

BEYOND FISH AND CHIPS

FOR A THOUSAND YEARS LONDONERS HAVE BOUGHT
HADDOCK, OYSTERS, AND EELS AT BILLINGSGATE MARKET.
THEY STILL DO, REPORTS **RICHARD SCHWEID.**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES MERRELL



Red snapper on ice at
Billingsgate market. *Opposite: Vendor
Mick Jenrick selecting a live eel.*



A

5:30 IN THE MORNING,

I'm standing on a wet, cold concrete floor listening to Kevin Gratton rave about the cod tongues on the pile of crushed ice in front of us. He is the executive chef at Scott's, one of London's most venerable and popular fish restaurants. We're at Billingsgate, the city's great and ancient fish market, and the two-inch-long cod tongues just arrived on a plane from Aberdeen, Scotland.

"Look at the size of them—you can see how plump they are and they've got that lovely sheen," the thin, brown-haired 37-year-old chef observes, his mild manner shifting to intense enthusiasm. "These are going to be great! I'll sauté them very quickly with cèpes in a bordelaise sauce. We'll scrape out some bone marrow on some toast and put it on the side. These tongues look particularly good. You can tell they were just cut out of the animal and sent overnight. They're not lying flat, dull-looking; they've got a bold form to them, a nice shape, you can see how succulent and firm they're going to be."

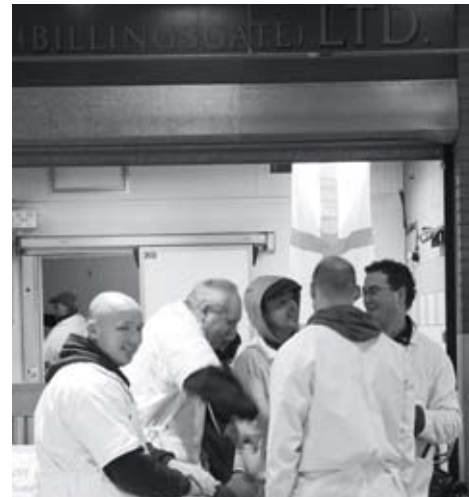
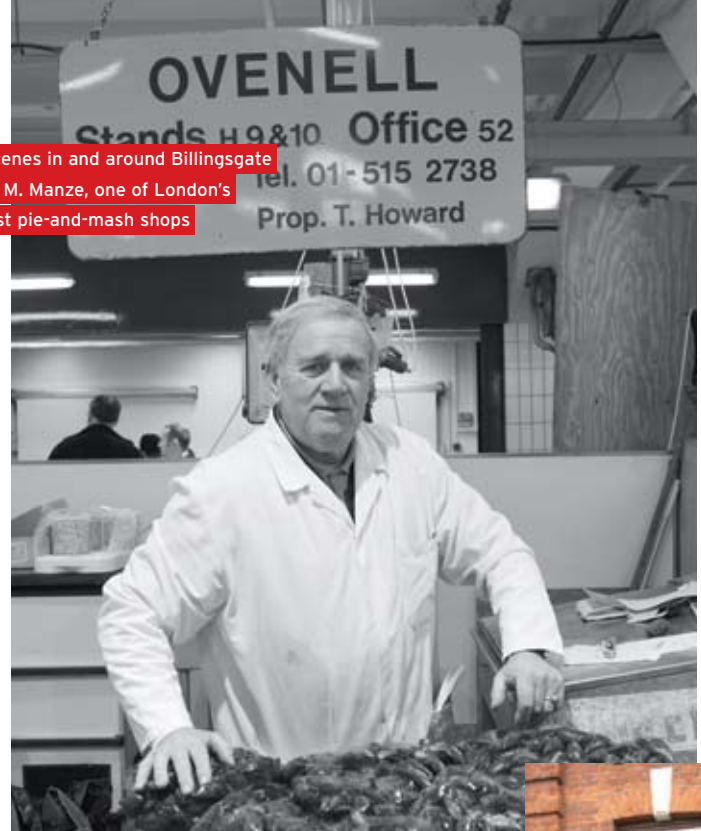
As he speaks I can see his breath in front of his face. I am sleep-deprived—having traveled in the predawn darkness from central London out here to the Docklands, next to Canary Wharf—and I'm trying to imagine what a cod tongue tastes like. I have eaten cod cheeks, battered cod, cod balls, cod paste, and salt cod, but I've never met with cod tongues. Until now. Gratton and Tim Hughes, Scott's chef director, have kindly offered to show me around Billingsgate. Most days their fish supplier does the shopping, but a few times a year they like to visit the market, which is open Tuesday through Saturday from 5 to 8 A.M. The cod tongues have arrested our progress down the aisles.

