



# Fishing tradition in Novigrad





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Charming Istria

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*Photo of a catch in Tar Cove (the fisherman on the far right is Gioacchino Favretto), taken after 1945, owner: Roberto Krevatin*

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## A love story since time immemorial

Often described as a *fishermen's town in northwestern Istria*, Novigrad nurtures a timeless bond with fishing. Fishermen have always been the heart and soul of Novigrad. You will often see them gathered around their trawlers in Mandrač Port, teasing one another while sorting through the nets with their fingers hardened by the wind and the salt. If asked, they will tell you that it is easier to share the sea than land, as the sea cannot be owned. So there is no rivalry between true fishermen. Of course, they do have a 'distinctive' vocabulary and are known to raise their tone of voice to signal their preferred location, where they will cast their net, how and when they will pull it out, or to express their disappointment over a poor catch. Fishermen's lives are intertwined with the sea: it can play a meagre role, affect their everyday lives or seal their fate. And they truly seem to be a part of a different universe, finely tuned to nature's cycles, the wind and the capricious temper of the fish; one where no certainties are guaranteed, and each new morning brings a different outcome. In this perpetual game, they remain devoted to the sea, respecting its secrets and hoping for a stroke of luck to bring them the most desired treasure - a good catch.

This text is an homage to fishing and fishermen, whose perseverance, hard work and legacy passed on from one generation to another leave us in awe. It brings to light their history, traditions, sayings, superstitions, anecdotes, stories and recipes, and is a recognition by Novigrad to both the fishermen and the port for what they have contributed to the town's past, present and future.

# Fishing in Novigrad: from ancient times to the present day

## **ANCIENT TIMES**

The first rural fishing agglomeration developed in the ancient times.

## **EARLY MIDDLE AGES**

Novigrad became the centre of the diocese in the 5th century. Ecclesiastical and secular authorities built their private fishing grounds – ponds at the Mirna river estuary and leased them out for a definite term in exchange for significant catch volumes from their coloni (tenant fishermen).

## **804 AD. THE FIRST WRITTEN RECORD**

The document titled *Placitum of Riziano* tells us that John, the Frankish Duke of Istria, generated high income from his estates, in particular from a large imperial estate in Novigrad with 200 tenant fishermen and a large fish pond.

## **13<sup>TH</sup> CT. FISHING AND THE CHURCH**

Bishop Oton of Poreč establishes the boundaries of fishing grounds in Luka Mirna Bay in 1266 – the borderline reaches Dajla Port in the north, and an unknown *Rostrum* site in the south.

## **13<sup>TH</sup> – 18<sup>TH</sup> CT. VENETIAN RULE**

Just like other towns of western Istria, Novigrad was ruled by the Venetians, who controlled the ports for the waterway that connected Venice to Dalmatian towns and the Levant. Wheat transport was crucial to Venice, so its galleys were met on the Istrian coast by specially trained pilots. Those skilled seamen would escort galleys packed with wheat through the dangerous sea areas

all the way to Venice. Novigrad was a pilotage port, but also a great fishing location.

## **15<sup>TH</sup> CT. FISHING CLAUSE**

Mentioned in the Novigrad Statute from 1402, it stipulated that any fisherman taking a lease on a fishing ground from the Novigrad municipality was obligated to sell their entire catch at the fish market at Novigrad's square throughout the Lent period.

## **FISHING IN MID-17<sup>TH</sup> CT.**

Giacomo Filippo Tommasini, Bishop of Novigrad, wrote that despite the poor and small diocese, fishing was in full swing in the period from 1641 to 1655, bringing the fishermen decent profits. Besides mullets, gilthead seabreams and dentexes, Tomasini also mentions freshwater eels. Salted fish traded well, too.

## **FISHING IN THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CT.**

A period marked by deteriorated economic conditions, poverty and low population density in Novigrad, which is why very few written records of fishing were left. What we do know for sure is that back then, a waterway was filled in and the island close to the shore (today's town centre) was transformed into a peninsula.

## **EARLY 19<sup>TH</sup> CT. AUSTRIAN RULE**

According to a list from the 1827 cadastre of Franz Joseph I, a total of 50 residents of the municipality of Novigrad were employed in seafaring and fishing. Two vessels belonged to fishermen, and all others to boatmen.

## **EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CT. THE FIRST COOPERATIVE**

In 1911, Novigrad accounted for 123 fishermen, 51 vessels, and fishing gears for sardines, tuna, bottom dwelling fish and anchovies. Fishing became a full-time job at that time. After the First World War, fishery revolved around the sardine. Novigrad's first fishery cooperative was founded in 1922, with its members paying rent to the Diocese of Poreč for fishing in its part of Tar Cove. However, they owned nets and could hold on to their catch.



### **20<sup>TH</sup> CT. AN ERA OF GROWTH AND MODERNISATION**

After the Second World War, the fishing fleet underwent expansion and catch volumes increased, primarily as a result of mastering new techniques and conquering anchovy and mackerel fishing grounds in the open sea. This period was also marked by the opening of the first fish canning plant. In the 1970s, cotton in fishing nets was replaced by synthetics and numerous mechanical innovations were introduced, such as a towing winch and boat electronics.

### **21<sup>ST</sup> CT. AN IMPRESSIVE FISHING FLEET**

There are currently 30 registered fishing businesses in Novigrad. Their fleet comprises trawlers that are primarily focused on shellfish and musky octopus, and a smaller number of boats that fish for soles and whitefish using bottom-set gillnets.



