

Stevie Parle

Small fry that packs a punch

In a sauce, thrown into a stew or simply enjoyed on its own, the humble anchovy boxes above its weight

Anchovies are pretty special, particularly salted ones. They have the most amazing deep, salty, rich flavour that is unlike any other. I love cooking with them and they are always close to hand in my kitchen.

An anchovy can transform a dish. Thrown in with some slow-cooking meat or in the pan with a quick-cooked steak, the anchovy melts and gives a background depth that cannot be immediately identified as an anchovy flavour. In fact, if you didn't know you would probably attribute the depth of flavour to excellent cooking, or particularly good meat. It's almost like cheating.

The taste you get from anchovies is often called *umami*, a Japanese word that is used increasingly in the West. It's the fifth taste that we can identify, after sweet, sour, salty and bitter. *Umami* is found in high proportions in Parmesan cheese, soy sauce, aged beef, good tomatoes – all the things that taste full and savoury in a

way that is different from, say, merely salty.

Adding Parmesan to a dish has a similar effect; Parmesan doesn't just make things taste of Parmesan, it makes them taste more of themselves. Pasta with Parmesan tastes better rather than cheesier.

Anchovies also work well when they are the main event. Often when I am cooking and don't have time for lunch I will grab a thickly buttered slice of crusty bread and put a few delicious, salty anchovy fillets onto it. They also make the perfect breakfast with toast and a boiled egg.

The taste of anchovies mellows when put with anything acidic. Letting them sit in lemon juice or vinegar before you use them changes the flavour as it slightly "cooks" the flesh, making it look paler and taste more mellow.

Many people think they don't like anchovies, but usually when they try good ones their attitude changes.

The best anchovies come from the Cantabrian coast.

Unfortunately this coastline has been seriously overfished and the famous Basque anchovies are now in short supply. The waters were actually closed from 2004 to March 2010. These days stocks have recovered somewhat, though anchovy fishing is still closely monitored.

They are a precious resource that should be respected and used carefully. For this reason I think it's important to buy only the best; it seems such a shame when precious anchovies end up as those little fishy fillets on pizza.

Customers at The Dock Kitchen ask me all the time where my anchovies come from. Top anchovies are large specimens, still packed in the salt they are cured in. I buy Ortiz anchovies from Brindisa. They fish in both the Mediterranean and on the Cantabrian coast. You can also buy them loose in good delis, or pick up a big tin when you are in Italy or Spain.

If you cannot find salted anchovies still in salt look for a brand of anchovies in oil, with the largest fillets that are still a little pink, as these will taste best. Again Ortiz are probably the best ones you can get.

Whole anchovies in salt need a little preparation, never soak them in water, just pull the fillets from the bones under a running tap, discard the spine and little bones, and rub the fillets clean.

The recipes

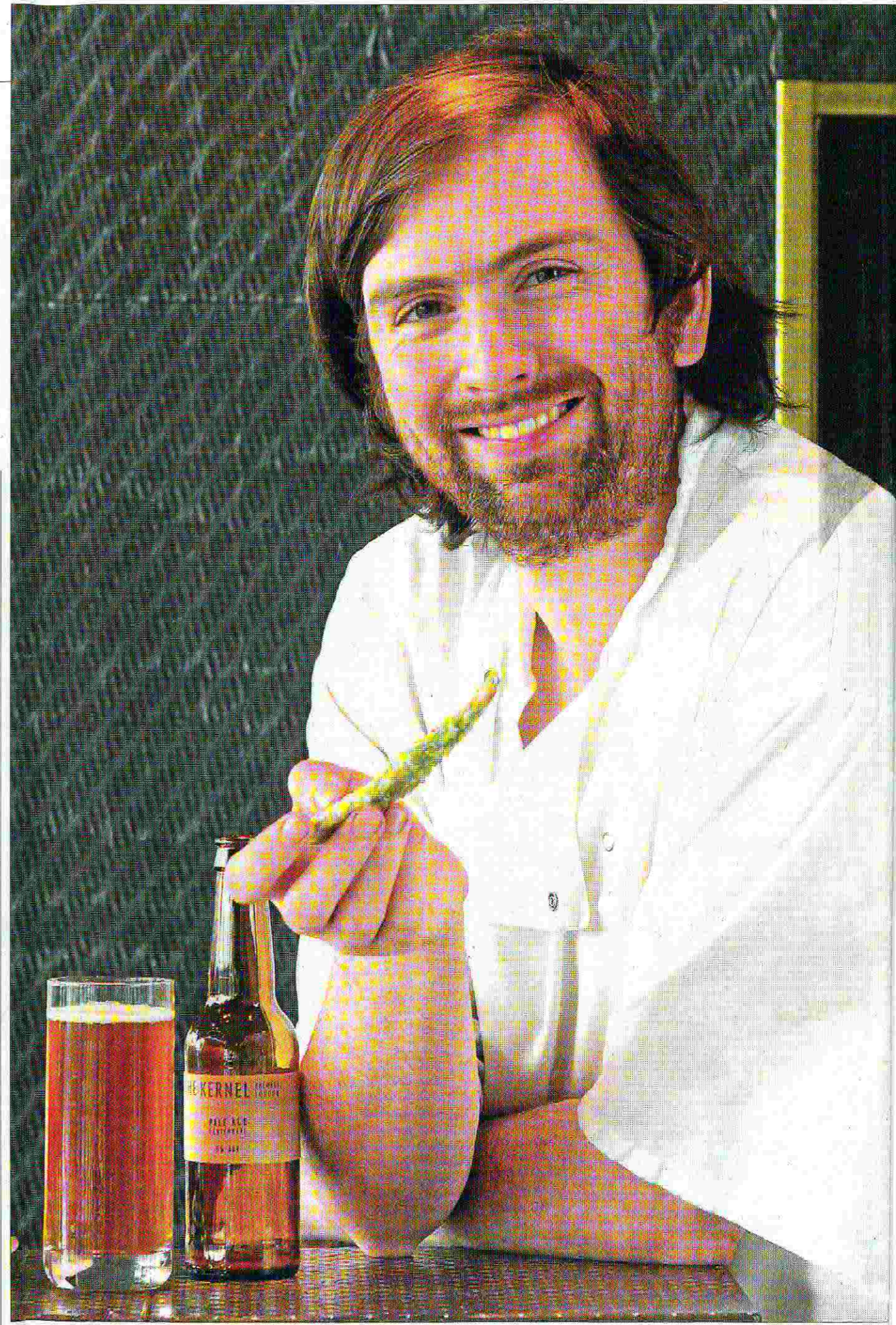
Brill poached with woody herbs, white wine, carrots, fennel, monk's beard (agrette) and anchovy sauce

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DeLonghi



Frittering away the

1 tsp black peppercorns

Bring back to the boil and add

pulls away from the bone.