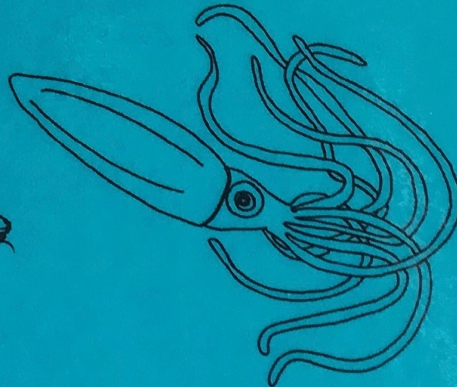
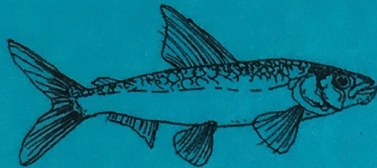
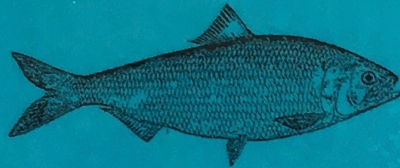
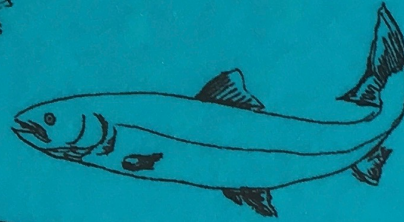
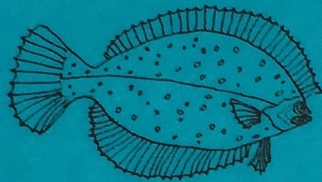
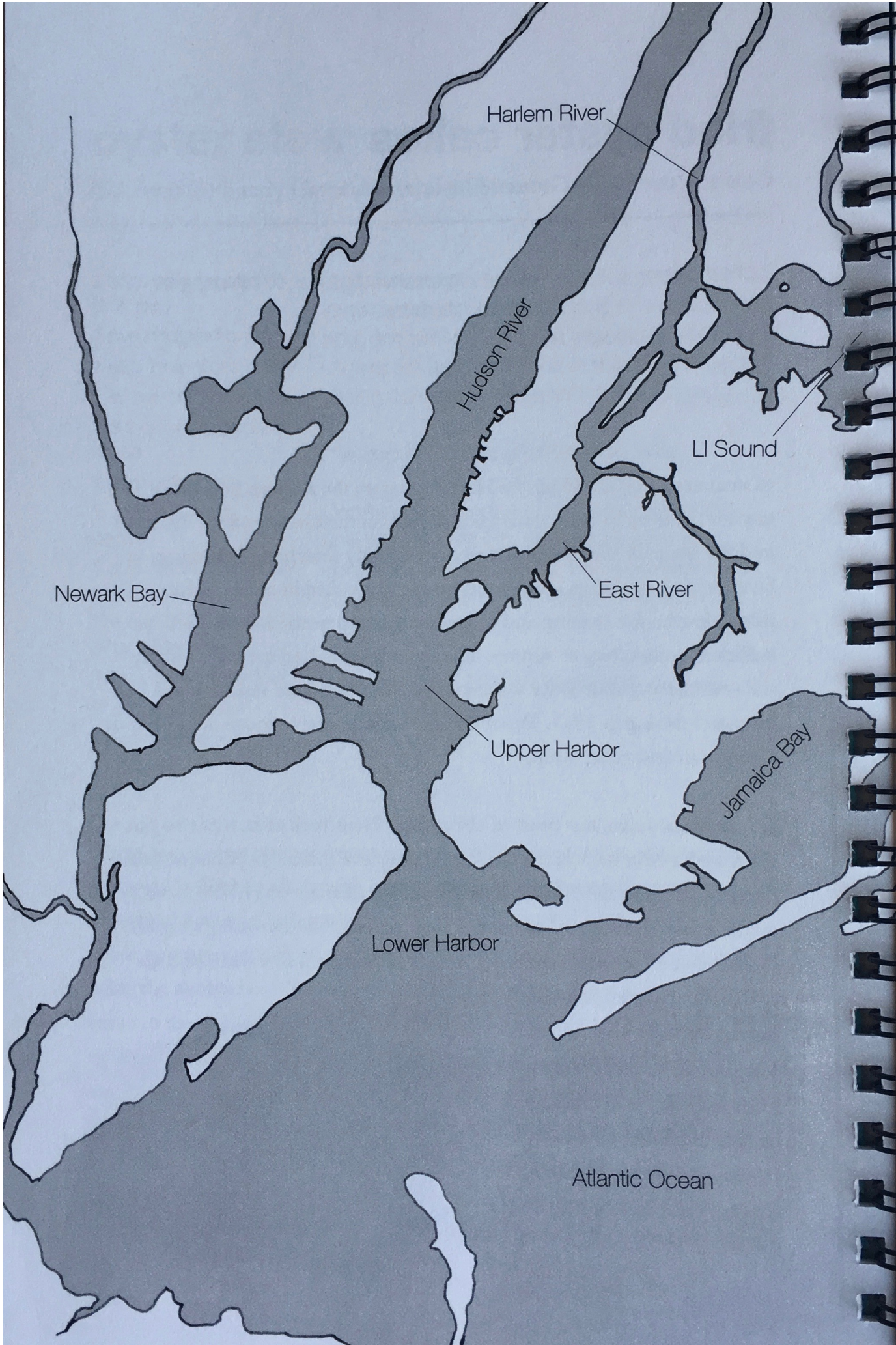


