

Buy the best sardines

CJ JACKSON gives her advice on buying sardines – they're inexpensive, great on the barbecue and packed full of omega-3



Sardiness with Sicilian fennel salad



WHY BUY SARDINES?

- They're inexpensive and widely available
- Stocks are sustainable
- They're packed with health-giving omega-3 oils
- They're a perfect match to summer flavours

There is a steady supply of sardines available throughout the year, but they're a good buy now because they go particularly well with other summer ingredients, like tomatoes and peppers. Sardines are also perfect cooked outdoors on the barbecue.

Why are they sustainable?

Shoals of sardines are found, and fished, in many areas. As they are fast growing, stocks recover quickly, which makes them a sustainable option. During the summer months they are often caught in the waters between Cornwall and Brittany – smaller and slightly oilier fish are found in the Mediterranean and are particularly delicious.

Choose the best

Oil-rich fish have a shorter shelf life than white fish. Look for fish that are still in rigor mortis, rigid and often curled in shape, and – ideally – packed in plenty of ice. This indicates that the fish haven't

been out of the water for very long. If not rigid, look for fish that are firm to touch and, importantly, have very bright raised eyes with black pupils and a clear cornea.

Another key thing to look at are the gills. You can ask the fishmonger to show these to you. They should be deep red if fresh – avoid any that are turning brown. Sardines vary in weight but are usually about 85-100g each. Generally you need to buy 3-4 per person as a main course. Sardines are part of the herring family and are basically small pilchards: both herring and sprats are good alternatives.

How to prepare and cook

You can buy sardines ready filleted, but there is little to indicate freshness, so consider buying them whole. Ask the fishmonger to remove the scales and gut the fish. If they only come unprepared, they can be scaled with the back of a knife or your fingers. Sardines are so delicate and

soft that running the side of your thumb along the belly of the fish is usually enough to slit it open, and then you can just remove the guts and rinse under cold water. You can take the head off if you want, but when the fish is cooked enough the eye turns white, so it's helpful to leave it on.

Traditionally, large sardines were used in Cornwall to make Stargazy pie, where the bodies of the fish form the main part of the pie and the heads protrude through the pastry with eyes gazing heavenward; hence the name. Sardines also feature extensively on Mediterranean menus, where they are grilled or barbecued and served with simple dressings using citrus, olive oil and different herbs.

They can be messy to eat. The best way is to just roll up your sleeves and get stuck in, using your fingers. You can locate smaller bones more easily by feel than by sight – just strip the cooked fillets off the bone, dip into a dressing and eat with crusty bread and salad. Lovely!



Sardines with Sicilian fennel salad

SERVES 2 • PREP 20 mins • COOK 10 mins

Easy

Seasoning the fish with coarse rock salt stops them sticking to the barbecue or griddle.

- zest and juice 1 lemon**
- bunch parsley, half the leaves kept whole, the other half finely chopped**
- 1 small garlic clove, finely chopped**
- 1 fennel bulb, with fronds**
- 50g/2oz toasted pine nuts**
- 50g/2oz raisins**
- handful green olives, chopped**
- 3 tbsp olive oil**
- 4 large sardines, scaled and gutted**

1 Mix the lemon zest, chopped parsley and garlic together, then set aside. Pick the fronds from the fennel and set aside. Halve the fennel bulb and finely slice. Make the salad by mixing the sliced fennel and fronds with the pine nuts, raisins, olives, and whole parsley leaves. Dress with the olive oil and lemon juice.

2 Heat the griddle pan or barbecue. Season the fish with rock salt (this stops them sticking). Griddle for 2-3 mins on each side until the eyes turn white. Sprinkle the fish with the parsley mix and lift onto plates. Drizzle with oil and serve with the salad.

PER SERVING 663 kcalories, protein 34g, carbohydrate 20g, fat 50g, saturated fat 7g, fibre 3g, sugar 20g, salt 1.49g