*Mandrač Port, A postcard sent in 1963,  
owner: Lapidarium Museum*

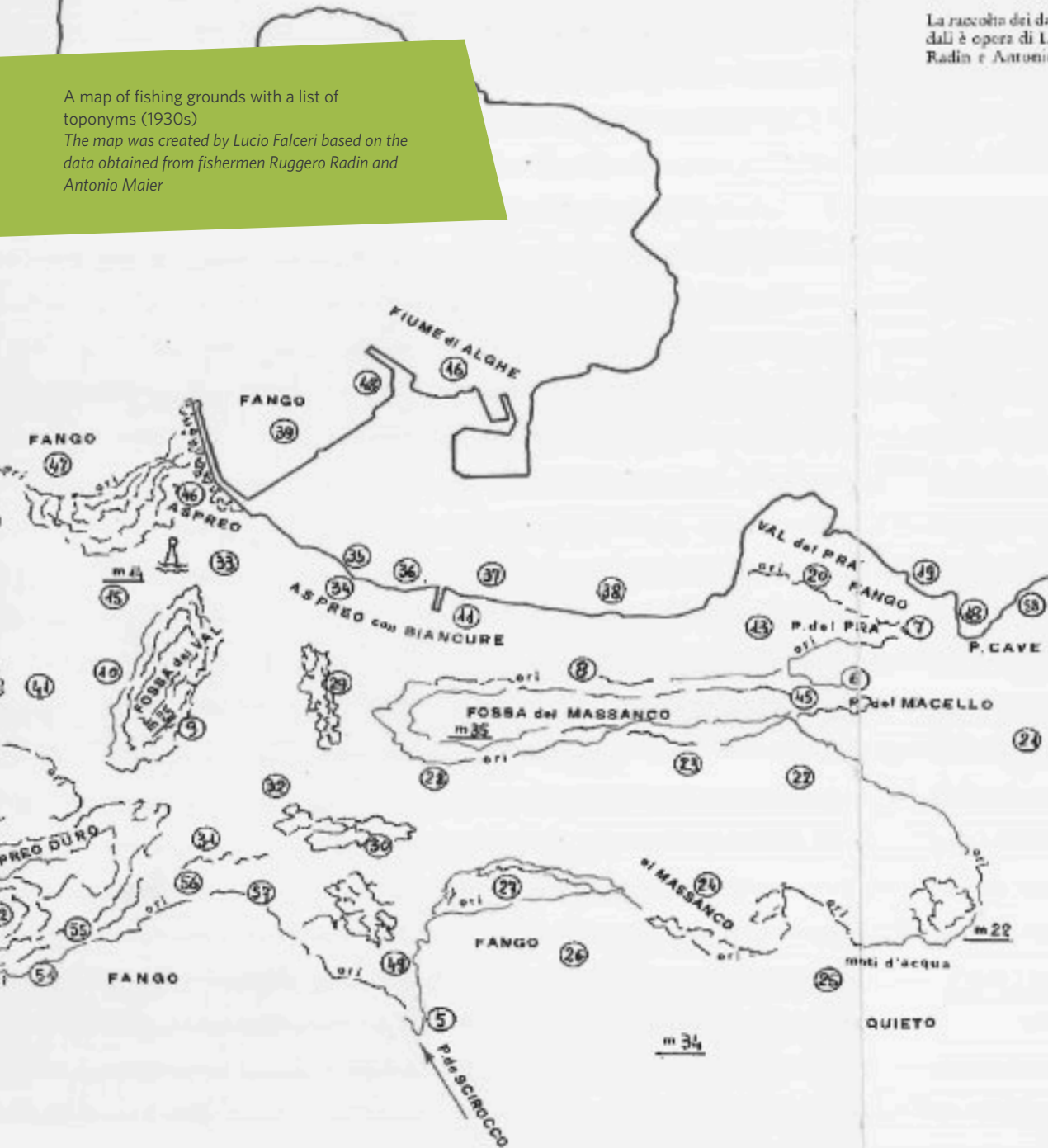


*A boy with a harpoon, Mandrač Port  
in Novigrad, 1905*

A map of fishing grounds with a list of toponyms (1930s)  
 The map was created by Lucio Falceri based on the data obtained from fishermen Ruggero Radin and Antonio Maier

## I FONDALI

La raccolta dei dati e la compilazione della mappa dei fondali è opera di Lucio Falceri, su indicazioni di Ruggero Radin e Antonio Maier.



### ELENCO DEI TOPONIMI

- 1) Punta Muiela
- 2) Puntal de Maistro
- 3) Puntal de Ponente
- 4) Puntal de Garbin
- 5) Puntal de Sirocco (Sciocco)
- 6) Puntal del Macello
- 7) Puntal del Pra
- 8) La fossa del Massanco
- 9) La fossa del Val
- 10) Pesca con la togna a riboni
- 11) Speron
- 12) Aspreo duro
- 13) Aspreo meno duro
- 14) I forti (sottocosta)
- 15) Tinto foudi bianchi
- 16) Fiume de alghe
- 17) Le Prese
- 18) Punta Cave
- 19) Molo del Pra
- 20) Val del Pra Fango
- 21) Pesca delle menole (Tire)
- 22) Banchi
- 23) Pesca con la togna
- 24) El Massanco
- 25) Metri d'acqua
- 26) Fango
- 27) Sassi
- 28) Pesca con la togna a riboni (acqua cresceme)
- 29 - 30 - 31) Biancaure
- 32) I Forti (La Tessa)
- 33) La Mea
- 34) Aspreo meno duro con bianchi
- 35) Belvedere
- 36) Porta (delle mura)
- 37) Casa di Umberto Sain
- 38) Macello
- 39) Aspreo
- 40) Testa Mea
- 41) I Fortini de Ponente

- 42) Bianco
- 43) El V
- 44) Aspreo
- 45) I Forti
- 46) Aspreo
- 47) Ori
- 48) Sanità
- 49) Aspreo
- 50 - 51) (tras)
- 52 - 53 - (tras)
- 58) Aspreo

The 'Zvijezda' cooperative in Mandrač Port. A postcard dated 1960, owner: Lapidarium Museum

## The golden era of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century fishing

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Novigrad accounted for 123 fishermen and some 50 vessels, and fishing became a full-time job. After the First World War, fishing in Novigrad revolved around the sardine. Mulletts were also important, and Tar Cove was the best fishing ground. The catch there was equally shared between the fishermen from Novigrad and Poreč until the 1960s. The fishing fleet on Istria's west coast faced no major losses during the Second World War, and the catch volumes increased in the post-war years as a result of mastering new fishing techniques. This entailed a need for a fish processing plant and led to the forming of a fishery cooperative called 'Zvijezda' (Croatian word for star), initially 'Srdela' (Croatian word for sardine), in 1951. It featured two boats, a fish market and a small plant for processing fish, mainly sardines, anchovies and crustaceans. It was located on the very coast, between Porporela and the small pier, in a place that is today packed with konobas and restaurants.

