf and thyme in a saucepan. Bring to the boil, then remove from the heat. Discard the bay leaf and thyme. Remove the garlic, then cover the pan to keep warm. Place the garlic in a mortar and pound with a pestle to form a paste.
- 5 Place the cod and the garlic paste in the bowl of an electric mixer fitted with a whisk. While beating on medium-high speed, slowly and carefully add a little of the hot milk mixture, then a little hot oil, alternating until all the milk mixture and oil have been added and regularly scraping down the sides of the bowl. Beat for a further minute or two on high speed, until it sounds like the paste is slapping against the sides of the bowl.
- 6 Transfer to a serving bowl and serve warm with olives and grilled bread.

## Goldband snapper fillets baked al cartoccio

Recipe by Eugenio Riva

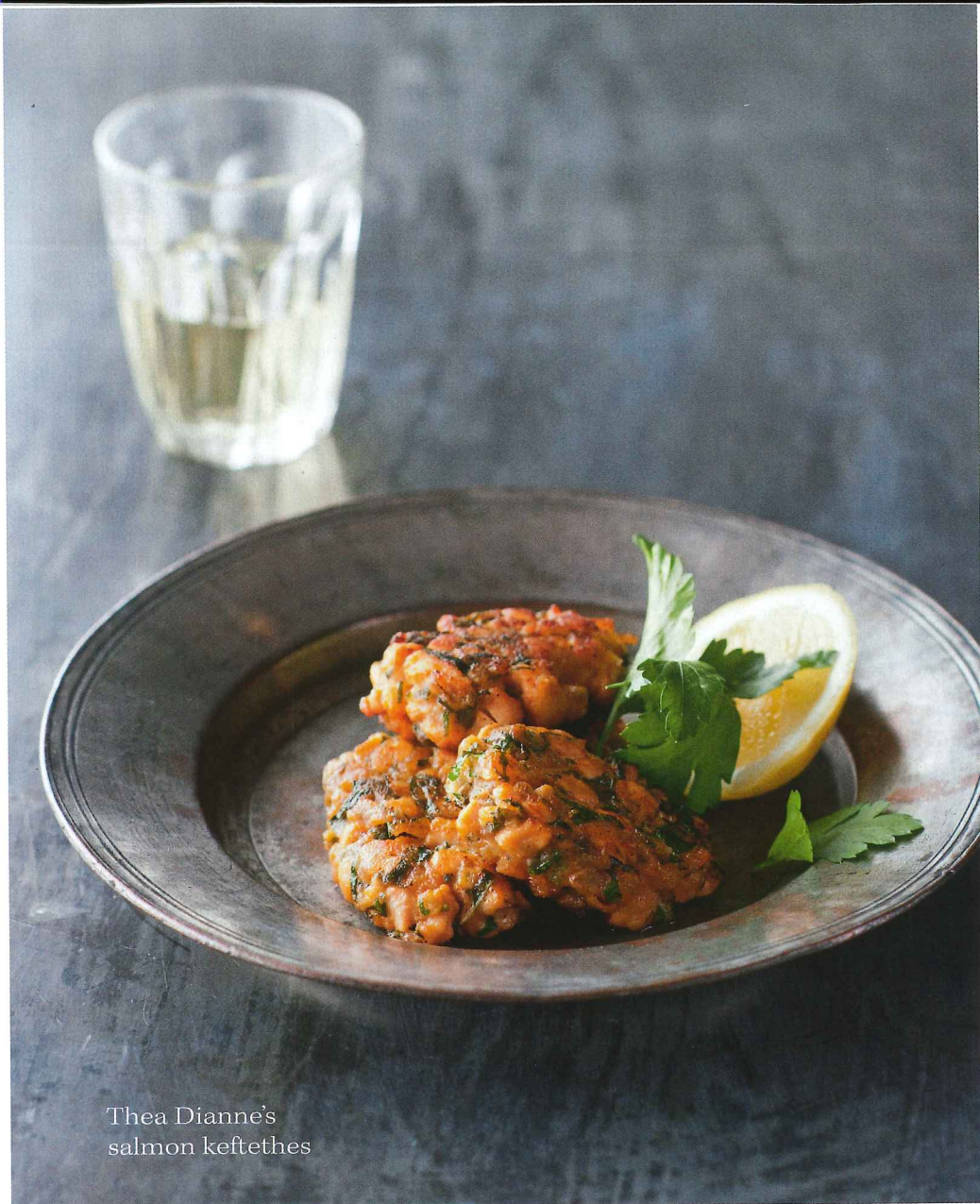
Fish is often wrapped in baking paper, foil, leaves or even bark to help protect its delicate flesh and keep it moist while it steams in its own juices. When diners open the parcels at the table, all the delicious aromas are released. Eugenio Riva often served fish cooked this way at the popular Ristorante Riva. If you let the vegetables cool completely first, you can wrap the parcels a few hours ahead of time and leave them in the fridge ready to go – just remove them from the fridge about 20 minutes before cooking so they come to room temperature.

