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From “noble” to “ugly” but “well-worked” fish—food morals in the Breton fish landings

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Abstract

Fishing and fish consumption have historically been marked by criteria of social distinction. The historical inequalities between those who consume noble fish and those who consume other more popular fish tend to revolve around the question of the freshness of the product and the quality of the fisherman’s work, considered as a singular kind of artisan. The economic and ecological injunctions tend to still be linked to a capitalist grid of vision of the world, and this article aims at deconstructing them. I use ethnography to understand how food morals and food justice are at stake along the fish supply chain.

Keywords Commercial fishing · Food morals · Food aesthetics · Fish markets · Fishing techniques

Introduction

With the effects of overfishing (Cury, 2019; Gascuel, 2019) and the successive crises of the fishing industry since the 1990s, political conflicts between small-scale Breton fishermen and the largest fishing companies have been deepening (Clouette, 2019). The process of valuation of the caught product, fish, or shellfish is a cornerstone of the political struggles. It can be sold in an auction, directly on the quay “at the back of the boat” or through short food supply chains. It can also be shared through informal circuits organized around “the fisherman’s cut”—called “godaille” in France (gift or sale of an in-kind wage share normally intended for personal consumption and also known as “fake fish”). The decrease of the inshore small boat fishing fleets is to the benefit of larger units that fish offshore and are grouped in an “*armement*”—a larger fishing boats company. Small-scale fishermen and industrial vessels do not land fish of the same quality, and in the same quantity. Both types of economic actors work differently with fish, and allegedly target different

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species. But in fact, they regularly happen to land the same species of fish, especially the ones that are the most expensive products, and that have been considered “noble,” because of an historical context that we will explain in the first part of the article. This competition has been going on for a century, creating inequalities. The modalities of struggle for small scale fishermen, notably around the fluctuating setting of prices (Jorion, 2010), however, reveal agency opportunities, both because the methods with which they catch their “noble” fish correspond more closely to the specifications of gastronomic catering and “good food” (Hochedez & Le Gall, 2016), but also through a revaluation of discredited—or “forgotten”—fish, a term reminiscent of that used by locally sourced vegetable producers. A whole palette of words is used onboard, on the quay, in fish shops, or in communication campaigns: noble fish, ugly fish, “well-worked” fish (“bien travaillé”), and industrial fish. The product definitions, by using binary oppositions between categories, create contradictions between their uses. Food networks are constituted through social distinction and even social inequalities, expressed through consumption practices, which in turn influence the practices of producers at the start of the supply chain. How do food inequities on the consumer side affect the whole fishing system, and in particular the choices and practices of producers? Can an industrial fish be noble? What is an “ugly” but “well-worked” fish? Which social assets do you need to have access to this or that fish, on a stall or on a quay? For which clientele is the small-scale fishing industry meant to survive?

What sociological issues are at stake between producers, sellers, and consumers? The aim of this text is to question a system that could be perceived as binary, by putting it into perspective with the diversity of practices and actors in the Breton fishery. Another aim of the article is to bring to the field of food justice a perspective that is anchored in an original ethnographic terrain for this field—fishing. The originality of this fieldwork and study lies in the fact that fishing is an industry with producing processes that engage with uncertainty. Its food morals are linked to the fact that producers do not grow or farm products, but hunt for wild animals and develop strategies to catch the right fish. Food morals lies in the definition of this “right” fish to catch. What are the moral stakes of the question: what is the right fish to catch? And is not it more a matter of knowing how to fish well than knowing which fish to catch? The aim of the article is also to bring a perspective on this industry that is part of the moral economy tradition. Fishing constitutes a perfect fieldwork to analyze the infra-political struggles around a fair price, especially because of the producers’ labile relationship to norms. It shows that illegality or legality of exchanges, or even good and bad practices, are considered according to a kind of food morals. These food morals are organized around infra-political community links and practices that only ethnography can render.

The article is based on transcripts of participant observation (commercial fishing and fish landing on the quay) and more than eighty interviews (semi-structured, generally about 2 h long) from the ethnographic fieldwork of the PhD (2014–2019, mostly in Finistère, Brittany, France). This fieldwork was carried out on board all types of vessels engaged in fishing activities from Breton ports: from small coastal

vessels spending only a few hours at sea,¹ to ocean-going vessels leaving for two weeks far from the Breton coast.² I got on board under the status of “passenger,” also informally called “marée-test” in French, because this status is a way for young fishermen that are still in school to get a first impression of the work onboard vessels. The examples given in this article will be mainly those of coastal fishing, especially during the unloading work.

Through the description of moments of sale, landing, and killing, the article questions the complex realities of the exploitation of fishery resources, revealing a multifaceted professional world. First, the article analyzes the issues of a campaign to promote the so-called ugly fish, created in 2020 by the Association des Ligneurs de la Pointe Bretagne³ and anchored in a history of consumption discriminating fish by species. Then, it analyzes a little more these stakes, by means of an ethnographic scene of landing of purse seiners (“bolinche”), showing how the idea of the “beautiful” fish is created, which tends more and more to be a “well-worked” fish. These definitions overlap with a grid of geographical and social inequalities in terms of consumption. Finally, in the last part, the article will show that this injunction to produce a “beautiful” fish is an entrepreneurial and neoliberal imperative that affects the ethos of the small-scale fisherman today in the context of the struggle for economic survival facing the largest fishing companies’ omnipresence. The ethnographic examples of 1 day of conger eel fishing and of ikejime killing technique show how the “responsible” fisherman is embodied differently. During a violent capture of an “ugly fish” (the conger eel), a form of transgression of this ethos respectful of the environment and the animal appears, which allows us to highlight the criteria of sustainability (Probyn, 2016) necessary to correspond to the model of “good food” closed to the underprivileged classes.

¹ The fishermen generally use multiple techniques of fishing onboard small-scale boats, like line and longlines, boxes or nets. A minority of them also use small trawls or dredges. There are one or two fishermen onboard, who are independent workers. Coastal vessels are not all considered “small-scale” fishing boats though: in Brittany there is a big fleet of coastal trawlers (targeting langoustine), that small-scale fishermen don’t consider as part of the small-scale community. Same with purse seiners (that are targeting blue fish). These two types of coastal, yet not small-scale, boats have more men onboard, between 3 and 5, and they land a lot more fish than the fishermen using other “artisanal” techniques (Clouette, 2019, 2021).

² Mainly trawlers, but also gillnetters or crabbers, with around 5 workers onboard the vessel (one boss and four deckhands). Generally, these boats are part of a bigger company.