fish stories

COMMUNITY COOKBOOK





Harlem River

Hudson River

Newark Bay

LI Sound

East River

Upper Harbor

Jamaica Bay

Lower Harbor

Atlantic Ocean

A Brief History of the Fish on Our Plate

Carolyn J. Hall, August 2015

New York City dwellers have enjoyed eating all types of seafood long before the people living here were called “New Yorkers.” Local seafood was commonly on everyone’s plate because much of the most available and plentiful sources of protein came from the marine and river waters surrounding the islands that make up New York City. People fished for food year round. Shellfish were used for currency among indigenous tribes, fin fish were important for trade as early as the 16th century, and colonial markets were built around the local fishing industries.

Access to those fishy waters—the Atlantic Ocean, the Hudson and East Rivers, the Bronx and Harlem Rivers—used to be easy. Beaches, marshes, and rocky coasts had bordered our islands, but over time and with the development of our modern city, those blurred borders between land and water have become hard boundaries of walls, piers, and industrial waste pipes, often impeding our access and significantly altering both the terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.

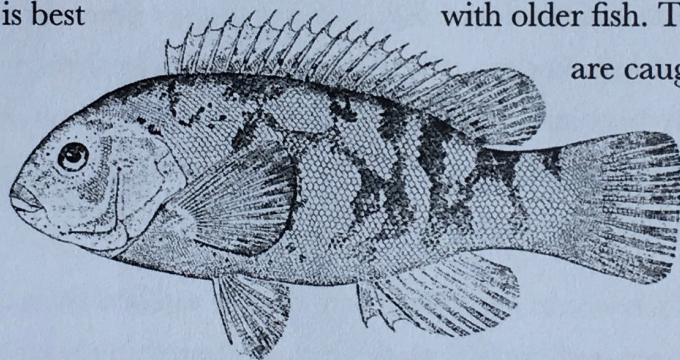
Today, New Yorkers can get almost any kind of seafood from anywhere in the world, prepared the way they want, at almost any hour of the day. Think of all the late night and 24 hour sushi places! Over time our seafood preferences have shifted—some choices remain favorites but others have disappeared from the menu. Can we relate those changes of preference to changes in our environment? To changes in human demand and technology? To cultural changes in the residents of this place at a certain time? The simple answer to all of these questions is yes. What is fascinating is to look back and track our habits through such changes and see which former fishy favorites are gone, forgotten, or making a comeback.

Most of the fish we find in New York City waters today were here back before the Dutch staked their claim on the very southern tip of Manhattan.

Among those, the edible fish that commonly come to mind are striped bass, oysters, bluefish, and flounder—all fine choices, with oysters and striped bass remaining favorites from way, way back. But there are others that were equally popular, or even more so, on the early New Yorker's dinner plate that fell out of favor including tautog, sheepshead, and shad. According to palates of the time, they were all very tasty. So why did they become less visible and slip off the menu?

The Dutch colonists loved tautog. As New Amsterdam lawyer and landowner Adriaen Van der Donck, for whom Yonkers is named, wrote in 1653, "When this kind of fish, which are plenty, is served upon the table, it goes before all others, for every person prefers it."¹ Tautog's popularity continued through the early 1800s and then suddenly it was no longer mentioned. Today, tautog, commonly called blackfish, is experiencing a resurgence. It can be found at Long Island fishery stands in city farmers markets and has also turned up in New York's Chinatown live tank markets—a recent favorite for the area. But tautog are slow growing and reproduction is best

if too many they have a mature and population susceptible overfished.



with older fish. Therefore, are caught before chance to spawn, the is to being Current

tautog fisheries are now regulated to prevent and manage overfishing. Perhaps because of a drop in their numbers in the early 1800s, they were harder to catch, or perhaps they were suddenly considered out of style by newer New Yorkers—replaced in popularity by salmon, lobster, oysters, and shad. For whatever reason, by the early 19th century, tautog were no longer a special feature on New York City tables.