Serves 6 (pictured p127)

- 1 large eggplant
- Large pinch of saffron threads
- 1 cup (250ml) extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 Spanish onion, finely diced
- 1 large yellow capsicum, finely diced
- 1 large red capsicum, finely diced
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 3 zucchini, finely diced
- 6 goldband snapper fillets (180gm each), skin on and pin-boned
- 12 sprigs thyme
- 3 tbsp strained lemon juice
- Crusty bread, for serving

- 1 Preheat the oven to 200C (fan-forced). Halve the eggplant and scoop out most of the flesh (discard), leaving about 1cm of flesh on the skin. Chop the skin into small dice.
- 2 Soak the saffron in 1 tsp of hot water for 5 minutes, then combine with the oil. Heat a large frying pan over high heat and add the saffron oil. When hot, add the onion and stir for 1 minute. Add the capsicum and garlic and stir for a further minute, then add the eggplant and a generous amount of salt and stir for 3 minutes. Reduce the heat to medium, add the zucchini and stir for a further 3 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat and set it aside.
- 3 Cut 6 sheets of foil, each large enough to wrap one piece of fish completely. Cut 6 sheets of baking paper, each slightly longer than the sheets of foil. Lay the foil pieces on a work surface, shiny-side up, then top each one with a sheet of baking paper.
- 4 Check the fish skin for any remaining scales, then sprinkle generously with salt and pepper on each side. Place a piece of fish on each sheet of baking paper, skin-side down. Top with the vegetable mixture, add 2 sprigs of thyme and drizzle with lemon juice. Fold the two long sides of the paper and foil over in a couple of folds above the fish, without pushing it against the fish, then fold the ends over to form a secure package so that the steam and juices can't escape.
- 5 Place the parcels on a baking tray and cook for 15-20 minutes, depending on the thickness of the fillets, until the flesh flakes easily when tested with a fork.
- 6 Place the parcels on plates for diners to open at the table. Serve with crusty bread to soak up the juices.>





Thea Dianne's salmon keftethes

### Thea Dianne's salmon keftethes

Recipe by Jonathan Barthelmess

Jonathan Barthelmess grew up in a family of cooks and restaurateurs. He was first recognised at Coast and Manly Pavilion for his Italian-inspired cooking, but has since returned to his roots, opening Greek restaurant The Apollo. At home he sometimes cooks this seafood version of the classic Greek meatballs, keftethes, which he learnt from his aunt Dianne. The easiest way to get the cooking time right is to cook a test one first; the trick is to have the oil hot enough to seal the patties and give them a good crust, but not so hot that the outside burns before the inside cooks. These make great finger food for a cocktail party.

