

Fabulous fish

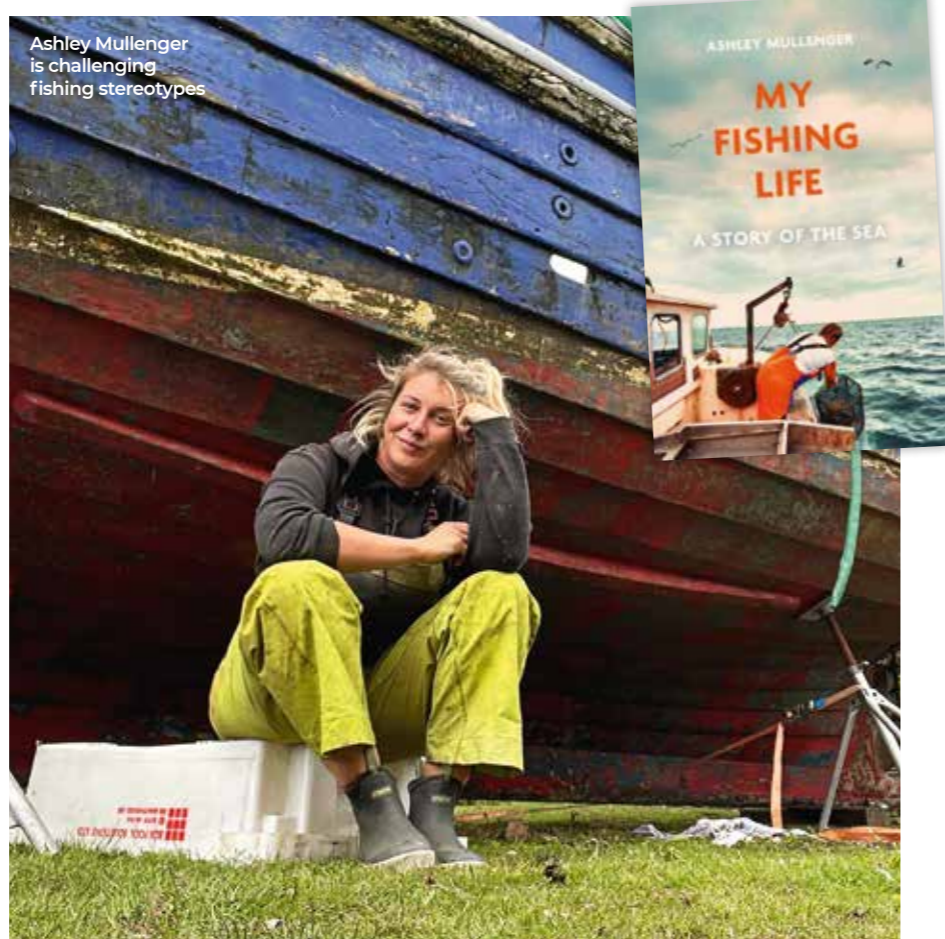
We meet two women breaking down barriers in the fishing industry to bring this healthy and delicious food to our plates. By **Caroline Roberts**

With 1am starts to catch the tides, wind and waves to contend with and long hours hauling heavy shellfish pots, fishing is a job few of us would relish. But for Ashley Mullenger, it's a labour of love. 'The isolation and the raw connection with the environment are really good for the soul,' she says. 'The sea can be hostile but it challenges you in ways no other kind of job does. You're using every single muscle just to stay upright, so you live in your body rather than just existing in your mind, like I used to when I worked in an office.'

Ashley, of Wells-next-the-Sea on the North Norfolk coast, is one of a handful of women making inroads into what has traditionally been a male occupation. 'We have this idea that fishing is a man's job as it's heavy work, but in reality it's more about stamina than brute strength – and very much about teamwork.'

Working on a small fishing boat can have its drawbacks if you're female, though. 'There's no toilet, so when I need a wee I have to squat on deck. If the weather's rough, my skipper, Nigel, will turn the boat to the direction where I'm least likely to get splashed,' she laughs.

Her daily journals have now grown into a book – *My Fishing Life: A Story of the Sea* (£22, Robinson), out on 2 May – that recounts the ups and downs of Ashley's fishing life with salty humour while also informing readers about the problems faced by the industry. 'The fish in the sea are a resource of this country and belong to us all, so everyone has a right to know what's happening. You hear talk of quotas,



Ashley Mullenger is challenging fishing stereotypes

sustainability and the effects of Brexit, but often people don't really understand the complex background.'