In the 1950s, Novigrad's fishermen recorded an average of 757 tonnes of sea fish catch, ranking first in this respect on the territory from Koper to Pula. As tourism grew parallel with the development of fishery in Novigrad, the 1960s saw an introduction of popular fishermen's evenings, held at Mandrač Port and alongside Porporela. They proved to be a huge success, and it was precisely Novigrad's fishermen who contributed to their realisation by donating fish. The events also featured arrivals of fishing boats from Izola, decorated with flags and pennants. Fishermen's evenings have become a tradition and are organised each year in late August, to honour St Pelagius – Novigrad's patron saint.





*A Delamaris Izola fishing boat parade during the Fishermen's Festival, Savudrija Bay, 1970s. Photograph owner: Roberto Krevatin*

# Traditional fishing techniques

## **EEL**

Nets would be cast at dawn along the beaches, to enclose the small coves where eels laid eggs. The fishermen would then strike the sea surface with their paddles and throw rocks to rush eels into the nets. The catch volumes were poor, between 10 and 15 kg a day.

## **SAND SMELT**

February was the optimal month for sand smelt fishing, with starry, moon-lit nights providing perfect conditions for the fish to come close to the shore and lay their eggs there. In the daytime you could see the egg clusters pulsating with life.

## **GARFISH**

Purse seines would be cast in March and April. Handlines were also used to catch garfish in the summer months, mostly by boys when fishing from the Novigrad pier ('diga' in local dialect).

## **BOGUE (BOOPS BOOPS), HORSE MACKEREL, ANNULAR SEABREAM, COMMON PANDORA**

These fishes would arrive in the coastal waters from September to October, in the period of first bora gusts, and fishermen knew exactly where to look for them. They would catch up to 200 kg a day. As dolphins used to tear the nets and eat the catch on a regular basis, fishermen would often lift the nets at night to get ahead of them.

## **GILTHEAD SEABREAM**

Gilthead seabream fishing involved two boats that would cast their nets in a way to surround the chosen site in a wide circle and illuminate the bottom with a fishing light placed at the centre. Fish would be trapped in an attempt to escape.

### SEABASS

As the seabasses would tear regular nets with their sharp gills, fishermen used trammel nets, the so-called *pasarele*, which would entrap them in a sort of a bag to prevent their escape. It was permitted to fish with a handline from the bridge in Antenal. This fish was easiest to catch in the early morning, as the river level would decrease and the water would get murky.

### COMMON PANDORA

Shoals of common pandora would arrive in the Istrian waters in the autumn and spring seasons, while in the winter they would linger around the rocky bottom. There were many good fishing grounds, but fishermen needed to carefully choose the site. Missing it by 10 or 20 m would often mean returning home empty-handed.

### ANNULAR SEABREAM, SCORPION FISH

These fishes find shelter in numerous cracks inside the rocks and they are most active at dawn. As it was not easy for fishermen to find their way around in the foggy weather, they would listen to the sounds coming from the sea depths. A distinctive clicking sound meant they were close. Horse mackerels could always be found among the stone blocks of the jetty in the port of Novigrad, so it was all about 'the early bird catching the worm!'

### FLATFISH – FLOUNDER, SOLE, CUTTLEFISH, BLACK SEABREAM, DENTEX

Flounder nets were used primarily for flounders and soles. While flounders lingered at the marshy bottom in the vicinity of the Mirna river, soles would be fished for on *bragozzo boats* from November to January.

### SARDINE

Sardines were fished for in the waters between Novigrad and Rovinj. Fishermen would head out to the sea and cast their nets. One would keep guard to protect them from dolphins, while others would rest until the nets were ready to be pulled out.



*Fishermen handling a purse seine, Novigrad, between 1955 and 1960: In the foreground: Albino Rihter. From left to right: Bruno Dimitri, Pino Zubin, Berto Žužić, Guerino Miani, Bepi Soldatić, Berto Cittar*

### ANCHOVY

In windless periods, anchovies would migrate from the Gulf of Trieste, and their arrival would be signalled by the seagulls swooping down towards the sea to catch the prey. Fishermen would then circle the site with their nets and strike against the sea surface with their paddles, ultimately catching up to as much as 100 kg of anchovies.

### GREY MULLET

Grey mullets were fished for once or twice a year in Tar Cove using shore seines. Some data say that this was a practice for more than 900 years. It was banned upon Croatia's EU accession.

### PICAREL

Fishermen would set up gillnets and longlines along and off the shore to



Catch of oily fish, Miljenko Benjak on the right, Edi Sain and Ennio Udovicich on the left by the cockpit, 1980s, owner: Roberto Krevatin

catch picarels. The fishing season lasted from January to May. They were angled as well, and local fisherman Piero Radin was a true champion.

#### **SHARK**

In May and June, during the periods of a full moon, sharks would gather for spawning in the waters between Dajla and Lovrečica, and near the Mirna river. They were fished for with longlines, using half a sardine as bait.

