“Girls can’t go fishing; it’s only for boys. You can’t come,” my big brother Bob told me flatly when we were kids. I stuck out my tongue and kicked his shins. Now I know he just didn’t want the bratty kid sister tagging along with the guys. Thus I never experienced the fun of recreational fishing in my youth.

But fast-forward twenty years or so to a time in the 1980s when the same brother, possibly suffering a pang of conscience, invited me on a fishing trip. The occasion was that he had somehow acquired a battered old boat from a down-on-his-luck guy in a bar, who’d downed a few too many drinks. A saltwater fishing license for this sort of outing wasn’t required then, as it is today. Bob had gleefully rushed off to get a couple of poles and life jackets, then called me. Thus began my first fishing trip.

Although I had my doubts about the impromptu adventure, I cheerfully agreed, in the spirit of regaining a dream deferred. We set off in the small derelict-looking motorized boat, navigating through the many gleaming pleasure craft out on a day of fair skies and fair winds. We killed the motor aways out on the Sound, stuck worms on our hooks, and cast our rods with feelings of anticipation and a false sense of seaworthiness.

Before the sun began to drop, we landed four scup, which my brother called porgies. I deduced that both names mean the same, like Batman and the Caped Crusader, but discovered later that scup are the New England porgy; there are other similar species also called porgy. Triumphant we detached them. They were small, about a pound or so, and had large eyes on compressed, highly curved, pale silvery bodies. My brother Bob saw our easy catch as a testimony to his fishing prowess. These fish like to hang out in estuaries and near rocks, shellfish beds, and pilings or jetties, he told me. They eat squid, conch, sand worms, shrimp, night crawlers, mussels and clams, according to the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection’s fishing web site, http://www.ct.gov/dep/fishing.

“Porgies are generally not the target species for most recreational fishermen,” my Sea Grant colleague Tessa Getchis told me yesterday. “Porgies are caught a lot, but that is because they eat almost anything.” She added, “We always called them ’bait stealers’. No matter what we were fishing for, we usually caught porgies!” Most anglers consider summer flounder, striped bass, black fish and black sea bass much more desirable, because of their larger size and few bones. But porgies were there, and porgies we caught.

The trip then turned into a Murphy’s Law comical disaster, as the sorry old boat began to self-destroy. First the motor gasped its last sputter, and we were dead in the water—no radio, no oars. The boat began to take on water, and I started frantically bailing with an empty can. Eventually I stood up, gingerly, and waved my arms, shouting for help. I began to picture my children growing up motherless.

Fortunately, a good Samaritan zipping by offered to tow us to shore, without too much disdainful curling of the lips. As we were pulled along, the ill-fated hunk of junk began to lose parts to Davy Jones’s locker, one by one. As we reached shore with the sinking hulk, we were further embarrassed by a little boy in snorkel gear who approached, holding up a piece of our boat.

“Here, you lost this back there” he announced, to our chagrin. By this time I never wanted to embark on an adventure without proper preparation again, and whether I wanted to speak to my brother was quite questionable too. We thanked our helpers.

Smiling, Bob turned to me, handing over the shimmering treasure, the string of porgies.
“Here, you take these fish home,” he ordered in his best tone of big brother generosity, smiling broadly.

“I don’t want them—they’re full of lots of really small bones and I don’t have time to take them out to prepare it. You can cook them all for dinner.”

“But…!” I sputtered in alarm. He was gone.

I couldn’t imagine then what to do with the porgies either, but I was raised to believe that wasting food was a sin, so a solution had to be found. They were put on ice. Next morning, I gave them to an Asian graduate student at my workplace, reasoning that students were known to be generally a hungry lot, and shrewdly guessing that he might know exactly what to do. He did, and he seemed pleased with the unexpected gift.

Now, scup/porgies are one of the most popular fish that recreational anglers catch in Long Island Sound. I’ve learned that you generally pan-fry them whole, then pick the flesh from the bones to use in recipes for salads, casseroles, fish tacos, and so on. They are especially popular, I’m told, in Hispanic and African American kitchens.

Scup (porgy) abundance fluctuates from year to year, according to the EPA Long Island Sound Study’s Sound Health 2010 newsletter, but is higher than in the previous decade due to a strong management plan. While some species, such as winter flounder, are declining, possibly due to warming temperatures, scup are doing quite well.

Recently, Johnson & Wales University in Providence Rhode Island, well-known for its College of Culinary Arts, held a contest in which people could vote for the tastier fish, porgy or tilapia. It was part of their effort to raise awareness about sustainable seafood. Tilapia is easily grown in tanks, so readily available, but has a reputation for being very bland-tasting without seasonings or flavorful sauce to enhance it. Porgy won the contest, hands-down.

So here I offer a recipe from Tony DiLernia, a professor at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York, for baked porgy with basil. It sounds so good, I’m tempted to go fishing again—in somebody else’s boat. If you’ve not encountered porgy before, I hope your first meeting doesn’t involve a leaky boat or a distress call, and definitely not a guy who over-indulged in a bar.

### Baked Porgy with Basil

**Ingredients**

- 4 porgies (scup), whole, scaled, finned, gilled and cleaned, (3/4 pound each)
- 3 tbsp. butter, margarine or olive oil
- 3 tbsp. shallots or green onions, minced
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 cup white wine, dry
- 3 tbsp. basil (20 leaves) fresh, chopped, (or 1 tbsp. dried basil)

**Method**

Preheat oven to 375°F. Use a cooking spray or coat the bottom of a baking pan with vegetable oil. Spread shallots or green onions in the baking pan. With a sharp knife make several slits along the sides of each porgy. Place fish on the bed of onions and sprinkle with salt and chopped basil. Set aside for approximately 5 minutes to mix flavors. Pour wine over the fish and dot the fish with the butter or margarine (or drizzle with olive oil). Cover with foil and bake for 10-15 minutes until the fish flesh turns opaque and begins to flake.

Serves 4. Preparation time 10-15 minutes.

*contributed by Tony DiLernia*