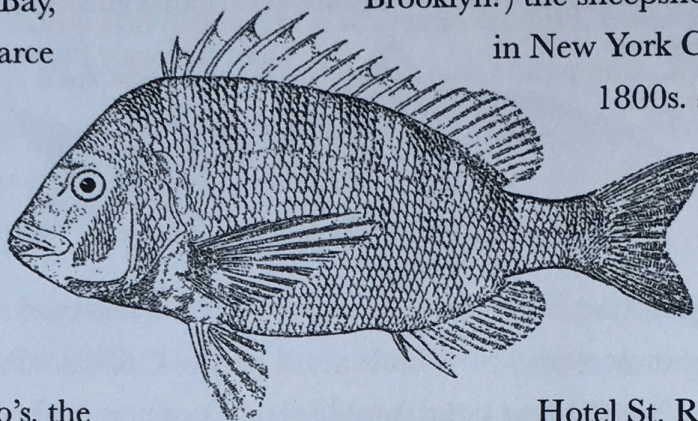
Van der Donck also called sheepshead "excellent" and in 1815, the ichthyologist and fish advocate Samuel L. Mitchell claimed "it is the most

1. Adriaen Van der Donck. Description of the New Netherlands. Originally published in 1653. Collections of the New-York Historical Society. Second Series. Volume 1, pp. 125-242. Printed for the Society, 1841.

esteemed of New York fishes, and fetches a higher price than any, excepting perhaps, fresh salmon and trout . . . Nothing, in the opinion of a New-Yorker, can exceed boiled sheep's head served up at sumptuous dinner."²

Yes, that's right, boiled sheephead—and broiled and filleted—on many a menu. Once very common in New York Harbor (have you heard of Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn?) the sheephead began becoming scarce in New York City waters

during the
the first
the 1900s
could
at such
society



1800s. Still, through
decade of
sheepshead
be found
high
restaurants

as Delmonico's, the Hotel St. Regis, and the Waldorf-Astoria. Then they disappeared. Some theorize that the destruction of oyster reefs by overfishing and pollution, oysters being a choice prey for sheephead, caused the fish to search elsewhere for food. Others think that the harbor waters may have cooled and the warm-water-preferring fish moved to more temperate climes. In either case, the sheephead was no longer a local and New Yorker diners moved on.

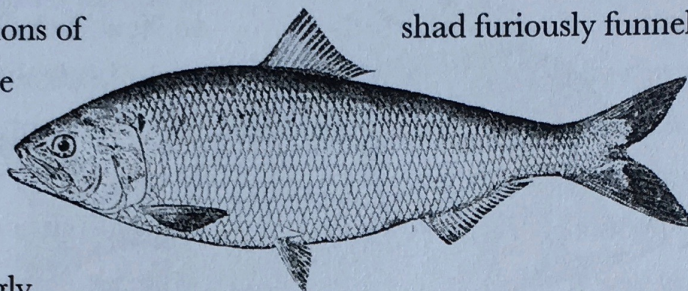
Unlike tautog and sheephead, American shad continuously pleased New Yorkers' palates from the indigenous Lenape tribes and early Dutch colonists to glamorous 20th century restaurant patrons. New York was famous for its sweet-flavored Hudson River shad. In fact, shad's Latin name, *sapidissima*, translates to "most delicious." Yet, at one point, shad was so plentiful, it was shunned by high society. As John Mylod, esteemed shad fisherman and protector of the Hudson River, wrote: "American shad was once so common on Manhattan menus each spring that polite society avoided this delicious fish because of its broad appeal to plebeian tastes."³ Shad wasn't snubbed for long and traditional planked shad, slow cooked on

2. Samuel L. Mitchell. *The Fishes of New-York*, described and arranged. Transactions of the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York. Volume 1, pp. 355-492. Van Winkle & Wiley, New York, 1815.
3. John Mylod. "Shad Fishing in the Hudson - It is time again for the ancient ritual of spring." *Seaport Magazine*. Volume XIII, No. 1, pp. 5-7. Spring 1979.

wood over an open fire, became the dish of the day.