#### **CRUSTACEANS (WARTY CRABS AND SPIDER CRABS)**

The crustaceans were fished for in May, using the so-called *švanjeras*, robust nets resilient to their pinches. The fishermen who had more than a hundred nets would go fishing on the high seas, as far as 20 miles off the coast. Daily or two-day catches near the shore would total between 50 and 60 kg.

#### **STRIPED SEABREAM**

Fishermen would cast their nets in the coves and wait for striped seabreams to arrive from the south. Their seasonal migration lasted from

March to May. They would migrate north in search for food and stay there until November. Hence the saying *Per san Andrea bisogna voltar le balighe*<sup>1</sup>. (Nets get emptied on St Andrew's Day).

#### **MACKEREL**

Mackerels were fished for in April, about six miles off the coast, where fishermen would wait to catch them on their way north. They would cast nets at night and pull them up in the morning, hoping for the best outcome. In May, trolling lines were the most frequently used fishing tackle. They would be towed at the speed of up to 2 miles/h.

#### **SARDINE, ANCHOVY, MACKEREL**

Purse seines were first used between the two world wars. Fishing was a profitable business, but necessitated pricy equipment. A smaller boat would attract fish at the seabed with bright lights, and the main boat would then encircle the shoal with a net, which was then hauled aboard by a towboat with a winch.

#### **RED MULLET, PRAWN, SMALL FISH**

Trawl nets hauled by *bragozzo* boats were once the only tackle used for fishing in Novigrad waters. The nets had lead weights attached to their bottom part, which would scrape the seafloor as they were dragged. It was a primitive fishing method that did not bring major profits and was later replaced by trawling.

<sup>1</sup>Shortened quotes from the book *"Cittanova d'Istria nel ricordo dei suoi abitanti"*, Fameia Cittanovese - Unione degli Istriani 1989, pp. 82 - 94

# Fishing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

There are currently some 30 registered fishing businesses in Novigrad. Their fleet mostly comprises trawlers for catching shellfish and musky octopus, and a smaller number of boats that fish for soles and whitefish using bottom-set gillnets.

With 48 commercial fishing licences issued, Novigrad is still among the leaders in Istria in this respect. Fishery is an ongoing activity here and there are no major oscillations as far as catch volumes are concerned.

The town takes pride in a wide range of fish and shellfish catches compared to significantly bigger Croatian towns and cities.

Fishing has to date remained one of the most important and most promising industries, which is why Novigrad's development strategy incorporates the preservation of this tradition and stipulates further investments into fishing infrastructure, in line with the objectives of the European Green Deal.

<b>January</b>	Seabass, squid
<b>February</b>	Monkfish, common pandora, flounder, white seabream, two-banded seabream, sharp-snouted seabream, spider crab, squid
<b>March</b>	Grey mullet, flounder, squid, cuttlefish
<b>April</b>	Dentex, gilthead seabream, cuttlefish, scallop, queen scallop, oyster, warty venus
<b>May</b>	Scallop, queen scallop, oyster, warty venus, scorpion fish, shark
<b>June</b>	Shark, scorpion fish
<b>July</b>	Shark, mussel, Noah's Ark shell, sardine, anchovy, scorpion fish
<b>August</b>	Shark, mussel, Noah's Ark shell, sardine, anchovy, red mullet, scorpion fish
<b>September</b>	Gilthead seabream, octopus
<b>October</b>	Gilthead seabream, octopus, sole
<b>November</b>	Octopus, sole, seabass, squid
<b>December</b>	Sole, seabass, squid



# Weather lore

Fishermen have always been good at reading the signs of nature, primarily those related to moon phases and winds, but they have also believed in other omens. When entering a port, they would watch seagulls fly in an attempt to discern the prevailing wind. Or they would observe the statue of St Pelagius at the top of the bell tower, mounted on a flexible stand in 1913. When the bora wind was blowing the statue would turn north, which was a good sign for heading out to the sea. If it faced south, one could expect sirocco, which was a bad omen. With no precise weather forecasts, fishermen would rely on the skies to bring them luck and a good catch, as their very existence depended on the weather conditions.

A part of these extraordinary oral traditions has been preserved in the form of sayings, the accuracy of which is truly impressive!

## **Original saying in the istrovenetian dialect**

Interpretation.

### **Caligada granda.**

If there are lightning flashes high up in the sky, you are safe.  
If they occur close to the sea, expect either caligada granda or heavy fog.

### **El sol va in saca, o vento o aqua.**

When the sun hides behind the clouds at dusk, expect wind or rain.

### **Luna colegada, mariner in pie.**

When the Moon is asleep, sailors are awake.  
(meaning: when the Moon is new)

### **Luna in pie, mariner colegà.**

When the Moon is awake, sailors are asleep.  
(meaning: when the Moon is full)

### **Stella e luna, porta fortuna.**

A shining star close to the Moon is a good omen.

### **No spetarte mai la bora se'l sirocco in mar lavora.**

Expect no bora when sirocco is whirling over the sea.

### **Tre calighi, una bora o una piova.**

Three days of fog are followed by a day of bora or rain.

### **Sercio lontan, piova vissin. Sercio vissin, piova lontan.**

When the Moon is far from Earth, expect rain.  
When the Moon is close to Earth, there will be no rain.

### **Luna in ponente, aqua crescente. Luna in levenate, aqua calante.**

The higher the Moon, the greater the difference between the high and low tide.  
The lower the Moon, the smaller the difference between the high and low tide.

### **Garbin bardassa, quel che'l trova el lassa.**

When the whimsical libeccio wind is blowing, the weather will not change.

### **Pescador de amo, poco guadagno.**

If you fish with a hook and line, you earn little.

### **Rosso de sera, bel tempo se spera.**

A red sunset today promises nice weather tomorrow.

