

Hunting Octopus in the Libyan Sea

- Jack Whitten -



Parson's Branch in Bessemer, Alabama, did not have octopus, but I did learn to catch snapping turtles by hand. I grew up with a bamboo fishing pole in one hand and a .22 caliber rifle in the other. In 1969, while hanging out in Aghia Galini, Crete, I saw a young Englishman using a diver's mask and he invited me to try it. I had only seen a diving mask in movies. What I saw expanded my notion of nature as I knew it.

I am a certified scuba diver, but I can proudly say that I've never hunted a fish while wearing a tank. My passion is free-form diving using a mask, snorkel, weights and fins. Hunting octopus is my favorite sport. Millions of years ago the octopus had a shell, but slowly they lost it through the evolutionary process. Since then, the octopus is always looking for a home. They occupy the abandoned shells of other sea creatures, cans and car tires or make their own houses, which I call "octopus architecture." They are extremely smart animals with fast reflexes and are masters of camouflage. They are the Houdini of the sea; escape is their middle name. Being sly and elusive, they can open just about anything. Unfortunately, they are addicted to the color white like a bull is to red. They can't control themselves. Thus, I always keep a white handkerchief tucked into my wetsuit, which I use to seduce them from their lair.



When hunting for octopus, one must learn to recognize the morphology of the bottom of the sea. Octopus prefer a specific setting identifiable by a certain quality of stones, sand and plant life. Octopus architecture is unique, constructed with stones, shells, wood, bits of sea glass or anything available for building a nest. And of course, they prefer white stones. The nest is always semicircular and built at the base of a large rock, which serves as an anchor. They burrow a tunnel deep beneath the rock, usually with an exit for escape if attacked. The semicircular structure is built five, six or eight levels of rock high depending on the size of the octopus. It is masonry without mortar: closely fitted, tight and fortified. Most of the time I only see the architecture. They feed at night until early morning. During the day, they position themselves at the entrance of the nest, protecting their turf and soaking up the sun. When I locate an occupied octopus house, I can only see their eyes.

I hunt octopus with a *kamaki*, a simple tool made of seasoned wild olive wood cut during a waning moon and left to dry for several years. A strong metal trident measuring three inches across and six or seven inches long is secured to a customized wooden shaft carved from a single limb with decorative carvings. The trident can't be too small or too large. The correct size allows me to penetrate the front door. The critical phase of the hunt is thrusting the trident directly between the eyes of the octopus. I must stay cool and make sure that the trident is properly placed before attempting to pull the octopus from his house. Octopuses are strong; remember, they are all muscle with no bone structure. When hunting without a spear, I grab them by hand. I hold them tightly at the top of the head while being careful to prevent them from turning over. Directly beneath the head is a parrotlike beak capable of inflicting a vicious bite. I've been bitten more than once, and it's not fun!



A nerve runs directly between their eyes. When no spear or knife is available, I must bite them between the eyes to sever this nerve and kill them because they can otherwise be extremely difficult to control. I have had large octopuses wrap their tentacles up my arm and all the way to my neck. It's a weird feeling, and the welts from their suckers can last for weeks. After the nerve has been severed, I thrust my forefinger underneath the cap and invert the head. At the same time, I grab the larynx and pull from the head the liver, ink sac and other innards. A large octopus can discharge enough ink to render a diameter of two or three meters of water to invisibility. I am now surrounded by a cloud of black ink. I secure the octopus by threading a strong nylon string attached to a heavy wire through the head, like threading a needle. Only then can I relax: I have successfully caught an octopus.

Next step: the octopus must be tenderized by slamming it against a large rock at least a hundred times or more. When its natural color changes to white, I rinse it repeatedly in sea water and drag it back and forth over a rough rock surface with a rhythmic motion. A white foam is released, and this movement must continue until all the foam disappears. When the muscle has completely relaxed, the texture of the flesh changes and the color turns to a grayish white. I grab two tentacles and pull them apart gently...the flesh should tear. Then—and only then—is the octopus ready for cooking.

Octopus may be cooked by grilling over charcoal fire or a gas grill, boiled with herbs and served cold as a salad, in fresh tomato sauce with pasta or sun-dried as jerky, or *krasato*, with olive oil, bay leaf and red wine. For grilling, I hang the octopus outside in sunlight for a minimum of two days, which removes all the excess water. Octopus can be sun-dried for weeks, which concentrates the flavors and preserves the flesh for months.

Krasato is my favorite recipe: place the octopus in a covered pot with one cup olive oil, three fresh bay leaves and allow to simmer in its own juice for twenty minutes. Pour in one cup of red wine (I prefer a cheap, dry red wine with full robust flavor), leave the pot covered for another twenty minutes and test with a fork for tenderness. Remove the lid and reduce the sauce to a rich dark, red-velvet-cake color. The texture should have the sensual viscosity of cream. Krasato, when done right, should make your guests swoon!

I've caught octopus in one meter and as deep as twenty meters of water. At sixty-eight years old, I can still hunt comfortably at twenty meters. I remember once finding two octopuses locked in mortal combat. They were literally eating each other. I caught and ate them both. Hunting octopus requires physical stamina, diving and breathing skills, tracking skills and an unlimited passion for the hunt. Yes, at times I've felt a pang of guilt in killing such a smart animal, but after the first taste of krasato, any notion of guilt dissolves into the vastness of the Libyan Sea.