

## THE WORTH OF FISH AS A FOOD.

BY A FAMILY DOCTOR.



OMEWHAT crude and confused notions prevail as to the value of fish as food, and as to its digestibility, and the place it should occupy in our dietary scale.

I have the audacity to believe that, if my present paper be read and carefully considered, some of

these may be removed, and the householder enabled to see things in a clearer light. The eating or not eating of fish can hardly be termed a matter of taste; indeed, I do not remember ever hearing any one avowing a positive dislike to fish in general. Of butchers' meat we have but few changes—beef, mutton, and pork; and these include veal, lamb, and sucking-pig, and even kidney, liver, tripe, and sweet-breads. But of fish or fishes we have an infinite variety, so that if a person does not affect one sort he can turn and sound the praises of another.

Now, many different ways of dividing and treating my subject suggest themselves to me, and I think I shall best consult the interest of my readers if I consider it under several heads:—

1. *Fish: its Chemical Composition.*—Briefly speaking, it contains less nitrogenous matter than does flesh. It also contains more water by weight than meat. We might therefore say, without fear of serious contradiction, that fish has not the same sustaining and staying power that beef possesses, and that it is not so well calculated to build up bone and muscle. If this statement were true to the very core, should we not expect to find a very great difference between, say, a butcher's foreman and a fisherman, in both hardiness and physique? But is there? I think not. Both are strong, we admit. Both get plenty of fresh air, because both live and work a good deal out of doors—the butcher's man in his cart, the fisherman in his boat. The former is more full of blood, perhaps even of muscle, and he is florid; the latter is brown and hard; he may not weigh so much for his inches, but his tendons are more wiry, and often his flesh is harder. Moreover, he is less nervous, he is bolder, and can "stay" better. He is less liable, also, to colds and chest complaints, and will weather inflammations which soon lay the butcher's foreman under the sod. For it is well known that beef-fed, florid men, are subject to inflammatory complaints of the most acute order. They are like houses built of dry old wood—when they do catch fire they quickly go.

I incline to the opinion, therefore, that although fish, generally speaking, contains less nutrition, bulk for bulk, it possesses quite enough for the maintenance of a healthy, hardy state of body. As fish contains a larger quantity of water, more of it can, and may, be eaten with safety at times than of meat, and is less likely to be followed by feelings of dulness and drowsiness, which necessitate the use of stimulants or strong tea to banish.

Moreover, fish contains a considerable amount of phosphorus, and we all know—though we cannot quite explain the reason—that this is a nerve tonic. Is it wrong to say, therefore, that fish, on the whole, can hold its own against meat?

But it must not be supposed that I am advocating an exclusively fish diet. No; changes are beneficial, and nature often craves for meat; but at the same time the people of these islands eat too little of fish food, and far too much of meat, for the coolness of their blood and calmness of their nerves. And, on the other hand, I do not need to be told that while fish is the staple of people in seaside villages, butchers thrive well enough there also.

II. *Different Kinds of Fish and their Digestibility.*—A young man, or an old man either, if his gastric faculties be up to par, can eat almost any kind of fish without disagreeable after-effects. Those, however, who are at all subject to indigestion, or to bilious attacks, should be careful in the selection of fish for the table. They ought, as a rule, to eat but sparingly of, or give a wide berth altogether to, oleaginous fishes, including fresh herrings, mackerel, plaice, salmon, eels, &c.

There is a fish up in the Arctic regions called the "candle" fish, which is so fat that, if a wick is run through it, it may be burned as a light; yet it is eaten with relish by the Esquimaux. From this we simply gather the lesson that the oily fishes, such as those already named, may often be eaten in cold wintry weather with impunity by even the delicate. But your wholesome summer fishes are the cod, the whiting, the turbot, the sole, the haddock, and a variety of others: bearing in mind, however, that as a rule sea-fish are more nutritious and wholesome than those whose habitation is in streams and lakes—always excepting lake trout.

*Shell-fish.*—There are many nutritious and delicious varieties of these, including the oyster, the lobster, the cray-fish, the crab, the mussel, the cockle, the whelk, periwinkle, limpet, and shrimp or prawn. The oyster naturally, as it seems to us, heads the list. He is king of shell-fish, although a very quiet king, for having as a juvenile sown his wild oats, he settles down for life, and when caught and brought to table makes no apparent objection to being swallowed alive. Moreover, when thus partaken of, the oyster, like a morsel of dainty cheese, possesses the obliging faculty of aiding his own digestion.

Next in point of value comes the lobster. This shell-fish is all too delicious at times, and probably has to account for many a fit of indigestion, especially if served up in the form of Mayonnaise. Strange to say that for me and for many others the crab has even greater charms than the lobster. It has, if properly cooked, and served piquantly, a more decided flavour, and it is less liable to be followed by disagreeable results.

Whelks, limpets, periwinkles, &c., are generally

eaten as tit-bits, and they never fail to do good where they agree.