## Fishermen's superstitions

Fishermen are quite superstitious, and this intriguing part of their oral traditions has also been passed from one generation to another. Below are some of the so-called *portascalogne* – bad omens that fishermen still watch out for.

*Never say good luck or have a great catch to a fisherman! Instead, make a 'sign of the horn' hand gesture to chase away bad luck.*

*A woman on board is an omen of bad luck.*

*Never say "rabbit" on a boat.*

*Never bring or open an umbrella on board.*

*Never head out to the sea on a Friday 17<sup>th</sup>.*

*Never turn a loaf of bread upside down when on board.*

## Fishing ventures with a salty twist

*Fishermen's stories recorded by Sergio Gobbo*

### **What is more frightful than a whale? Three whales!**

Something truly incredible, but most certainly true, happened some two centuries ago. It was a very warm summer and the town was stricken by famine. One morning three enormous whales got stranded in the then cove (today's marina). If anyone knew what to do, it was the members of the Imperial Navy. All town residents came running to the beach, some for the meat, some for the fat for candles, and some just to see the miracle that had never been seen before in the Adriatic. Joyful feasts lasted for days. However, our elderly generations say that the large quantities of meat combined with sizzling summer temperatures led to the meat going bad, and after a week a nasty disease occurred and took a lot of lives.

A large whale bone on display in Novigrad's elementary school, and an entire skeleton exhibited in the Natural History Museum in Trieste corroborate this story.

### **When lanterns light up the sky**

Farming and especially fishing have always been the main activities in this area. But the true story of fishing started in the late 1950s, with a big *saccaleva* boat and two small wooden boats (*kaic*) that fishermen would use to catch large quantities of sardines during their night fishing ventures. There were six or seven *saccaleva* boats in Novigrad and on moonless nights each would be escorted by two small boats with lanterns. It was a true spectacle for us children: the fleet would head out at sunset and return in the morning. Seeing the lit-up lanterns on the horizon was just magical. The sea and the boats, sardines, lanterns and countless stars – after all these years I still keep reliving it every night.

### **In the jaws of a shark**

There were usually ten sailors on a saccaleva boat: eight fishermen and two persons in charge of lanterns. My father was the captain of one such boat, and I was truly lucky as he would often take me fishing with him. I grew quite fond of one of the fishermen – Albino Sain, who was always the last one to come aboard and was thus nicknamed Decimo (the Tenth). He was almost like a father to me, and he always had great sea stories to share. So here is one: I was the one to signal when it was time to close and pull up the cod-ends filled with thousands of sardines, mackerels and squids. A big fish or two would often stray in there as well. One evening, I spotted an enormous dark shark. As I kneeled down to see the creature better, it jumped out of the sea with its jaws wide open, exposing its jagged teeth and an abyss of its insides. I flinched back and it was a life saver. I have been extra cautious ever since.

*Patching of nets, Porporela. Karpinjan in the background. Postcard from 1980, property of the Lapidarium museum.*



## **Novigrad's fishermen in person**

*An interview with local fishermen, held in January 2022*

### **Silvio Simonović – Cicilia**



*"I owe my vitality and good health to the sea and the way of life that means becoming one with it. I have always loved the sea and this is why I still go fishing. Whatever the trouble, I head out to the sea and I immediately feel better."*

### **Ciano and I**

Luciano Udovicich – Ciano and I started fishing with experienced fishermen when we were fourteen. We went straight on a night fishing venture and loved it. It's just you and the fish – an exciting battle. Ciano and I were excellent rowers. We spent almost 30 years, from 1964 to

1993, on our *batana* boat. And when we replaced it with a motor boat, we were unstoppable. No one could beat us. Wouldn't want it to sound like bragging, but I'm quite sure that Ciano and I were the best night fishermen with harpoons in Yugoslavia. The two of us supported all nine of our family members.

### **Navigating without a GPS**

We memorised a great number of orientation points. When going night fishing, we had to know where the fishing spots were. In the middle of the night. Without a radar or a map. Not even foggy weather could distract us. We were so familiar with the area that we knew precisely where and when to expect fish. We developed our tactics when it came to immersing nets. We knew where to find gilthead bream and white seabream. Other fishermen would pass by our secret spots, while we would always come back with a good catch. No wonder they were jealous of us.

We were quite resourceful when it came to 'predicting' the weather. Sirocco is perceived as causing unease in people, as a result of changes in the atmospheric pressure, and there was an old man in Rivarela who would always go out for a drink or two when he sensed the sirocco wind coming. So whenever we saw him drinking, we knew we should keep off the sea.

### **Indian jazz**

The famous Croatian jazz musician Boško Petrović loved to come by for a snack together with his jazz ensemble. Those were the times! Fabulous parties with great food – sardines, crabs, lobsters, and so on. Petrović had a soft spot for Novigrad and such gatherings became a tradition. We became good friends. I wore my hair long at the time, so he would call me "Hey there, Indian!" The music and atmosphere his band created in Mandrač were truly special. He came here for over 40 years and will stay in my heart forever..

### **Recipe for the most delicious fish**

After returning to the port, we would fry fish to the great satisfaction of many locals. They would always come by for a snack, saying that it was

much tastier than the fish they prepared at home. All we did was descale some sole fish and add fresh oil and salt. My wife first cuts the fish head off and rinses them under the running water a few times. And it just doesn't taste the same. Some thought the frying pan was the secret to our succulent fish. But let me tell you that we hardly ever washed it. And on the rare occasions that we did, we would only clean it on the inside.

### **Retirement? Not yet...**

Not so long ago there was a documentary about a retired fisherman on Italian television. He was away from the sea for a year or two and his blood pressure increased. His doctor jokingly advised him to start fishing again. When he returned for a health check-up after a while, everything was fine. The doctor asked him: "Did you change your habits or something?", and the man replied "I've started working again". The doctor was surprised and said that he had not really meant it. I could have retired 15 years ago. But I decided not to because I enjoy fishing. I won't be retiring any time soon. What would I do at home anyway?