³ The Association was created in 1993 and has about fifty members. It defends the professionals using a line to fish, especially when sea bass is targeted, whether it is fishing with a rod or a longline. Other criteria, beyond the technique, gather the members, in particular the biological rest in winter, a boat size limited to 12 m, or working days at sea not exceeding 24 h.

Can “ugly” fish be considered “noble”?

What does “nobility” mean when it comes to fish?

First, it is necessary to deconstruct an important binary opposition constitutive of the fishing food morals: several reclassifications of fish species from noble to less noble and vice-versa make it possible to link the history of seafood consumption to questions of food justice. There is indeed a certain tradition in the French seafood business to describe a fish delicacy as a “noble” product. These “noble” fish have been considered as “royal products” since the Middle Ages, because they are either rare or conveying legend imaginary (Le Cornec, 2007). They are all luxury dishes that are now still served in gourmet restaurants, and whose characteristics are part of a social knowledge indicating educated taste and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979): salmon or sturgeon, sea bass or turbot, John Dory or sole. These “noble” fish were already highly considered by the richest classes of the population during the Middle Ages, unlike mackerel, herring, or other fish that were eaten by the poor people after being smoked, dried, salted, or cooked with brine. The delicate flesh of the “noble” fish contrasts with the need for nutritious food of the lower classes. The taxonomic inventory is a grid that can be historically superimposed on that of social hierarchies. But it is during modern times that a real French “gastronomic culture of fish” (Quellier, 2019) is established, becoming a tool of social distinction for the elites. The fish are eaten on *maigre*⁴ days, and thus acquire a Catholic moral character. But the elites soon established a gastronomic taste for fish, reinforced by luxurious and rich sauces and preparations. The size, the freshness, and the rarity of the fish become discriminating criteria of the “good fish.” According to historians (Pitte & Miossec, 2019), penitence became a sham, and the fishes eaten on *maigre* days became the symbols of a refinement. Species were classified by taste in modern treatises on food, and, like nowadays, turbot⁵ was regularly designated as the best fish. But the difficulties of supply also influenced the desires of wealthy consumers. That is why freshwater fish were popular among the elites: they could be fished closer to the big cities. But the enthusiasm of modern travel writers visiting Breton harbors (ibid.) proves that the social distinction lied in the ability to overcome supply problems and eat fresh seafood in Paris. Our ethnography shows that access is still an element of distinction among the current concerns of fish consumers.

With the gradual disappearance of local fishing boats in the second half of the twentieth century,⁶ the supply chain has tended to be mainly supplied by offshore vessels, especially trawlers. The fish targeted by these boats are considered less delicate than those of the small-scale fishery. Above all, they are kept in cold rooms on board to be landed after 15 days of fishing, losing their freshness. The large-scale

⁴ To eat light 1 day of the week.

⁵ Florent Quellier finds numerous mentions of this fish in the writings of noble gourmands, with the expression “Prince of the Sea” even used by Grimod de La Reynière in 1808 (Quellier, 2019).

⁶ In 2018, the deep-sea fishing model represents 80% of the catch and 80% of the jobs in the Finistère fishery.

distribution has become the biggest customer of the “*armements*,” the big fishing boats companies, with more than 60% of sales of fresh fish products according to the national professional association Pavillon France.⁷ The increase in landings of offshore fish is accompanied by an increase in fish consumption in the French population in general.⁸ Fish trawled offshore, landed under auction in large quantities, still carries the stigma of “poor man’s fish,” even among the crew of fishermen who catch it. An example from my ethnographic fieldwork shows the perpetuation of these social prejudices. The sailors of a Breton ship on which I embarked for 15 days in the Celtic Sea called haddock “Arab fish.” Haddock is not at all considered as a “noble” fish, as it is generally fished offshore and then transformed to be sold in supermarkets. The fishermen referred there to the cliché of the poor and Maghrebin customer of Parisian suburban areas, buying fish in giant hypermarkets. The stigma is both racist and classist: people from the outskirts of Paris allegedly eat low quality fish or frozen fish because they supposedly cannot afford to buy other products. They live in socially constructed “fish deserts,” not only because they live far from the sea but also because they live outside the alternative supply networks, making their territories real sea- “food deserts” (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Leaving aside the racist consideration, deep-sea fishing is often perceived by the new generation of sailors as a “monospecies” fishing model that “feeds the Parisians,”⁹ out of step with their desire to be part of a local social ecology.

“If there are rich people who want living crab, well, OK, there are ways to find some, so that it’s possible to eat it in restaurants and so on... but otherwise in Paris you eat canned sardines, you eat smoked herring, you eat things that are cured, smoked, things like that. Fresh fish must not be accessible to everyone. (...) The coastal people end up having crappy fish, eating crappy things. For me, it’s for the people on the coast that we should fish. That’s the logic, so I would like to be able to bring what the people want. That is to say that there I find myself with a “*godaille*”¹⁰ of crabs, I have fifteen crabs... I’d like a little more variety. I’d like to fish for everything and catch things at the right time. But it’s the same with agriculture. Next door there’s a field, the guy does a lot of different things in market gardening, his field is magnificent and it’s a pleasure on all levels, it must be a pleasure for him, it must be a pleasure for the people who are his customers, and a pleasure for the landscape. Next to it is a cornfield, it is no match for it.”

But if the reduction of the food mile in a socio-ecological perspective is one of the ideals of the new generation, the interest of small-scale fishing remains to enter new markets. Making a fish “noble” therefore also means making it competitive, by

⁷ <https://www.pavillonfrance.fr/articles/economie-marche-mer>

⁸ Fish consumption has doubled in thirty years at the global level (from 9.0 kg in 1961 to 20.2 kg in 2015, an average increase of about 1.5 per cent per year (source: FAO SOFIA report, 2018). The French eat about 34.5 kilos of seafood per year (compared to about 20 in the early 1990s), but there has been a decline in the consumption of fresh fish (source: France Agrimer).

⁹ Interview with bolinche and offshore crabbing deckhand.

¹⁰ He is referring to his fisherman’s cut.

creating some storytelling that enhances its glocal product identity (Goodman et al., 2012).

Claiming nobility: a struggle for food sovereignty?

In this sense, “forgotten fish,” to echo the expression of “forgotten vegetables” in agriculture, applies differently to the seafood world. The less noble species kept being fished, and sometimes even overfished, whereas the “forgotten” vegetables were simply left aside by the industrial farmers. The transformation process of canning has been associated for too long with specific species to remember that these could be produced, sold, cooked, and eaten differently. But when they are, these fishes represent other political, economic, and morally constructed values. A species formerly associated to “bad food,” can symbolically become “good food” and even “moral food” (Ki Che Leung & Caldwell, 2020).