Serves 6

100 ml extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for pan-frying

- 1 large brown onion, finely diced
  - 1 tsp each ground cumin, ground cinnamon and ground nutmeg
  - 2 large vine-ripened tomatoes, peeled, seeded and finely diced, juice reserved
  - 1 tbsp tomato paste
  - 1 salmon fillet (500gm), skin off, pin-boned and finely diced
- Bunch flat-leaf parsley, leaves picked and very finely chopped, plus extra leaves for garnishing

- Bunch mint, leaves very finely chopped
- 2 tbsp plain flour, plus extra for rolling
- Freshly ground white pepper, to taste
- Lemon cheeks, for serving

- 1 Heat a frying pan over low heat and add the oil. When hot, add the onion and cook for 5-10 minutes, until it starts to caramelise. Remove from heat and stir through the cumin, cinnamon and nutmeg. Set aside to cool.
- 2 Combine the tomato juice with ½ cup (125ml) of water and mix in the tomato paste until smooth. Combine this with the onion, diced tomato, salmon, parsley, mint and flour. Beat well using a wooden spoon until the mixture becomes pasty and sticks together. Add salt flakes and white pepper to taste.
- 3 Form 4cm balls from the mixture, flatten into patties and coat in the extra flour.
- 4 Heat a frying pan over medium heat and add the oil for pan-frying. When hot, cook the patties for about 2-3 minutes each side, until just cooked through.
- 5 Serve garnished with extra parsley leaves, with lemon cheeks.

### Escabeche

Recipe by Christine Manfield

Escabeche is a Spanish dish of fried fish covered in a hot vinegar marinade and typically served cold. Variations of the dish are popular in Italy, Portugal, France, North Africa, South America and the Philippines. Originally, this technique was used to preserve the fish, which would have had a much stronger flavour than Christine Manfield's modern version here. The fish can be eaten at room temperature as soon as the marinade has cooled down, but it can also be kept refrigerated for up to three days.

Serves 4 as an entrée

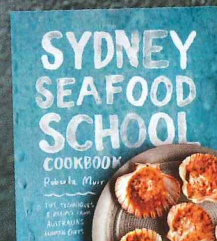
- 1 tsp cumin seeds
- 2 tbsp plain flour
- ½ tsp chilli powder
- 12 small red mullet fillets, skin on and pin-boned
- 300 ml extra-virgin olive oil
- 8 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- ½ cup (125ml) red wine vinegar
- 2 fresh bay leaves
- 2 sprigs thyme
- 1 small red chilli, thinly sliced
- 1 tsp Spanish unsmoked sweet paprika
- Coriander, dill, mint, flat-leaf parsley and oregano leaves, roughly chopped, for serving
- Crusty bread, for serving

- 1 Place the cumin seeds in a small frying pan (without any oil) and cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, until fragrant. Watch them closely as they burn quickly. Grind the roasted cumin seeds to a powder using a mortar and pestle or spice grinder, then set aside.
  - 2 Combine the flour, chilli powder and 2 tsp salt flakes. Check the fish for any remaining scales, then dust it lightly in the flour mixture, shaking off any excess.
  - 3 Heat a frying pan and add 100ml of the oil. When hot, fry the fish in small batches for 2-3 minutes, until golden and cooked through. Place the cooked fish in a single layer in a small non-reactive dish.
  - 4 Combine the garlic, vinegar, bay leaves, thyme, sliced chilli, paprika, cumin, ½ tsp freshly ground black pepper and remaining oil in a saucepan and carefully heat over medium heat until almost boiling.
  - 5 Remove the hot marinade from the heat and pour it over the fish. Cover with foil and leave to marinate for 1 hour at room temperature.
  - 6 Remove the fish from the marinade and place on a serving plate. Toss the herbs with enough of the marinating liquid to coat them.
  - 7 Serve the fish with the herbs sprinkled over the top and crusty bread on the side.\*
- For more recipes visit [gourmettraveller.com.au](http://gourmettraveller.com.au).

Originally, escabeche was a technique used to preserve fish, which would have had a much **STRONGER FLAVOUR** than Christine Manfield's modern version here.



Escabeche



Sydney Seafood School Cookbook (\$49.99, hbk) by Roberta Muir is published by Penguin Lantern. These recipes have been reproduced with minor GT style changes.