*Repairing a fishing net, Mandrač, 1970s: Silvio Simonović in the foreground, with Emil Mitrov to his right; Giordano and Berto Stelco, and Nicoletto Demitri can be seen in the background*



## Silvano Štokovac



*“When I retired, back pain kicked in and my leg hurt more and more. My health condition was beyond repair. When I used to set off for the sea, I was the happiest man in the world.”*

### Three generations of fishermen

Fishing runs in my family. My old man was a fisherman, and so is my son Alessandro. I was 14 when I started. My son is well-educated, so I begged him to choose a different path, but he got fed up with people and turned to the sea. He works a lot. Everything he knows, he’s learned from me. I’ve been retired for 30 years now. Time flies...

### How it all begun

I started working on ‘Stelko’ in 1954. It was a boat owned by the Yugoslav Navy, and I spent two years there. In the fifties we would also go crabbing. We’d go as far as 20 miles to the open sea by a small boat powered by a 20 HP engine. Every other day we’d come back with 500 to 600 kilos of crabs and some 70 kilos of rays. It took us four hours in one direction only, and upon returning we’d have to take out the catch from the fishing nets. We didn’t sleep more than four to five hours a

day. We went home just for a quick snack and came back to work. Once I slept only five hours in five days. This was often the case during the moonlight.

### Working at ‘Zvijezda’

I remember when two new boats for Novigrad fishermen, ‘Foka’ and ‘Morž’, were built in Betina, Dalmatia, in 1956. At the time I worked for ‘Zvijezda’, which paid us only for the fish caught, while all the preparations and net cleaning we did for free. No one complained because we were making good money and people were happy. On Mandrač there was a warehouse and workshop, where we kept nets and patched them in the winter to get them ready for the summer.

### Witty solutions

I worked as a motorman. Everyone who wanted this kind of job had to take an exam first, but I wasn’t allowed because I was a churchgoer. So, I used the exam certificate of a fisherman who spent his time in the workshop instead of going to the sea.

### Jokes and pranks

We’d always make pranks while aboard. An old fellow fisherman would spill water on our legs while cleaning the boat. Or he would put a bucket on top of a cabin door, and the first one to open it would be soaking wet. However, once I managed to pull a prank on him. He went to sleep and left his shoes outside, so I filled them with lard. You should have seen the look on his face when he put them on!

### Ah, those were the days!

The Mirna River valley once abounded in sardines and anchovies of an impressive size. On one occasion we cast a net and caught 115 quintals of anchovies. We brought the catch to Rovinj to have it processed into flour. Then we went back to Novigrad and cleaned the nets until 10 pm. When we finished, the captain told us: “Let’s go out!” We were so tired that we could barely stand on our feet, but we went anyway....

### **Boat sweet boat**

I was the first fisherman to start a private business in Novigrad and worked for 30 years on a small boat. I enjoyed being on my own. I could sing, cry, and do whatever I wanted - there was nobody to nag me about it. I built myself an eight-metre plastic boat and enjoyed every minute on it. I installed a hydraulic fishing net, so I didn't even have to leave the cabin.

### **The accident that almost cost me a leg**

Before my old man died, I had an accident. He was steering, and I was taking out the fish. It was a small motorboat with an outboard shaft made of two iron pieces. At one point, the fishing net got stuck under the boat. I lifted my leg and hit the propeller. It cut my boot throughout its length and reached the bone. The wound was so deep that the doctors wanted to cut my leg off. Thankfully I was young, so they decided to put it in a cast for seven months. I didn't work for two years. That accident really took a toll on me.

Tourists watching the boat getting ready to head out, 1970s, owner: Roberto Krevatin



## **Ennio Udovicich**



*"Novigrad boasts the most impressive trawler fleet. Umag and Savudrija follow. Why is this so? Because we have kept our fishing tradition alive. Not even the Rovinj fishermen can beat us."*

### **When I was six**

When I was a kid, fishermen called me Boccia. This means a young apprentice. They called me "Boccia, come here!" to get stuff such as cigarettes, wine and bread for the entire crew. Then we would eat together. I've always held them in high esteem. As I grew older, it was my turn to say to young apprentices "Hey Boccia, go get us..." But they were less eager to do it. Times have changed, I guess.

### **Earliest fishing experiences**

I started fishing in 1982, when I got to join a purse seiner. Most of the crew members were way older than me, and I loved it. I changed jobs and learned different fishing techniques. I got to work on a trawler and a scallop vessel. Older fishermen would never leave the waters around Pula, while we'd go all the way to Biograd. I'm retired now, and my son has taken over. He's very skilful - I've taught him everything I know. He's

in charge of everything but cleaning queen scallops. I do this from 5 am to 10 am. Before that, I take the catch to the Trieste fish market by van. I wake up at 2:30 am.

### **My fondest memories**

In the summer mornings, when we would return to the port with our catch, the pier was full of people waiting for fresh sardines. They sold like crazy and we earned decent money. Back in those golden days, we would roast or grill part of the day's catch. During the lunch break, people working at the local state-owned water and electricity supply companies would bring wine and we would all eat together. Our boat was always packed.

### **My brother and his famous boat**

My brother Luciano Udovicich, whom we all called Ciano, was known for his hard work, inventiveness and skilful hands. In the late 1970s, he 'patented' a small *batana* boat with a Tomos 10/18, the newest outboard engine available at the time, and a glass bottom, which allowed him to go harpoon fishing on his own. Until then, two persons were required: one would row and the other would look through the glass. Luciano would head out to the sea, lie down and look through the glass bottom in search of fish. From the shore it seemed as if there was no one guiding the boat, and Savudrija residents would observe it in awe, commenting "Holy Lord, it's a ghost boat"!