In 2020, the *Plateforme Petite Pêche* (Small Scale Fishing Association) has launched an advertising campaign called “No to Looks Discrimination”.¹¹ The association, created in 2012, defends the interests of the French small-scale vessel fleet. It brings together “artisan”¹² fishermen who are usually not part of the decision-making institutions. In Brittany, a lot of members of the *Plateforme* are working on small line vessels they own. The association’s press release announcing the publicity campaign insists on the quality of the line fish, in comparison with fish caught on boats with techniques considered more industrial, trawling in particular, that damages the flesh of the fish by crushing them. “*Just be adamant about the quality of the fish, but that goes for both pout and turbot!*” says the press release. The *Plateforme* wishes to rehabilitate products that, according to the activists, deserve the attention of gourmets in a general context of homogenization of the offer and historical prejudices (Fig. 1). There is, in the objective of this communication campaign, the search for a reversal of the model of “*intense social scrutiny*” characterized by the question: “*You eat that?*” (Barnhill & Dogget, 2018). Pout is thus presented by the association as the tastiest of the *ganidae*, contrary to the traditional classifications favoring pollock or cod.

The association seeks to create a taste among the elite for products usually consumed by the poor. The process is not new, as in the rural and postcolonial areas surveyed in several parts of the world (Matta, 2010). Requalifying “poor” food requires

¹¹ “Non au délit de sale gueule;” <https://pointe-de-bretagne.fr/non-au-delit-de-sale-gueule-lancement-dune-campagne-pour-la-promotion-des-poissons-oublies/> with the help of the FEAMP (Fonds Européen pour les Affaires Maritimes et la Pêche), Brittany’s regional Council and the Pays de Brest and Cornouaille local political institutions.

¹² The European Union designates as “artisanal” any vessel less than 12 m long, excluding trawlers and dragnets. In this article, we stick to this definition, generally accepted among the Breton small-scale fishing community. There is a French exception though, defining an “artisan” as a fisherman who works onboard a vessel he owns. This common denominator chosen by the French authorities, in addition to a vessel size limit of 25 m makes it possible to include many vessels excluded by European standards under this “artisan” label, hence giving pride of place to the trawl fishing industry. About the controversy around the use of the word “artisan” in the French institutional context of the fishing industry, see Clouette (2021).

Fig. 1 A pout on one of the posters made by the *Plateforme Petite Pêche*. Translation: “Handsome pout fish looking for a nice chef.”



a marketing of authenticity and a discourse on the health benefits for consumers (Warnier, 1994; Badii, 2014; Dupré, 2005). But the campaign is also directly political, presenting the defended vessels as a model of the social and solidarity economy—“the exact opposite of the industrial and ultra-capitalist model of the farmed salmon industry.” One goal of the *Plateforme* is to organize among producers to achieve food sovereignty in collaboration with other actors in the supply chain and the so-called responsible consumers. This aim towards food sovereignty is also an ideal for food justice, considering that the artisanal activity is constitutive of what makes a local community sustainable (Thompson, 2015). The association wishes to benefit from the relays of the press, but also from the fishmongers, to whom it offers posters.

The advertising campaign is part of the political struggles over pricing (Jorion, 2010), an attempt to recover agency following the sharp decline in certain species stock in Breton waters, like sea bass or pollock. Those used to be highly remunerative for small-scale fishing and are no longer a guarantee of income. The association develops the example of pout because it illustrates well this search

for agency. This particular type of fish would be worth much more than the few cents—the association indicates “84 cents”—granted to the fisherman under auction. The solution put forward is the one of short food supply chains: buying directly to the fisherman, or in a fish shop who has an agreement with the fisherman. Those alternative distribution networks create political conflicts between traditional actors of the sector. This economic transformation initiates a moral debate as well: what do a few cents represent for a fisherman’s work on a fish—fishing, gutting, washing, and landing? What work is expected for that amount of money? What does the requirement of “good work” with fish, in the field of small-scale fishing, imply in terms of food practices and ethics? An expression used by small-scale fishermen encapsulates this care: “a well-worked” fish (“un poisson bien travaillé”), implying an artisanal definition of working with fish, catching it using appropriate techniques that do not deteriorate the quality of the fish, prepared in the best possible way for transport and stored on a large quantity of ice. A “well-worked” fish is about “linking quality and naturalness” (Lamine & Roué, 2005), but also quality of work and quality of the product. It has similarities with the basic principles of fair-trade (Joyeau & Robert-Demontond, 2004), implying that the idea of “working well” also means protecting the environment. Most importantly, this debate on the quality of the work intersects with issues related to fishing techniques and the habits surrounding industrial or artisanal practices. During the ethnography, Small-scale fishermen were indignant about the gillnetters who break the inexpensive crabs that are caught on their line to avoid the work of taking them off. *“If you don’t want spider-crab, then you don’t put in sole nets, otherwise you know you will get spider crabs. Or you accept to take time and untangle them, because they deserve to be sold”* said a small-scale fisherman in an interview. Elsewhere on my fieldwork, a small fisherman explained that he always leaves his nets in the water for a short period of time, in order to have fish of premium quality. A colleague agreed with him in another interview, adding that some *“leave their nets lying around, so the stuck fish rot, then the lobster goes up in the net to eat it and at the end of the day the fisherman catches lobster. (...) come on, if you want to catch lobster, use crab traps.”*

The product of the sea is then no longer considered “noble” without regard for the technique that took it out of the water and for the network through which it transits between the boat and the plate. Those who value less remunerative products enjoy a moral aura within the small-scale fishing community. Thanks to small-scale fishermen lobbying, an ugly but “well-worked” fish will be sold on a fair price. It will even be considered more “noble,” in a way, than the trawled fish of traditionally “noble” species. This demonstrates a shift in the historical gastronomic culture of fish, focusing less on the intrinsic characteristics of the species, but on the environmental and socio-economic characteristics of the fishing activity itself. “Nobility” seems to be less a question of quality of the flesh than a question of environmental justice or food ethics. In order to understand the issues of food justice that are at stake around these conflicts of technique and territory, it is necessary to look at the moments of landing, which are fundamental in the definition and consideration of products and producers.