Mussels are now greatly used—more, perhaps, in France than in England, for in that volatile land cooking has really become a fine art. Mussels are blamed sometimes for being poisonous; but it is a well-known fact that many shell-fish affect for a time the health of those who make too hearty a meal of them, and I do not think in this respect the mussel is a whit more guilty than the periwinkle.

One would think that the mussels which grew on the copper bottom of a ship might be unwholesome. It seems this is not the case, however. The bottom of an old flagship was being cleaned the other day; boat-loads of mussels were taken away by shore-men, but no case of poisoning was reported. About fifty marines partook freely of them also, and out of this number one only was taken ill. Probably he was a man of curious idiosyncrasy. But should not mussels have “a close time,” as well as oysters? I think any one is safe enough who eats mussels in the months that have no *r* in them—May, June, July, and August.

Shrimps and prawns are very delicious and appetising.

III. *Cured Fish*.—There are a great many different plans adopted for curing fish, and I cannot at the present moment call to mind any method that is unwholesome. Indeed, for the most part, the curing of fish renders it more appetising, palatable, and none the less easy of digestion.

Many a poor man who spends a shilling or two on a Saturday night upon stringy, unwholesome meat, might dine far better and more cheaply on the Sunday upon salt herring and mealy potatoes, boiled in their jackets. The herring is king of the sea, after all—not because he is said to choke the whale; he is far better employed when suffering himself to be landed in the fisherman's net. Even a red herring is a treat at times; and can salmon itself surpass in flavour a well-cured kipper?

We have kippered salmon, also, and kippered mackerel, and dog-fish, all good, all wholesome, though all somewhat salt. Being so, they make one thirsty afterwards. The best drink to counteract this is oatmeal and water, with a squeeze of lemon-juice.

Dried fish and the “spaldings” of Scotland are both excellent in their way.

Smoked sprats are delightful, and ought to be greater favourites than they are.

Finnan haddocks—the real Scotch—are beyond all praise. It is well to know, however, that many dried “yellow haddocks” are offered for sale in the markets, that are cured by a chemical process, being salted, dyed with turmeric, and rubbed over with some pyrogenous compound to give them a smoky flavour.

Some fish “tin” well, others do not. If I were reduced to a state of famine, and had nothing else within reach except tinned oysters, I *might* taste and swallow one or two; but a tin of salmon, put up by a

respectable company, who do not dye the fish and swamp it in olive oil, will make a dinner with potatoes and greens which no hungry man would despise.

Sardines are delicious and wholesome, when, mind you, they really are sardines, and not young pilchards or herring-tails.

Anchovies are also good, and far from indigestible.

IV. *The Cooking of Fish*.—Well, to begin with, the oyster requires no cooking at all, nor will it admit of any without destruction of its peptic properties. Whether in *pâté* or in pie, it should only be warmed.

The boiling of fish is a great art. It is one to which I cannot pretend to have attained, so I dare not attempt to teach it. It seems to me, however, that the faults to be found at table with boiled fish are usually two: first, it may be overdone; and secondly, it may have been cooked in too much water, or in some way—the cook herself could tell you—so as to extract the most nutritious part of it, and thus mere juiceless fibres come before you.

Broiled fish is not so digestible, but it would be easy to mention a score of sorts that are very appetising and delicious when so served.

As to herrings, fry them when fresh, boil them when salt, toast a bloater, broil a kipper, and hang a red herring before the fire.

By the way, the roe of the cod is not much used in this country. Nicely broiled and eaten cold for breakfast it is a very excellent dish indeed.

V. *The Time to Eat Fish*.—I do not allude to the time of year—all fish, of course, are to be eaten when in season only—but the time of day. This is a matter of greater moment than may at first appear.

Well, then, provided you did not eat too heartily of supper the night before, for breakfast you may have almost any kind of dried fish, or even fresh fish broiled. If he has enjoyed a good night's rest, even a dyspeptic might enjoy kippered herrings or a salmon steak, with boiled eggs to follow, for breakfast. This would do him more good, and be more easily digested, than the much be-praised devilled kidney.

Finnan haddock is quite a breakfast dish. Fish for dinner comes in well before meat, but a fish dinner pure and simple is better still.

For supper I do not advise either boiled or fried fish, but oysters may be taken sparingly, or lobster or crab, if the evening still be young. Mussels or cockles might be taken as a forenoon snack.

Shrimps and prawns ought, in my opinion, to be eaten before meals, say a quarter of an hour before. They thus act as a tonic, and aid to digestion.

I may be here allowed to say, parenthetically, that an inch or two of tasty cheese, eaten about five minutes before a meal, will do far more good than cheese and “green meat” after a meal.

VI. *What should one Drink with Fish?*—I put the question in a paragraph because I have been often asked it. Fish contains more water than meat; and for this reason, and many others, I say that the less to drink one has with a fish dinner the better.