Shad were relatively easy to catch. This accounted for their abundance on menus, but also contributed to their demise. Each spring shad migrate from the Atlantic Ocean through the Narrows between Brooklyn and Staten Island, into the upper Hudson Bay and East River, and finally reach the Hudson River and its miles of freshwater tributaries where they spawn.

Imagine millions of shad furiously funneling over 200 miles from the bay into smaller and smaller branches of the river making the increasingly shallow



waters a living stream of silver bodies. One could string a net across the river, watch shad swim into it, drag it to shore, and easily catch a thousand meals. This is exactly what was done year after year for over four centuries. Four hundred years of adult fish caught before they could spawn. And 400 years of growing numbers of fishermen who tried to make a living by feeding rapidly growing New York City.

At the height of the shad fisheries in the late 19th century, commercial shad fishermen lined 150 miles of New York Bay and the Hudson River—from Sandy Hook, New Jersey to Albany, New York. The Courtelyou Family fishery's records from the 1790s show they were catching an average of 16,000 shad per year from the Brooklyn side of the Narrows and during the high season an average of 3,000 per day. By the mid 1820s the average catch per year had dropped to 7,000 shad and only 700 per day. And in 1838, the last year of their records, they caught under 2,000 for the whole year. At this point they claimed that the "shad-fishery....is scarcely worth attending to" and "all the fisheries in New York harbor are nearly destroyed."⁴

Yet shad stayed on the menus. How?

4. Thomas F. De Voe. *The market assistant: containing a brief description of every article of human food sold in the public markets of the cities of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Brooklyn: including the various domestic and wild animals, poultry, game, fish, vegetables, fruits, &c, &c. With many curious incidents and anecdotes.* Pp. 203-204. Hurd and Houghton, New York, NY, 1867.

First there were attempts to keep people from fishing too much during spring spawning season; closing some days of the week, and limiting hours on others. But it was hard to keep an eye on the fishermen all along the river and the catches didn't improve much. Then, scientists developed artificial propagation to boost the numbers and millions of shad eggs were hatched in captivity to be delivered as young fish to the depleted river. For a while the regulation and propagation strategies worked. Fisheries in the late 1800s bounced back and shad stayed in the best restaurants. By 1895 over three thousand shad nets lined the harbor and the Hudson River catching up to 2 million shad annually, and another 2 million were caught in other New York waters—4 million local shad harvested in one year.

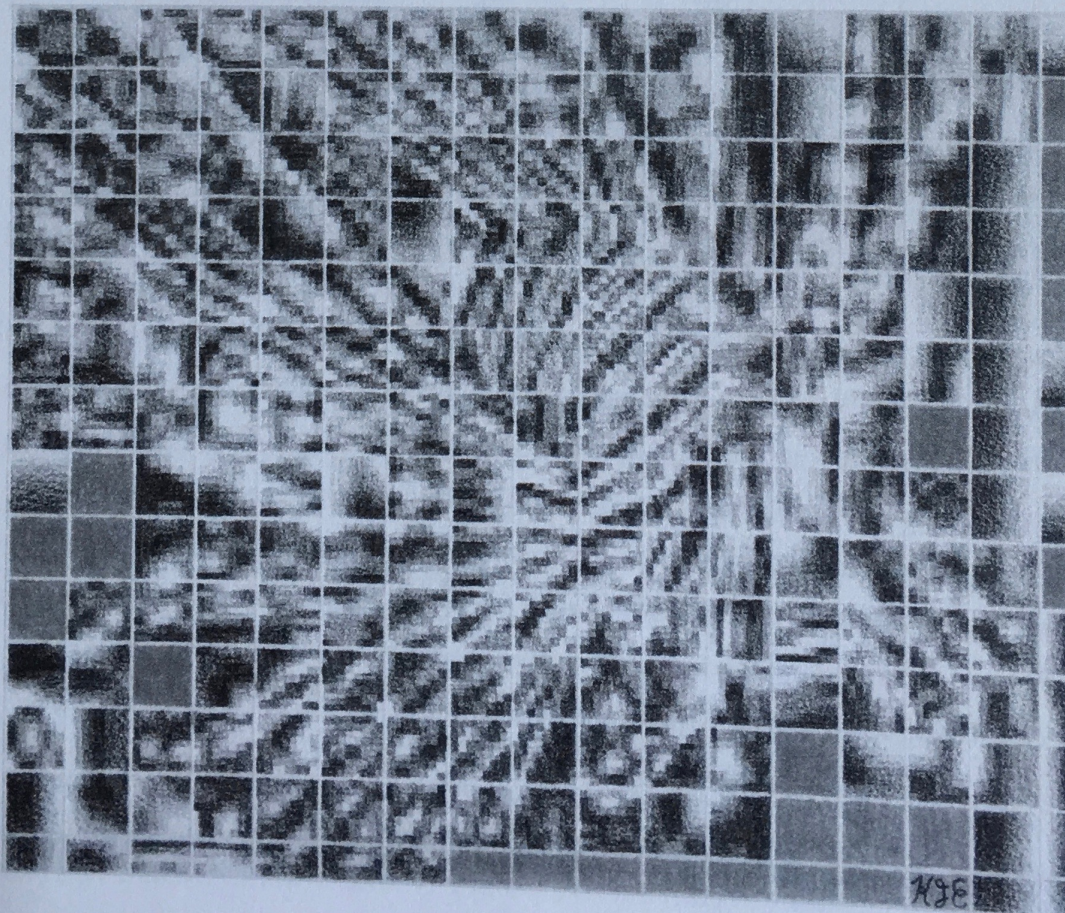
Eventually propagation couldn't keep up and the shad population began to fail again. By the 1920s, Hudson River shad were rarely on menus. During World War II, when much of the fishing industry was pressed into service for the U.S. Navy, shad recovered and the fisheries briefly rebounded. Yet taste for shad did not. Those eating out in the 1950s and 60s preferred shrimp, sole, lobster, salmon, crab, and swordfish—mostly imported seafood easily frozen or canned. Just as well for shad. Increased fishing pressure with new technologies developed during the war and major changes in river habitat, including dams that blocked their paths, seriously reduced the shad within 10 years and they never really came back. The fishery was completely closed in 2010 to try to allow the Hudson River shad a true chance to recover.