Doing fish, fishermen, and local consumer justice

Artisans and bycatchers

The short food supply chains are pointed out as being unmanageable, informal economic spaces, where cash circulates without being declared and where over-quota fish are sold. Direct selling is frowned upon by institutional actors, especially intermediaries in the supply chain, because it is beyond their control. The following ethnographic example from my fieldwork shows that direct selling offers small-scale fishermen the tools and means that institutions already offer to larger vessels and companies. On an icy January morning, at about 3 a.m., a handful of seiners (“bolincheurs”) entered a port in southern Finistère. At this time of night, only a few employees of the fish market are there to welcome them. The shift lasted longer than expected because the fishermen did not find any schools of sardines, the fish they were looking for. They caught and then landed a large quantity of horse mackerel (*chinchard*), but also several tons of sea bass. Horse mackerel has a bad reputation in Brittany and is one of the “ugly fish” in the advertising campaign mentioned above. It is not eaten much and is considered as the poor relation of the mackerel. Since it is not valued in terms of price, it takes a lot of fishing. Moreover, it does not weigh much compared to the volume it takes in the holds, despite the difficulty of the work involved. It is sold to companies that transform it into fishmeal. Many of the fishermen I met told me that there is a loss of meaning in the work done when fish is bought to feed other fish, generally considered as more noble, like farmed salmon. Fish is considered here as a low-quality industrial product that will help farmers to produce supposedly high-quality products. And this is one of the main struggles of the organizers of the alternative distribution networks: to offer the fishermen a consideration for the quality of the landed products. Indeed, the horse mackerel can be “well-worked” (“bien travaillé”), unlike the one landed by the seiners, as Ben, a small fisherman from my fieldwork, who would like his horse mackerel to be better valued in the distribution chain, reminds us: “*We don’t know how to eat horse mackerel in France. It is however the favorite fish of the Japanese! For those who know how to prepare it, fresh, it is a delight.*” Small-scale fishermen try to organize networks that restore the tarnished reputation of discredited or industrially processed fish, but they lack institutional support to affirm a new “gastronomic culture of fish,” as Quellier coined for the modern ages (2019).

Here again, a detour through ethnography allows us to grasp this reality: Jérôme, a small filleteur from Guilvinec, is used to working with a distribution network called *Poiscaille*. *Poiscaille* buys everything at an annual fixed price and then resells the products to subscribers, in the form of “baskets of the sea,” in Paris and in several large cities in France. Thanks to this network, he has access to guaranteed prices that allow him to make a living from his trade, unlike the variable prices of the traditional fish market. Like CSA boxes, *Poiscaille* provides consumers with sourced (though not local) products, and traceable to producers respecting seasonality and a charter of practices. Before finding this network,

Jerôme tried to sell his fish directly on the quay, the old-fashioned way. But the dishabituation of the local populations for this mode of consumption, and the variability of the catches put him several times in situations where he could not sell everything “directly” to locals. He therefore had to sell his surplus fish under auction. One day, he brings up in his nets too much pout to hope to sell them to the local customers on the quay. After selling what he could at the best possible price, he went to offer the rest of his catch at the auction. The pout is then accepted, for a ridiculously low price, 6 cents a kilogram.

“If there were no alternative networks like that, the boat would be sold. I couldn’t live like that. I put fish in the auction, I got 6 cents per kilo. Six cents per kilo! While it is valued at three, four euros on the quay, in direct sale or with Poiscaille. Come on, see the fish, it is alive, beautiful. It’s not the crap from the trawl, all crushed... They don’t differentiate. It’s the same price for everyone.”

Another time, he shows me the ballan wrasses, which he has nicely arranged, all lined up, for direct sales customers:

“You see, I line them up like this because they go on direct sale. Otherwise, I don’t bother, it’s five cents... And then they’re gutted, too. Normally, you don’t gut the ballan wrasses. Last time, I put in gutted and cleaned ones, they counted them as “injured” ones! You’re doing their job and on top of that you’re penalized, that’s crazy... I was furious. I said to myself “they are making a fool out of me... five cents, “injured”... What is this!” That’s really... It’s disrespectful, you work, you do your thing, you value your fish as much as you can and then... It’s a total waste of time. That’s why all the small-scale fishermen, well, everyone is looking out for markets far and wide...”

The price-setting mechanism is evidence of an “asymmetrical rate of exchange” (Bernier, 1981) between the fishermen and the intermediaries on whom they depend. It is also the source of arguments for questioning the auction and the opacity¹³ of the value production processes. The fish auction is supposed to be an essential tool for the functioning of the production chain, which is meant to guarantee a balance of power between producers (fishermen) and retailers, represented mainly by large-scale distribution systems (hypermarkets). One of the risks of abolishing the auctions would be the malfunction of this balance of power, at the expense of small-scale fishing—hence the indifference of the largest fishing companies to the risk of abolishing the auctions. However, for the sake of competitiveness, some fish markets are implementing a low-price policy (purchase at low prices and resale at low prices). According to Jérôme, the auction acted “*in retaliation*.” When alternative resale networks are set up in parallel, the fish markets lower their prices even more, “*in retaliation*,” because they see those distribution network as growing economic competitors.

¹³ <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r97-345-5/r97-345-513.html> Etude par le cabinet Mennillo, *La formation de la valeur dans la filière pêche française*, Paris, 60 p.

The search for alternative forms of agri-food distribution and the tensions surrounding traditional distribution institutions raise a question of moral economy, to use E.P. Thompson’s expression, that of the “fair price,” affordable for the (lower-income) consumers while being profitable for the (small-scale) producers. Alongside this question of price, the geography of food networks is fundamental to understanding this moral economy, which included the idea of a community’s priority right over locally produced resources.

Territorializing fish

Justice can be seen as a process which is necessarily evolutive. Food justice means recognition and fair prices for the producer, but it also means access equality for the customers. Wild fish is a singular product which strongly depends on the weather, on fish stocks stability and is subject to risks. Alternative food distribution circuits set ways to share these uncertainties (Lamine & Roué, 2005)—“*as long as Poissaille doesn’t act like just another wholesale merchant*” says one fisherman, showing a fear of the conventionalization of the initiative (Guthman, 2004). Not acting like another fishmonger means sticking to the policy of fixed prices and systematic purchase contracts. This is reminiscent of the policy of producer organizations (OP), which undertake to buy their members’ catches at minimum prices in the event of overproduction and difficulty in selling—fish that are then processed into animal meal. However, the commitments of the alternative direct-sale distribution networks are oriented towards enhancing the value of the product: the baskets with fixed prices are sometimes filled with pout and mussels, other times with lobster and turbot, depending on the seasonality, but always at the same price. Justice takes on an environmental meaning: it is not only the fisherman who is rightly considered but also the fish and the marine environment in which he works.