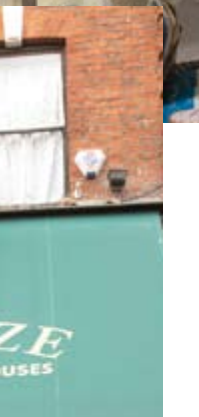
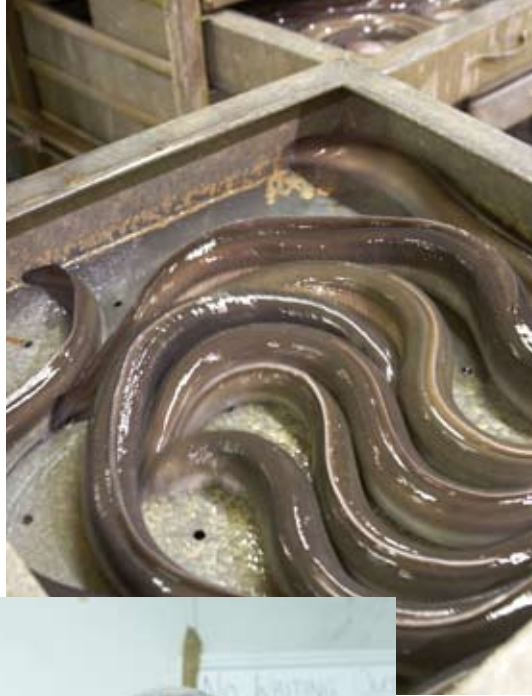
Around us action swirls through the brightly lit, high-roofed hall with a not unpleasant fish smell in the air. It is organized chaos: bells ringing, voices shouting, someone cursing loudly, a steady traffic of handcarts piled high with plastic boxes of fish being pushed through the narrow aisles by men in long white lab coats, many with stocking caps. Standing idly for too long can get a person bumped rudely out of the way. It's damp and cold outside, and barely warmer in here. Just another winter's day at the market, not much different from any other in Billingsgate's 1,000-year history. Londoners, well-off and otherwise, have eaten fish from the market since Roman times.

Seafood has always occupied a central place on Britain's dinner tables, and London has long supported a thriving fish market, as diverse today as ever. While independent wholesalers play a bigger role than in the past, much of the fish served in the city continues to come from Billingsgate.

It is thought that the market was originally called Beling's Gate after a sixth-century Saxon named Beling, who owned the wharf

Scenes in and around Billingsgate
and at M. Manze, one of London's
oldest pie-and-mash shops





FROM MARKET TO TABLE

In early-20th-century London numerous shops sold fish and chips or eel pies, both staples of the local diet. Eel consumption has declined steeply along with the number of pie-and-mash shops, which were never, to be fair, places for haute cuisine. And the still ubiquitous fish and chips often use frozen fillets. But a few gems do remain. At the higher end, London has always had its share of first-rate seafood places, and thanks to recent upgrades at some aging standbys, the quality is as high as ever. A short list offers the best of both worlds. —GUY DIMOND

BENTLEY'S OYSTER BAR & GRILL

On first impression Bentley's looks old-school, but this once-ailing stalwart—nearly a century old—has been given new life by chef-restaurateur Richard Corrigan. The menu is traditional without being stuffy: The lobster linguine and the fish soup are exemplary. The upstairs dining room is arguably a bit stiff, but the ground-floor oyster bar keeps things lively. *Dinner, \$280. At 11–15 Swallow St., Piccadilly Circus; 44-207/734-4736; bentleys.org.*

GEALES

For much of its history (at the same location since World War II), Geales was a proper, old-fashioned “chippie.” The new owners have raised the stakes, turning it into a smart fish restaurant with a traditional bent. You can still get haddock and chips, but you'll also find whole dressed crab or Duchy of Cornwall oysters from the restaurant's own oyster beds. *Dinner, \$100. At 2 Farmer St., Notting Hill; 44-207/727-7528; geales.com.*