The story of shad is a common one. An abundant fish, valued for its flavor and nutrition, is at first a gift to small coastal communities. Those communities grow and more people need to be fed. Sustainable fishing for food is replaced by a profit driven industry. Demand drives the market, the fish population suffers, and humans invent a way to increase the harvest for their own gain with little consideration for the fish itself. Finally, when the fish is no longer easily found, and recognition dawns that harm done to the fish and the environment outweighs the benefits, an effort to understand, protect, and restore the fish begins.

So some fish, like the sheepshead, lose their prey or their environment

changes and they are gone—bound for greener pastures. Others, perhaps like the tautog, are forgotten in favor of imported fish that are more exciting and exotic but can reappear in the cuisine of a new wave of people. For those like the shad that were loved to near extinction, there is hope. There is potential to once again see them surge up the Hudson River en masse in search of a place to spawn, fulfilling their roles as predator and prey in the watery ecosystems that surround us. And maybe one day, with careful regulation and respect, we will be allowed the pleasure of rediscovering the taste of this historically delicious New York City fish alongside the new and old seafood delicacies we have grown to love.

Carolyn J. Hall, based in New York City, is a historical marine ecologist and an award winning professional contemporary dancer. She enjoys exploring ways to combine her two halves into new creative processes with fascinating people outside of her professions. She is currently an independent researcher for the New York Seascape Project of the Wildlife Conservation Society.



About Fish Stories

Fish Stories Community Cookbook is a collection of seafood recipes, local histories, stories and drawings alongside ecological information contributed by people who live and work in the Lower East Side of New York City—a former seaport and ever-changing neighborhood. The book was compiled and produced by the Oyster City Project for Paths to Pier 42 and distributed at the Paths to Pier 42 Fall Celebration on October 25, 2015.

Fish Stories Community Cookbook celebrates cultural histories tied to New York City's dynamic harbor and embraces the rituals of cooking and eating as central everyday spaces through which we can envision a sustainable future for our city's estuary. The name "Fish Stories" is meant to elicit playful contributions, and is a nod to Allan Sekula whose work questions the politics of maritime labor and the flow of global capital.

In the process of collecting recipes and stories from people in the Lower East Side, we held workshops or participated in public events to talk with people at the Hamilton-Madison House Senior Center; the fishing clinic at the Lower East Side Ecology Center; P.S. 184 Shuang Wen School Summer Carnival Fundraiser; the Loisaída Festival; 2 Bridges Kids! afterschool at Two Bridges Neighborhood Council; Family Day at the Vladeck Houses; Weinberg Center for Balanced Living at the Manny Cantor Center; a performance at Pier 42 by Arm of the Sea Theater; and the Mulberry Street Branch of the New York Public Library. All material was collected and compiled during the spring and summer of 2015.

Many thanks to all the partners and people who have generously participated!

—Meredith Drum, Rachel Stevens, Oyster City Project, October 2015