Competition for space is a growing issue, she explains. 'Of course, we have a huge need for sustainable energy but offshore wind farms and other industries such as seaweed farms mean small-scale fishermen are being squeezed into ever

smaller areas, which puts pressure on fish stocks. There's a need for other offshore industries to work more closely with fishing communities.'

There are now only around 11,000 fishing boat crew left in the UK and recruitment is difficult, so Ashley is keen to encourage more women into the role. 'It's often seen as a dead-end job but

there's lots to learn and so much traditional skill involved.'

She has now amassed more than 10,000 followers on Instagram and was thrilled to be named Under 10-metre Fisherman of the Year in the 2022 Fishing News Awards. 'To have that acceptance from a predominantly male industry really blew me away, and it sends a message to other women that they'd be welcome too. It's not just about women in fishing, it's about women everywhere doing anything they want to do, breaking stereotypes and challenging themselves.'

However, fishing isn't just about what happens on the sea, and there's an increasing number of women working in a wide range of industry roles. One is Elaine Lorys, the UK's first female master



Elaine Lorys demonstrates the art of filleting

fishmonger, who manages a harbourside shop in Newlyn, West Cornwall. It's not a career path she expected to follow – she was offered the job after being made redundant from her role as a department store window dresser.

'My first reaction was: "I'm not interested in fish"', says Elaine, 'but the minute I got there I loved it, especially displaying the fish on the counter as there are so many amazing colours.'

That was 27 years ago but she never tires of serving her local customers along with the many visitors to the port. 'People come down on holiday year after year and make a beeline for the shop. I'm part of their summer. Nowadays, customers are much more interested in where the fish has come from, how it was caught and how to cook it,' she says. 'We're very up on sustainability and letting people know what's locally caught.'

The Master Fishmonger Standard Award involved demonstrating her filleting skills as well as her in-depth knowledge of the wider industry, covering topics such as fishing quotas and Brexit. She received the accolade in 2019 at Fishmongers' Hall in London and was also invited to the Women of the Year Awards. 'I met so many amazing people who had done things like starting charities, and there I was, recognised for my filleting!'

When it comes to buying fish, she urges us to be more adventurous. 'People tend to stick to the same sort of fish, but eating a wide variety is important for sustainability. Ask the fishmonger what's plentiful at the moment. Make sure the fish is glossy with bright-pink or red gills, and its eyes aren't dry and sunken. When you walk into a fishmonger's you should be met with that fresh smell of the sea.'

ELAINE'S NEWLYN HAKE AND ONIONS

To see a video of Elaine cooking the recipe, scan this code:



Serves: 2

INGREDIENTS

- 2 tbsp rapeseed oil
- 2 medium white onions
- 2 Cornish hake loin fillets, skin on
- 1 lemon, halved
- 2 handfuls samphire, washed
- Sea salt, black pepper

METHOD

1. Heat 1 tablespoon of oil in a frying pan over a medium-high heat.
2. Add the onions, reduce the heat and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.
3. Sprinkle with salt and leave them to caramelise for 30 minutes. Add a little water if they're drying out.
4. Sprinkle the hake skin with sea salt and black pepper and rub in.
5. Heat the remaining oil in a clean frying pan. Once it's hot, place the

hake fillets in the pan skin side down. Gently press with a fish slice and cook for 3 minutes.

6. Turn the fish, add a squeeze of lemon, and cook for a further minute or so until cooked through. Add the onions and samphire to the pan for the final minute.

7. Add another squeeze of lemon and serve on a dollop of buttery mash or a potato cake.

Elaine's recipe appears with many other delicious seafood recipes in *For the Love of the Sea*, compiled by Jenny Jefferies (£22, Meze Publishing).



The finished dish of Newlyn hake and onions

EAT YOURSELF HEALTHY

Fish is a great source of protein, vitamins and minerals. The NHS recommends eating at least two portions a week, including one portion of oily fish, such as salmon, sardines, trout or mackerel. Oily fish contains Omega-3 fatty acids, which can boost heart health, while white fish is a nutritious, low-fat alternative to red meat.