The issue of access to fresh produce in rural coastal areas is problematic, due to the distribution networks organized during the second half of the twentieth century. Large-scale retail outlets have become predominant and direct sales have almost disappeared. At the same time, small-scale fishing has declined, until it has become a minority in the port landscape. The docks have also gradually closed to non-professional visitors. Nonetheless, informal resale networks have persisted. The system of “fisherman’s cut” (in French: “godaille”) allows the sailors to have a part of the landed fish as wages in kind intended for personal or family consumption. These fish are usually distributed free of charge or sold at knock-down prices within the local communities and the fishermen’s entourage. This “below the radar” system (Scott, 1990) allows local communities to have access to low-cost fish, and sometimes to “noble” fish that they cannot afford, even in supermarkets. The resale of this share of salary in kind is made up of noble fish and not “false fish” or scraps. At sea, one says “false fish” as one would say on land “false money.” The word “godaille” comes from the English “good ale,” an expression referring to the mixture obtained by the worker who mixes a little wine with his soup, thus improving the taste. In the same way, this “godaille,” or salary in kind, is meant to improve the everyday life of

fishermen. There are, of course, negative effects: the direct sale makes it possible to 7 under the counter the stocks of fish whose fishing is prohibited (either because the fish is undersized, the season is officially over, or quotas have already been reached).

Let us return to the ethnographic example cited above, the seiner landing. After taking several tons of horse mackerel out of the holds, the crews landed a few tons of sea bass. These sea bass are the subject of considerable tensions within the fishing communities. They embody conflicts that have been present for at least a century between seiners and small-scale fishermen. Unlike line fishermen, who target single fish using hooks, seine techniques target schools, thereby sometimes emptying whole bays of their bass population. Small-scale fishermen consider that the seiners, by landing tons of fish in one go, are undermining prices and preventing the resources from being sustainable. During the winter landing described above, many juveniles were landed and then sorted. The sailors put aside the fish that were above the regular size to sell them at the auction. The rest joined the informal resale circuit. As the purse seiners did not find any sardines, they had to fall back on fish that were not very profitable – horse mackerel, but also on fish with better added value, even though the spawning season was in full swing. In winter, small-scale fishermen decide not to fish because it is the breeding period of sea bass. Seiners, because their gear does not allow them to target fish, are allowed to land by-catches, up to a certain maximum tonnage. Sea bass landed in this way are landed legally. However, this situation reveals complex practices: first, it seems obvious that the landing of this fish is detrimental to the marine ecology and the professional diversity of the sector. The sea bass population, already very reduced, is affected by the capture of juveniles in winter. The catches of schooling fish prevent any possible competition from line fishermen. They land less fish, and the better quality of their catch is not considered, as seen previously. Moreover, small-scale fishermen had taken the resolution not to land anything in winter. These bigger boats fish landings are beneficial to the largest fishing companies, to the detriment of small-scale fishermen and a local social ecology. “Under the radar,” the seiner captain chose to fish sea bass, whereas the regulation only allows “real” by-catches, like when sea bass is accidentally caught among sardine banks. The share wage in the fishing world is a wage distribution system directly influenced by the catch and its value. Then, it encourages deckhands not to denounce these practices, even when they disapprove of them, since their pay is higher thanks to these catches. Both the production model and the wage model feed a vicious circle. However, if we look at the fish distribution networks, it appears that the informal resale also benefits a local population that often does not have the financial means to pay for fresh line fish, creating a new type of “local trap” (Born & Purcell, 2006). Alternative distribution networks, such as *Poiscaille* mentioned above, provide a living for small-scale fishermen.¹⁴ Without *Poiscaille*, their activity would be threatened. But the fish they catch then crosses France to be sold far from the coast. There are no pick-up relays in Brittany, because *Poiscaille* believes that it would not be fair to compete with direct sales. Even if the

¹⁴ INRAE scientists have shown that fishermen working with this company have an income 40% higher than the average commercial fisherman.

company has recently developed its activity in rural areas, most pick-up points are in big cities, especially in and around Paris, where urban classes can afford a subscription. The industrial fishing and landing practices described above participate in the destruction of ecosystems. But they also are paradoxically the scene of local solidarity, through the deckhands who distribute free “noble” fish to an aging, rural and economically disadvantaged population (“*aux petits vieux du coin*”). The distribution of “godaille” is done outside of the Breton alternative food networks and it is not organized by citizen initiatives (Darrot & Noel, 2018). It is under the radar of the food governance map.

Food justice here depends on the choices of individuals, deckhands, and on the illegal yet common practice of the Fisherman’s cut. An interesting thing to point out is that industrial companies have tried to forbid it, but none of them have succeeded.¹⁵ To the deckhands, “Godaille” is considered a fair and traditional complement to the share wage, which is already an uncommon wage model compared to the French jurisdiction and welfare state. In a halieutic industrial context, the fisherman’s cut paradoxically brings the local community together. What is fair for some is not fair for others; what becomes fair for some could exclude others. Several academic studies have shown the importance of common-based urban agriculture strategies (Reynolds & Cohen, 2016; Horst et al., 2017; Santo et al., 2016; Paddeu, 2017a) to reduce food inequalities and injustices. Alternative networks allow affluent, urban residents to have access to high quality fish, but leave out coastal residents, who do not have access to alternative networks. Spatial proximity is therefore less valuable than the network and the financial capacity to afford quality fish, a network that creates and maintains the contemporary gastronomic culture of fish. Small-scale fishermen do not have a fisherman’s cut to distribute within the community, because they are their own bosses. Some of them keep selling a part of their fish directly on the quay. Direct selling, just like the “godaille” system, depends on trust, bartering, and cash transactions. With less intermediaries in the selling process, the fish is cheaper, and the locals can have access to seasonal fresh fish. But this informal model is also risky and time-consuming. People have lost the habit of coming to the dock to buy fish directly from the fisherman. Because it was too uncertain to sell his daily catch directly on the quay, Jérôme signed a contract with *Poiscaille*. The company takes all of his locally sourced fish at a fixed price. He is sad not to participate in a form of local life but feels he must give priority to the economic mechanisms that ensure his survival in this industrial landscape, feeling powerless in the struggle to restore former consumer practices—as they were before supermarkets became hegemonic.¹⁶

Line-caught sea bass from the tip of Brittany is not “uprooted” food (Malet, 2017; Paddeu, 2017b) and breaks free from the standardization that industrial capitalism

¹⁵ One of the longest Breton fishermen ‘strike took place in 1997 in Lorient, after the fishing holding Pescanova acquired the Jégo-Quére company and tried to forbid “godaille” onboard the vessels.

