

MATT MORAN: Cook a barra for laughs

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From: [The Courier-Mail](#)

January 22, 2012



CHUCK IT ON: Grilled barramundi cutlets with oregano, tomato and black olive makes the perfect Australia Day feed. *Source:* Supplied

WHAT could be more Australian than to throw a barra on the barbie on Australia Day? All we need to go with it is some fine weather.

Despite a somewhat disappointing summer, with many al fresco dining plans shifting indoors due to undesirable weather, I've still got high hopes and my fingers crossed for a good old Australia Day barbecue.

While there's sure to be a sausage or two, some of my dad's lamb and possibly some prawns, I'm planning to make a feast of some barramundi too.

There's much debate about farmed barra versus the wild-caught stuff, but I'd go with farmed every time, as I find the flavour to be less muddy. At ARIA, we use West Australian-farmed barramundi from Cone Bay, where the fish are reared in large saltwater sea-cages, and exposed to twice daily tides. The tidal changes mean the fish spend much of the time swimming against the current, exercising their muscles and essentially purging them, leaving

them with a firm texture and clean, sweet flavour. When it comes to barramundi, it's as close to perfection as you're likely to get.

When buying barramundi yourself, be sure to ask its origin. Any fishmonger should be able to tell you something about where the fish has come from and vouch for the quality, regardless of whether it's from Cone Bay or elsewhere.

Fish of any kind are quick to soak up the flavours of a marinade, giving the sweet flesh an extra flavour hit. Lemon and garlic are classic pairings, as well as any number of herbs. I've added dried oregano here - keep an eye out for dried Greek oregano, also called rigani, which is sold in large bunches and is particularly tasty.

I make a double quantity of the lemon/garlic/oregano mixture and reserve half of it to use as the base for the warm dressing I'll spoon over the fish once it's had its time on the barbie. This serves to layer the key flavours and help them pack a bit more punch.

Chopped tomatoes add freshness, and although I've taken the trouble to skin them and remove the seeds before chopping, if you're not inclined to fiddle around it's not entirely necessary (call it force of habit from years of fine dining cooking). You could even use a combination of some of the little tomatoes that are around instead. I've seen tiny red grape tomatoes, yellow cherry tomatoes and green-skinned kumatoes that would work beautifully, either singularly or in combination. The only preparation required is to halve or quarter them before adding to the dressing.

Briny black olives (pitted, of course) add an intense salty counterpoint to the tomato sweetness. The fish itself won't take very long to cook. Once it changes from pearly translucence to opaque, it's time to take it away from the heat to prevent over-cooking. Spoon a generous amount of dressing over the fish as soon as it's on the plate so the sweet fishy juices can mingle and become part of the dressing, too. With a dish like this on the table, it's sure to be a happy Australia Day, rain, hail or shine.

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