J SHEEKEY

A lesser-known sibling of the celebrity-magnet Ivy restaurant, J Sheekey is better in many ways, not least because it's easier to book a table. Though it dates back to 1896, the current incarnation is more classical than antique in both look and menu. Sautéed skate cheeks might be followed by halibut, while puddings include public school favorites such as spotted dick. The Covent Garden location usually ensures a steady flow of off-duty thespians. *Dinner, \$160. At 28–32 St. Martin's Ct., Leicester Sq.; 44-207/240-2565; j-sheekey.co.uk.*

SCOTT'S

Lavishly refurbished in 2007, this grand and expensive fish restaurant immediately became the place to see and be seen among London's international superrich. The service is stately and the retro food appealing without being too challenging. Ask for a seat at the bar and savor the crustacea, but save room for seasonal desserts like summer

pudding with assorted berries. *Dinner, \$145. At 20 Mount St., Mayfair; 44-207/495-7309; scotts-restaurant.com.*

SWEETINGS

Opened in 1889, this fish ordinary (as it would have been called then) has barely changed. The white tiles, barstools, shared tables, and old-fashioned plates of fried or steamed seafood with oddities such as gulls eggs—when in season—hark back to an era when city gents were gentlemen and bowler hats were worn outside. *Lunch, \$65. At 39 Queen Victoria St., Bank, City of London; 44-207/248-3062.*

TOM'S PLACE

Just opened in February, this fish-and-chips shop is run by Michelin-starred chef Tom Aikens, who uses only sustainably caught seafood, so there's no Atlantic cod or endangered tuna. It's a funky-looking little place with dot-matrix display boards and bright colors. Reflecting the exclusive location, prices are very high by fish-and-chips standards. *Dinner, \$60. At 1 Cale St., Chelsea; 44-207/351-1806; tomsplace.org.uk*

WRIGHT BROTHERS OYSTER & PORTER HOUSE

Located on the edge of Borough Market, Wright Brothers is a good place to pop in to if you're visiting London's prime destination for food lovers. The oysters might be French, Scottish, or American, but they're always in their prime because Wright Brothers is also one of the city's main distributors of the mollusks. *Dinner, \$96. At 11 Stoney St., Borough Market; 44-207/ 403-9554; wrightbros.eu.com.*

in the heart of the old city, just downriver from where London Bridge is today. Before the Saxons, the Romans had a quay and a bridge in the same spot in their city of Londinium. The first known written reference to Billingsgate appears in customs regulations decreed in A.D. 870 by one King Aethelred. A 1279 charter issued by Edward I mentions the fish market.

These days fish is popular for its health benefits (mercury concerns notwithstanding). In 1400, when King Henry IV granted Billingsgate a charter to collect tolls and customs, the consumption of fish was mandated by the Church. Seafood was a critical part of the city's diet in the Middle Ages, when more than a third of days on the religious calendar were meatless. This, plus the fact that fish was cheaper than meat, meant it was a perennially important component of what people put on their tables.

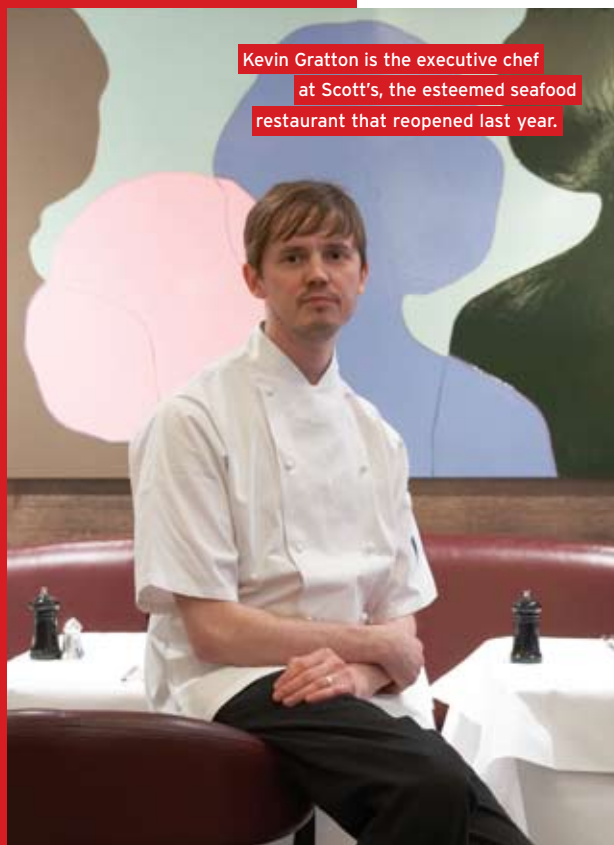
The crowded aisles at Billingsgate are nothing new. In 1699 an act of Parliament recognized it as London's official fish market and opened it to the public. The change was designed to end the control exercised by a powerful clique of wholesalers who were driving up prices. It wasn't until the mid-1800s that a building was constructed to house Billingsgate. Before then it had consisted of stalls gathered around the wharf. Crowds at the market could grow dangerously large, and occasionally things got out of hand. On August 6, 1802, the *Times* reported: “Yesterday being the first day of oyster season, Billingsgate market was thronged with people at a very early hour of the morning. So eager were they to gain admission to the oyster boats that many fell into the Thames, and one poor woman was unfortunately drowned.”