¹⁶ To qualify this observation, it is interesting to note that the periods of lockdown linked to the Covid 19 pandemic brought the inhabitants of the (small) ports closer to the small-scale fishermen, thus favoring an expansion of direct sales networks. This can also be explained by the phenomenon that has led urban people to spend their quarantine in their seaside homes.

implies. Making the effort to add value must not only be useful to the fisherman, but also to the Breton consumers, who would benefit from fresh fish through direct sales. Sale at the “*back of the boat*” would work as an alternative to the “grocery gap” (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010): if urban people with capital¹⁷ have CSA-like distribution networks, Breton people could have year-long local alternatives to hypermarkets. The visibility of these alternative networks is therefore a political and commercial ground for access to local products and resources. In addition, involvement in alternative distribution collectives encourages curiosity on the part of customers, who, by increasing their knowledge of fish and seasonality through contact with other members of the network (Lazuech & Debucquet, 2017), develop a stronger relationship with their local environment. *Poiscaille* explains that it does not want to create pick-up options in territories where direct sale could be performed by the fishermen themselves. Even if the company opened many rural pick-up points in recent years, they cannot seem to shake the “East-Parisian” image. The fishing world does not have a union tradition, but the last five years have seen the emergence of a few movements, including that of the *Pleine Mer* association, which has taken on the task of centralizing the maximum number of direct sales points on an interactive map.

Godaille and direct sales both are systems that are meant to give local coastal communities access to fish. This locally sourced fish is “noble,” whether it is an industrial but “noble” species from the Fisherman’s cut, or any “well-worked” fish sold at the back of a small fishing boat. The search for quality to make a fish “noble” implies the materialization of a geography of distribution networks, but it also implies a standardization and a hierarchization of the techniques used. The greening of the societal relationship with nature encourages direct contact between the fisherman and the consumer, which can also foster a certain form of pressure for excellence. The search for new markets and distribution networks, as well as the establishment of a particular geography territorializing the caught fish, surround indeed a redefinition of what should be a “good fisherman” in the society. What are the embodiments, in an official and “hidden transcript” (Scott, 1990) of this new neoliberal¹⁸ “skipper effect” (Pálsson & Durrenberger, 1990)?

¹⁷ Cultural and social capital, through consumption habits, seem to be more important distinction criteria than just economic capital, since the average price of a “basket” of *Poiscaille* is 19.50 euros per week, equivalent to the retail price of one kilo of cod in supermarkets. The price of the meat, on the other hand, remains cheaper. (source: <https://rnm.franceagrimer.fr/prix>).

¹⁸ As Bourdieu has written (1998), neoliberalism acts as a political and discursive program of methodical destruction of collectives. This economic posture is well suited to an imaginary based on the myth of the individual skills and success of an independent “skipper,” an expert of the natural elements in which he evolves to hunt. The neoliberal “skipper effect” naturalizes economic relations between producers and socio-ecosystems. The “pure and perfect market” is almost considered not only as a “logical machine,” but as part of an ecological milieu. The—flexible and responsible—skipper must develop skills to hunt for fish *and* for markets.

Venting

Conger as an outlet for the fisherman’s pressure

Many small-scale fishermen met during my fieldwork are very dedicated to the ecological discourse in order to secure market shares in opposition to supermarkets. In doing so, they play the role of “ecological sentinel.” This expression refers to a media role that society—i.e. the customers—asks them to play. It involves taking up postures of respect for nature, attention to the environment and animal rights. Fishermen emphasize the equation between ecological preoccupations, protection of the environment and the quality of the fish they land. The high price of small-scale products is legitimized by this extra care given by the fisherman, which requires constant publicity at the risk of being crushed by the larger companies, which also massively invest in this green storytelling. After presenting what he implemented daily on board to ensure the most ecological fishing possible, a line-fisherman from my fieldwork encouraged me to come and watch the conger fishing. According to him, there would be in this fishery the reversal of a moral imperative imposed on small fishermen. Again, conger fishing weaves together fish aesthetics and consumption inequalities. The conger eel is an animal that multiplies stigmas. First, it is scary. It is a large, long and nervous fish, which, when it appears on the deck of a fishing vessel, threatens to bite the hands of the fishermen, their feet, their calves or any other part within its reach. Aboard the vessels, anecdotes about conger eels were often the subject of passionate discussions, and I was able to appreciate the character of the animal myself, having been confronted with it several times. I have frequently seen fishermen engage in hand-to-hand combat with the animal, giving skillful and violent hammer blows on its head to knock it out, while performing a choreography of jumping around the serpentine figure that sought to bite them. The fish resists (Wadiwel, 2016) in a particularly spectacular way to the blows carried out by the sailors. It even resists the killing in a way, through its nervous movements that last long after it has been killed, gutted and even sliced into pieces. This resistance is all the more badly perceived by the sailors as it embodies the end of a competing predator’s life. The animal is often present in the imagination of sailors as a competitor (it plunders the nets), or as a dangerous predator (the “man-eater”—the fish that eats the fishermen in the sunken wrecks). Being violent here is a reflex reaction, a “contagion of violence” (Rémy, 2009) of the hostile marine environment. In addition, conger is considered to have a bland taste and no gastronomic interest. It is not at all considered a “noble” fish and it cannot be “well-worked” in such a violent and volume-based context of production. Its price is therefore low, whether it is landed by a small-scale line fisherman, or by industrial vessels.

Owen, a small-scale Breton fisherman, respects seasonality. He supplies the most gourmet restaurants with his fresh, targeted fish, always caught outside of the biological resting period, and very “well-worked.” Once a year, however, as part of this seasonality, Owen fishes for conger eel. His fishing is part of the movement to rehabilitate “ugly” fish (see Fig. 2: the conger eel is one of the fish

Fig. 2 Title: A conger on one of the posters made by the *Plateforme Petite Pêche*. Translation: “It is a big conger eel but we like it.”



in the campaign mentioned in part 1), but the confrontation with the animal is necessarily violent, “brutal” as he says. Since the fish is not under pressure of overfishing, Owen will allow himself to “empty the sea a bit.” Hundreds of conger eels are “slain” non-stop, put on stakes at the exit of the longline, and the deck is quickly covered with blood. It seems impossible, in short, to describe this moment of fishing as “respectful” of the animal as well as of the environment, as it looks like a carnage. This sequence of work, recurring every year with the seasonality, is thought by the fisherman as a way to release the political and societal pressure imposed on fishermen. This fishing method does not respond to any neo-liberal rules or ecological imperatives concerning quality and environmental protection. It is the space for venting one’s anger at an animal competitor. But conger fishing actually respects the environment and is fully sustainable. It is done with longlines, a dormant technique that allows only conger eel to be caught on hooks, without harming the other animals. Owen can then capitalize on the image of sustainability that he maintains all year long with his responsible fishing, because he sticks to the ethos of a regulator of the environment, and he diversifies the catches

to relieve the pressure on the more “noble” species. As the conger eel is violent and considered a nuisance, the violent professional gestures of the fishermen appear legitimate. Using lines, baits, and hooks requires, according to the professionals, a greater ability to “*think like the fish*” when it is being hunted. It allows one to be as close as possible to the “fresh” fish and thus corresponds to the ultimate new ethos of halieutic capitalism. It also embodies the most concrete form of the Greek *metis*, and inspires the greatest possible respect in the community, even from the more industrial fishermen, who are the political enemies of the line fishermen. Etienne, a small-scale fisherman who line-fishes during the summer season, also professionally dives to pick up scallops during winter, a marginal practice but one that is increasingly publicized in France. By going himself to the bottom of the ocean, and by tracking the shellfish underwater, Etienne has the impression of “*thinking like a scallop*.” As he told me in an interview, he had the feeling that he was able to sense where the animals would place themselves. Jokingly, he even told me that he recognized the noise of the trawlers’ dredges that passed nearby, and that scared him a little because they could take him away in their movement, “*like the shells*.” His immersion seemed to increase the difference between him and the trawl fishermen working above while reducing the difference in level between his position as a producer and that of the animal he was tracking. What he described is almost a perspectivist experience, in addition to a commitment to a “responsible” commercial approach, once out of the water.