Luciano Udovicich in his younger days, early 1980s, owner: Roberto Krevatin

## **Roberto Krevatin**



*"I am fifty-seven. All I had I gave to the sea. My hands, my legs, my head. Everything."*

### **How it all started**

I was fourteen or fifteen when I started fishing, right after elementary school. My dad, my uncles and cousins, they were all fishermen. My dad wanted me to stay in school and learn a trade. But I chose this.

### **Now and then**

Back then, nets were pulled by hand. There were no hydraulic net-retrieval systems. Today, boats use from 200 to 300 nets. Back in the day, it was only 30 to 40 nets, so the job was less stressful. Most often we would use purse seine nets for catching pelagic fish. We would obtain a special licence to catch sole fish in the winter time. The sardine season lasted from April to October. I prefer how it was before - less hectic. Younger generations got used to all the stress, but it still strange to me. Today there are some 35 to 40 owners of fishing vessels in Novigrad, plus the employees. I think that some hundred families earn a living through fishing. This number hasn't changed much over the years.

### **What I love about fishing**

I loved the time spent with my fellow fishermen. We truly respected those who were getting close to retirement. As they lost some of their strength, we would pull the nets for them, and they would teach us. We were all equal and hanged out together. Before departing, fishing crews made up of seven to ten members would prepare and eat dinner, play cards, had a drink or two and even sang together. And they would always do a great job the next day. When the weather was bad, we would gather in a café in Mandrač. We were literally inseparable. I loved singing. When we were out in the open sea, we'd sing both Istrian songs and the ones that were forbidden at the time (Colomba bianca, Bella ciao). Out there, we didn't have to worry about somebody hearing us.

### **If I were to decide....**

I'd test young fishermen first. Give them a batana boat and tell them to start rowing. Then we'd see how it would all go without the boat engines and other pieces of modern equipment. Today, if an engine shuts down, what do they do? Phone somebody to tow them away. Back then, there was no marine radio or a mobile phone, just a watch and a compass.



*Roberto Krevatin in his younger days, early 1980s, owner: Roberto Krevatin*

## **Amedeo Miani**



*"I know the sea. I can tell by its smell what it has in store for me."*

### **How it all started**

I started fishing with my dad when I was around five or six. My professional career began at the age of 19, after serving in the army. I'm 50 now and I've never had any other job. My dad and my uncles were of great help to me, mostly when it came to repairing nets. I've learned from them as well as from other fishermen. Today I own a big, fully-crewed fishing boat, a fish shop, and a restaurant.

### **What I like about fishing**

I took to fishing immediately. My dad was a fisherman, and I would go with him and help him clean the fish. He was not happy with it. He tried to talk me out of fishing, telling me that it was not an easy job. But my mind was made up. I invested in the fishing business and have been enjoying it ever since.

It still excites me to think about what we might find in the fishing nets. Then there is also a unique relationship between a fisherman and his



boat, getting to know the fishing area, new or different fishing methods, or other fishermen. I simply can't resist it. No day is the same.

### **Fond memories**

Oh, I have tons of memories. I've visited many ports, been to a lot of places. We were known throughout the Adriatic. That's how you make friends: by hanging out in konobas, drinking wine, singing and playing music. And there were no excuses the next morning, going fishing was simply a must. Nowadays we don't leave Novigrad, but I keep in touch with the people I met on those trips. Support and friendship of fellow fishermen mean a lot. You can always count on them - for example, to help you fix a failure.

### **How my dad saved our lives**

It was September 1993. I got married that year and we were expecting a baby. My dad, uncle and I took our small boat and went fishing. As we left Novigrad, we were suddenly caught in a storm. It was one of those unpredictable situations. All hell broke loose in just 10 minutes. I wasn't that experienced at the time. Thanks to my dad, we managed to come home. It was really tough - the engine malfunctioned, the boat was rolling, we were struggling for hours. The storm was tossing the boat around, while we were trying to keep the water out. Panic took over and we feared for our lives. At some point, we even started undressing to jump into the sea... But my dad found incredible strength to get us out. He was calm and collected. I guess adrenaline was pumping through his veins as he was trying to save his son, and he truly performed a miracle. When we returned, I was so shaken that I could not speak for four or five days. But it didn't discourage me from fishing.

## **Manuel Korlević**



*"You should respect the sea. Try to be a step ahead of it. The sea is much like a woman."*

### **How it all started**

I got my first scuba diving mask when I was four. I used it for hunting crabs and finding seashells. Then I got into sport fishing with my friends. I became a member of the *Ribon* club. I won seventeen national championships and participated in the world championship with the Croatian national team. I would come in first both as a team member and as an individual.

### **What I like about fishing**

I've spent most of my life in, on or by the sea. I'm in love with it. Its mysteriousness has fascinated me since I was a child. Being so close to it has helped me calm down my temper and stay away from trouble. Every day is a new adventure. Keeping the tradition alive makes me feel good - Novigrad is primarily a fishing town, and there are but few young people who like this job. I see it as a challenge and an expression

of my lifelong passion for the sea. I like night fishing because I can use my very own tricks of the trade to catch bigger fish, like gilthead bream or dentex.

### **The types of fish I catch**

I catch soles, gilthead breams, sharks, lobsters, dentexes, and white seabream, mostly high-quality whitefish. The choice of net and the throwing method depends largely on the type of fish you're after. You also need to know where a particular type of fish is most likely to be found. I avoid catching small fish. This is very important for keeping the fishing tradition alive.

### **My clients**

I've had a boat of my own for two years now. I've hired two fishermen and two persons to repair the nets. I sell part of the catch to the best local restaurants and the wholesale fish market. Most of it ends up in Trieste, Venice and Udine. I receive many phone calls early in the morning and sell everything right away.