The shouting and swearing have a long history, too. Indeed, “billingsgate” became a term for coarse and abusive language.

The early-17th-century anonymous play *King Leir* (believed to have inspired Shakespeare's masterwork) includes the line, “...as bad a tongue, if it be set on, as any oyster wife at Billingsgate hath.”

Over the centuries, despite the unruly crowds and foul-mouthed fishwives, the market continued to feed London. In his 1856 volume, *The Food of London*, George Dodd wrote of Billingsgate: “It has seen out the Normans and the Plantagenets, the Lancasters and the Yorkists, the Tudors and the Stuarts, the Orangists and the Georges; it has supplied fish to all of them. It has witnessed great fires, great plagues...river pageants, Tower executions, City insurrections, custom-houses new and old, London Bridge with houses and without; and yet there it is still. Beling's Gate supplied the old city in 1055, as Billingsgate now supplies the monster metropolis in 1855.”

Some 150 years on, the same holds true for today's monster metropolis, even though in 1982 the market moved from its traditional home in a high-ceilinged, brick building with colonnades near London Bridge. (Architect Richard Rogers refurbished the old building, which is now a venue for special events.) At its current **CONTINUED ON PAGE 000 »**



Kevin Gratton is the executive chef at Scott's, the esteemed seafood restaurant that reopened last year.



Cod tongues bordelaise with sautéed cèpes—served with bone marrow and toast—is a signature dish at Scott's.

BEYOND FISH AND CHIPS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 000 »

location, Billingsgate's business has remained brisk. Last year its nearly 50 vendors did an estimated \$250 million in sales. A few decades ago the most important clients were fishmongers who sold to the public from their shops. But supermarket chains have virtually wiped out the small sellers, and restaurants now account for the lion's share of the business at Billingsgate.

Kevin Gratton and Tim Hughes are associates in Caprice Holdings, which owns eight London restaurants and buys large quantities of fish from Billingsgate. When Caprice acquired Scott's a couple of years ago, the two chefs spent a million dollars redesigning the kitchen. Scott's is said to date back to 1851, making it the second-oldest restaurant in England. The new owners incorporated the clean lines of the prior Scott's into a gleaming, modern setting with dark oak paneling and white linen. The work of contemporary British artists lines the walls. Cod tongues were on the menu the night the restaurant reopened in late 2006, and Gratton considers them one of his kitchen's signature dishes.

Moving through the aisles at Billingsgate with Hughes and Gratton, we stop to greet stallholders and examine their offerings, a staggering variety of fish—some 200 species, according to market figures. The two chefs run their fingers along the sides of a Dover sole, turn over a turbot, bring a sea bream to the nose, admire some native oysters from West Mersea. Gratton estimates that a third of the seafood served at Scott's comes from here.

High-end restaurants aren't the only big buyers at Billingsgate. There are scores of pie-and-mash shops that call on vendors such

as Mick Jenrick, known as the king of London eel dealers. Across the aisle from Jenrick's stall is a bank of metal drawers, each full of eels slithering around in cold water, some a yard long. Jenrick sells his fresh eels chopped into ready-to-stew pieces.