“*To think like a fish*” must not be considered as an animistic posture though. As Vanessa Manceron showed while following the British ornithologists (2022), this way of thinking in our western countries is more like a naturalist way of connecting or building a relationship with the environment through cumulative knowledge and daily close observation. Owen also regularly uses the expression “*to think like a fish*” to describe his activity. However, it would seem almost unnatural to most fishermen I met during fieldwork to try to really “*think like a conger*” because, as one of them reminded me during an interview, “*it eats sunken men on the seafloor*.” Within the framework of this commercial and ontologic posture, the conger is socially constructed as an intimate enemy. The sustainable fishery entrepreneur model relies on neoliberal food morals which, with respect to “noble” fish, implies a posture of care. Conger fishing is, like the carnival in feudal modern times, the seasonal exception of a reversal of practices—rather than values. It participates in affirming the link with the environment maintained by the “sentinel,” who allows himself, once during his watch, a violent venting moment. And this venting moment is made possible because it is always considered as a responsible way of managing fish stocks.

Neoliberal morals and artisan agency: the case of *ikejime*

What, then, would be the epitome of this neoliberal morals aboard small-scale fishing boats? Owen also uses the *ikejime* technique, a killing technique that is supposed to avoid animal suffering as much as possible, but also to guarantee the best quality of fish. With the *ikejime* technique, the death of the fish is “good to see and to show” (Givre et al., 2019). Or it is at least, “good for storytelling,” in a Western



Fig. 3 Screenshot of Josh Niland’s Instagram posts

context where the death of fish tends to be more and more “hidden” under a growing interspecific sensitivity (Bimbenet, 2017). This *ikejime* death becomes socially accepted because it is presented as the aestheticized gesture of an expert, of an artisan, not to say an artist. The technique embodies the opposite of the violent industrial mechanics, which hygienism (Aghulon, 1981) has relegated to “hidden in plain sight” spaces: slaughterhouses (Pachirat, 2012). Contrary to the example of conger fishing described above, the violence of *Ikéjime* is not likely to become socially “contagious” because of the additional care given by the fisherman. It consists in neutralizing the animal’s nervous system as quickly as possible when it comes out of the water and draining the fish of its blood. The first step is to introduce a blade (in Japanese, a hook called *tegaki*) to neutralize the brain of the animal. Second, the professional introduces a metal wire, which looks like a flexible cable, at the location of the hole and slides it all along the vertebral ridge, to destroy the marrow. Intended to lengthen the conservation of fish flesh and improve its taste, this manipulation reduces the formation of lactic acid, emitted by the living being when it dies to start the decomposition process. After that, incisions are sometimes made on the caudal fin and gills. Then the fish is stored on ice (or sometimes dry-aged). The method is becoming increasingly popular with consumers, in parallel with the growing demand for live fish. It facilitates the maturation of the fish flesh, as if it were meat. *Ikejime* is done at sea by fishermen directly or by specialized professionals on land, after a period of rest in tanks. The aim is to avoid stressing the fish as much as possible. The fish is individualized, contrary to the hundreds of (hidden) fish gutted by the sailors of the industrial companies at each trawl run. It is killed as soon as possible and does not have time to be in its death throes. The technique of *ikejime* sends back an artisanal image: it is the “well-worked” fish at its best. But it also conveys an exotic image of fishing to customers who have the capital to pay for it and appreciate it, like Kobe beef. This interest in Japanese technique is part of a contemporary French culinary landscape that has been fascinated for some years by Japanese gastronomy and Japanese tools, particularly knives.

The comparison between fish and meat is also more and more popular in the high gastronomy world. Fish has been rehabilitated and is now considered as important as meat in terms of possibilities of cooking (preparation of the parts of the animal's body, their maturation, and the variety of the recipes to imagine). Josh Niland, who embodies this movement with his advice to consume fish “from scale to tail” (2021), even named his restaurant “The Fish Butchery” (see Fig. 3: On Niland's Instagram, Fish is displayed as the finest butcher's cut). Niland surprises his customers by explaining that “fresh” fish, like freshly killed cows, has no taste, and that it must be dry-aged (rather than iced) after a technically appropriate killing. Luxury is thought of in an ecological way, and the supposedly unappetizing parts of fish are reconsidered by chefs. Fish offal dishes are thus becoming increasingly popular and most frequently prepared in the kitchen of fancy Western restaurants. Through these exotic and specialized techniques, the fish acquires a certain form of “nobility,” which is not far from that which the fish had on the modern tables. Nonetheless, the wealthy classes that make up the clientele of these restaurants cultivate the taste of the fish itself and not that of a tasteless flesh that was suitable for “maigre” days and was then decorated with rich sauces in the Middle Ages. The customer here eats a flesh that is not thought of as a simple protein intake, but which has been transformed—one could almost say shaped—by an artisan. On fieldwork, the link is very often made between the fish thus prepared and a work of art.

These techniques are not accessible to everyone, and imply an apprenticeship, a cultural capital that takes the form of a class distinction through the political commitment of consumers integrated into a market niche. It allows producers to increase the value of their products when they are “well-worked,” but it also subjects these same producers to a neoliberal imperative that forces them to embody the moral imperative permanently. “*I only do orders. The volume of work... it's not possible otherwise,*” says Owen. Some local auction fish markets, such as the one in Quiberon in Brittany, have adapted to the supply and demand for this type of products. They have invested in tanks where the fish is left swimming for a few days before being slaughtered, far from the hook that pulled them from the bottom of the sea. Twice on my fieldwork, small-scale fishermen practicing *ikejime* joked about the possibility of experimenting the Japanese technique on a conger eel. “*Good luck*” said one of them, before bursting into laughter. “*We could write “conger ikejime” on the labels, and people would see nothing but fire (...) but it's completely impossible, already just killing it is an adventure, then killing it using the ikejime technique, no! Impossible! And dangerous too!*” The absence of certification, of standardization of this practice still allows to recover the agency by appropriating a narrative identifiable by the greatest number. As it is impossible to imagine the *ikejimé* aboard large vessels, the term comes to signify a difference in the commercial imagination, the one of an artisanal care that the industry is not capable of providing, the one of an attention given to the fish by the small-scale fisherman, and of a slower relationship to time, to communities. It is perhaps in this storytelling that the struggle for survival of small-scale activity is played out the most. Every way of using the *ikejime* technique that I was able to observe during fieldwork or to note in interviews with small-scale fishermen was singular. Not one of them corresponded exactly to an “official” definition, and this is also where the strength of the gesture lies, because each one claimed the

same term, as a symbol of resistance to industrial appropriation. It becomes possible again to impose a rhythm, to recover agency.