### **A sea story**

A few years ago, in late August, when sudden thunderstorms are quite common, my former boss and I went fishing. We expected a change in weather, but not to such a scale. We were quite far from the coast. All of a sudden, strong waves rose, and it began to thunder. Then we sighted the waterspouts come down. Two or three of them formed around the boat. I felt like I was in a horror film. They sounded like a frightful female scream. We were scared because you can't predict how a waterspout will move and behave, and it's faster than a boat. I'll never forget that scene. We hid in the cabin, with things falling all over, and watched the waves splashing against the rolling boat. When we finally reached the shore, I kissed the ground beneath my feet.

## **Forgotten recipes**

*As told by fisherman Ruggero Radin*

### **Salted sardines and anchovies**

Not everybody knew how to prepare salted sardines. A handful of salt was placed on the bottom of a clean wooden barrel of 10-12 kg, and sardines were lined up one after another, back to belly. Salt was scattered on each row, after which the barrel was rotated. There would usually be 15 to 20 rows of salt and sardines. They were covered with a wooden lid and pressed down with a stone weighing between 15 and 20 kg. After three days, the weight of the stone pressed down the sardines by a handbreadth, causing the sardine oil to come to the surface. It had to be removed immediately so that the brine could be added. To prepare the brine, you would cook a half a kilo of salt and a potato in a litre of water. When the potato rose to the surface, the brine was ready. It was poured onto the sardines instead of oil to prevent them from going bad. The same procedure was followed when salting anchovies, only it was easier and faster because we didn't have to watch for oil.

### **Twait sheds**

Sometimes we would catch a twait shed, a shiny fish resembling a sardine, but larger and full of bones. We would cut the fish lengthwise, cover it with salt and leave it under a heavy weight for a day. We would then prick the fish with two cane sticks to keep the meat open. We would hook it above a smoke source to dry and smoke.

### **Anchovies**

We would thread the twine through the fish's eye with a needle and hang it around the fireplace to dry. With fish scales glowing, it looked like sitting under a Christmas tree. We would have them for dinner when the weather was bad. It was the diet of the poor, but very nutritious, ready in no time and at no cost. For a snack, we ate salted

sardines with pasta, or fried anchovies with bread crumbs, seasoned with oil, vinegar and onions. People used to say: "They're as good as prosciutto!"

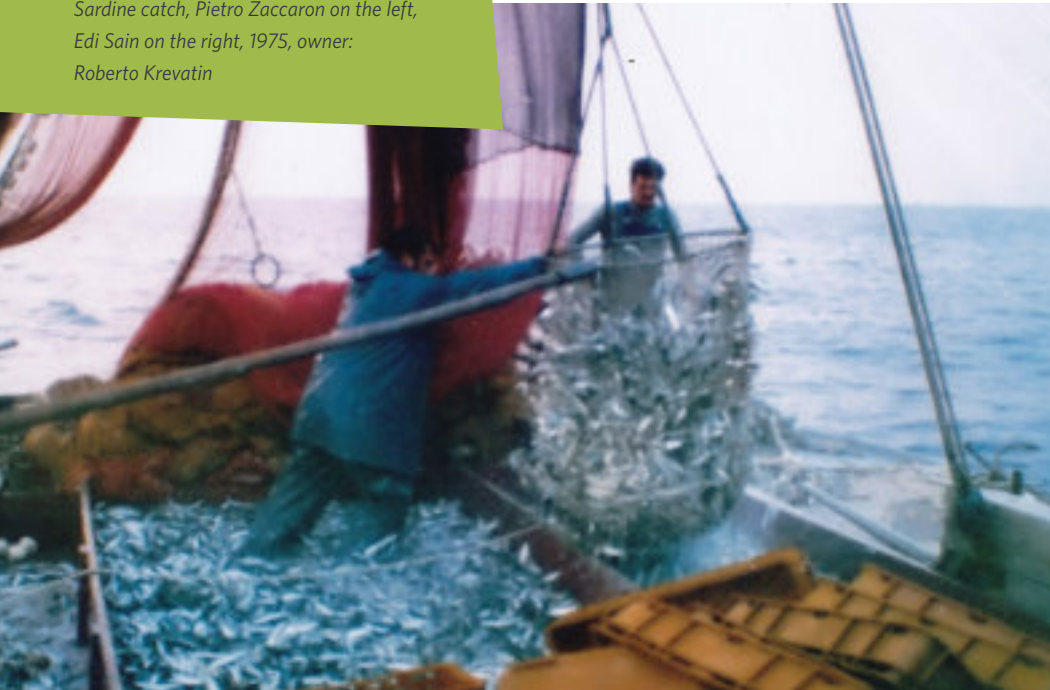
### **A tasty mullet dish**

We would brush the mullets with olive oil using a turkey feather and grill them over oak embers on a pre-heated grill. The smell would spread all over the house. When the fish was cooked, we'd put it on an oval plate and season with homemade olive oil, pepper and garlic, and serve together with polenta cooked in a copper pot. We would also add wild chicory mixed with dandelion greens and lamb's lettuce. Of course, we would pair our evening meals with a glass or two of Teran or Malvasia wine.

## The future of fishing in Novigrad

Fishing has been a key economic activity and the main source of livelihood of Novigrad residents for centuries. The situation imminently changed with the development of tourism, which gradually took over the primary role in the 1960s. Nevertheless, the two sectors have remained deeply intertwined as a significant share of the catch sold by the local fishermen ends up in creative specialities of the town's renowned restaurants. So each and every guest has the privilege to taste the produce of the fishing tradition, now lovingly nurtured by the new generations of fishermen and thus saved from oblivion. Owing to this circular process based on sustainable practices, fishing has remained the lifeblood of our town, and has helped preserve the precious role of fishermen.

*Sardine catch, Pietro Zaccaron on the left,  
Edi Sain on the right, 1975, owner:  
Roberto Krevatin*



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Novigrad Tourist Board