Many of London's pie-and-mash shops date from before World War II. They often have a 19th-century decor, with long wooden tables that diners share and tilework on the walls. A five-pound note buys a plate heaped with mashed potatoes and stewed eels, covered in a parsley-and-flour gravy called liquor. The customer tops it all off with plain or hot vinegar to taste. Eel is a rich, tasty fish. Served with potatoes and liquor, it makes for a meal that some find a bit heavy. Nevertheless, the lunchtime lines at pie-and-mash shops are often out the door. M. Manze's Eel and Pie House, located next to the Chapel Street Market, serves about 250 portions of eel a week, according to the 40-year-old owner, Timmy Nicholls, who buys his eels from Jenrick.

"I go to Billingsgate every Tuesday and Mick shows me what he's got," says Nicholls. "Everything is of a proper quality—you can count on it. I sell lots of stewed eels. These days everything you see is mass-produced. Pie and mash is the closest you'll come to home cooking, and Billingsgate is critical to that."

Pie-and-mash shops are direct descendants of the costermongers, food vendors of Victorian London whose sidewalk carts lined the streets. In the mid-19th century, a bracing cup of warm stewed eels was cheap and filling. In addition to eel, the costermongers sold cockles, mussels, boiled whelks, pickled salmon, smoked herring, oysters, lobsters, and crabs. They would come to Billingsgate after the big wholesalers and fish shops had made their purchases. Stallholders wanted to **CONTINUED ON PAGE 000 »**

BEYOND FISH AND CHIPS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 000 »

unload what they had left, and costermongers could make the little money they had to invest in the day's stocks go further.

"London, from one end to the other, teems and steams with eels," wrote C. David Badham in his 1854 book *Prose Halieutics or Ancient and Modern Fish Tattle*. "For one halfpenny a man of the million may fill his stomach with six or seven long pieces, and wash them down in the glutinous liquor in which they have been stewed. 1,166,830 pounds, on an average, are bought from Billingsgate every year by itinerant salesmen, who cook and retail them on their different beats."

In the last few years Billingsgate has gone beyond the role of fish purveyor to that of fish promoter. An on-site school provides free classes in fish appreciation to children and offers a popular one-day class to adults on seafood preparation. Yet many believe the market is in danger of disappearing. When it moved to the Docklands in 1982, the area was an industrial wasteland. Today the market is surrounded by huge glass-and-steel office buildings, and neighboring Canary Wharf has some of London's most valuable real estate. It is widely believed that Billingsgate could soon be moved again or perhaps be folded into a centralized complex of food markets elsewhere in the city.

Uncertainty may cloud Billingsgate's future, but no one would guess it on a Saturday morning in 2008. More than 300 years after the market became public, it seems the whole world comes to Billingsgate. People arrive, walking from the tube stop at Canary Wharf, before the sun is up, pulling two-wheeled baskets. Or they

come by motorbike or car, their vehicles overflowing the parking lot. It's a veritable United Nations, a cash-only bazaar with the clientele speaking a babel of languages. Because the market is closed on Sunday and Monday, stallholders want to sell the last of the week's product. Prices are adjusted accordingly.

Fish are bought by the boxload, whole. No fish cleaning is allowed on the market floor. Many people come to stock their freezers; others come to buy all they can to take back to their neighborhoods and resell over the weekend, loading fish into large green garbage bags. Men from Pakistan in kameezes and from West Africa in dashikis, and from the Caribbean with dreadlocks wrapped in colorful crocheted caps, and women in saris, or turbans, or headscarves, or with spiked hair, piercings, and tattoos, all pack into the aisles at Billingsgate, gesturing, talking, weighing, and paying, all speaking a common tongue: fish.

It's the same language that has been spoken here for a thousand years. A vocabulary of taste, quality, and price, equally understood by all. The market's days may be numbered at its present location, but its role in the seafood traditions of London will carry on elsewhere. Wherever it is, will be Billingsgate.

And the cod tongues? Ah, the cod tongues. The day after accompanying Kevin Gratton through the market, I was one of 180 people who lunched at Scott's and among the eight who chose cod tongues for their first course, he told me later. It was a good choice—they were delicious. Cod tongues are more muscle than meat off the bone, and these had a solid, robust flavor, closer to sweetbreads than cod. The cèpes were rich in the bordelaise, and the creamy, tangy bone marrow on toast followed the mushrooms as naturally as night the day. ■