Let us not forget, however, that the entrepreneurial ethos that it imposes traces the halieutic contours of the new spirit of capitalism, in contrast with a worker's "*quant à soi*" (Lüdtke, 1984), the creative unproductivity that would express itself outside the demands of the market. As with the Alaskan salmon in Karen Hébert's fieldwork, the fishing production model is changing: the fishing companies used to think of their catches in terms of a uniform "tonnage" yielding a constant financial flow, which encouraged overfishing. They now tend to market them in terms of a more variable and individualized "quality" product (Hébert, 2010), without however deviating from a capitalist grid of vision of the world. The competition is played out through discourse, through selective labeling, between ecology and neoliberal governance (Bresnihan, 2018; Foley & Hébert, 2013). The resource crisis has encouraged this change in representations because other niche markets had to be invented that were compatible with environmental and social ethics and standards. In a certain way, the construction in opposition to mass agri-food production reproduces some of the aspects of the relationship to non-humans that characterized it, i.e. a manufacture of a wilderness on which is affixed a grid of understanding of the capitalist world. The story told with ikejime is that of obtaining an exceptional product, landed with the minimum of animal suffering, and thanks to a Japanese artisanal technique that arouses the curiosity of the consumer. The ikejime technique, *a fortiori* associated with the local "line-fishing" label, reinforces the marker of a product in opposition to the industrial towed gear. Moreover, trawling techniques are increasingly being singled out in societal debates, such as during the European negotiations on the banning of deep-sea trawling in 2016, and on electric fishing in 2019, and recently the possible banning of all trawling activities in Europe.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the literature on the food morals, by ethnographically investigating the French fishing community. Several findings can be highlighted. First, eating fish and seafood is historically rooted in a tradition of social distinction. The criteria of this distinction have however evolved, following an ecologization of the relations between Western societies and natural environments. Aliette Geistdoerfer and Jacqueline Matras-Guin note the transition from a fish considered as "punishment food" to a food idealized for its image of proximity with wild nature: "The sea, the last bastion to imagine a wild, natural, authentic universe... The French want to incorporate these symbols, the only way to remain in symbiosis with nature" (Geistdoerfer et al., 2003). Consumers want "to be as close as possible to the animals" (Vialles, 1988), a luxury of "mental or physical proximity" shared by two distinct classes, the rural poor and the wealthy gastronome "who likes to recognize or imagine the origin of the dishes." We show in this article that the valorization of the so-called less noble species by small-scale fishermen, i.e., the transfer from a nobility of species to a nobility related to the quality of the food involving killing techniques, would also go in this direction. Moreover, the notions of sensitivity and

animal suffering lead consumers to demand that fishermen take care of the living beings they handle, kill, and transform. The success of the ikejime is partly based on this argument, even if it is put to the service of the quality of the food, rather than the welfare of the animal.

Second, the article shows that the extension of the notion of justice to non-human species is a complex process. Behind the imperative of food quality, hides a reflection on the quality of the fish as a mirror of the moral qualities of the fisherman, like the cows raised by the Nuer people that Evans-Pritchard met in southern Sudan (“their social idiom is a bovine idiom,” 1968). Sandro De Gasparo and Dominique Dessors were able to show that workers in Breton industrial slaughterhouses made the link between their working conditions and the quality of the product they were working on. The pace of production was not only experienced as a source of abnormal suffering at work but was also felt to be an obstacle to good meat quality (De Gasparo & Dessors, 2009). Among all the types of fishing, which are all singular fish hunts, with their qualities and their faults, a certain nobility regularly emerges in the community’s discourse as being the prerogative of the line, the most random tracking and undoubtedly requiring the greatest commitment to put oneself in the position to “*think like a fish*.” And this storytelling, as sincere as it could be, is a seller for a certain category of consumers. Researchers have shown that agribusiness workers were dehumanized in the process of naturalizing the constraints of factory work, and the natural “requirements” related to the animals raised, killed or processed (Joyce et al., 2015; Pachirat, 2012). Our findings confirm that fishing is also concerned by this naturalization of working conditions. The political struggle for better working conditions can then be embodied in the demand for better consideration for the animals involved because the quality of the fish sometimes also overlaps with the quality of life of the fisherman. However, ethnography also shows that fishermen still have a series of neoliberal injunctions, a series of rules subjecting them, in the end, to the market. The types of fish remain socially constructed around a gastronomic culture that differentiates the wealthy from the lower-income customers. Turbot, sole, sea bass are still considered more “noble” fish than others, even though quality marketing has brought in fish that once attracted little consumer interest. In addition to these historical social distinctions, there is indeed a growing ecological-economic interest in fishing techniques, which do not all guarantee the same quality of landed fish. Trawled fish, for instance, is denigrated in these alternative networks, while towed gear is still the most used technique for fish supply. In addition, alternative distribution networks to the traditional auction model create disparities in access to certain fish according to social geography and classes. Access to fish is not a matter of proximity but combines several social factors. The results regarding the reorganization of fisheries markets shows an evolution: what was fair for some and unfair for others a few decades ago is now sometimes reversed. These results also point out which organizations are emerging to generate more equity but show how marginal they are in the industry despite this shift: *Poiscaille*, the leader in the hook-to-fork distribution system represent about 1000 tons of products per year now, while around 500 000 tons of fish are sold each year in France.¹⁹ However, the

¹⁹ https://www.franceagrimer.fr/content/download/69397/document/20220616_CC_%20PECHE_AQUA%202022_FR.PDF

Covid period has been a game-changer for this company, which had 2,500 subscribers at the beginning of 2020, and 20,000 twelve months later. In 2022, *Poiscaille* announced a goal of 80,000 subscribers in 2026. Such a development would mean an industrial change in the sector and in the French fishing landscape.

Author contribution The paper has only 1 contributor, FC.

Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, PPP and JN upon reasonable request.

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