Catching supper with hook and line is a pastime most yachtsmen will attempt at some time or other, but why do some fishermen enjoy more luck with the rod than others? Ben Meakins gets some expert help to improve his catch.

Considering how much time I’ve spent afloat, the ratio of fish sizzling in the pan to those still on the water remained frustratingly low. Hooking and eating your own fish is satisfying and free, but without some basic knowledge, is likely to be frustratingly low.

I spent a day afloat with Jon Hooking and eating your own fish. He’s a professional fisherman, considering how many people think fishing is a pastime to be enjoyed at weekends. As a fishing guide, Jon Hooking teaches the basics of fishing for free to children in Southampton, and has been fishing since he was a boy. He owns Hamble Danglers, a fishing tackle shop in Warsash, near Southampton, and has been fishing since he was a boy. As we motored out towards the destination at a likely looking spot instead of sailing purposely to a fort give fish a good place to feed and hide. Rocky ledges are also good areas, especially in a fast-flowing current. We headed out to No Man’s Land fort in the eastern Solent, and caught three mackerel.

What kit?
Rod or hand-line? At the most ideal, as they are more compact. One thing to note, though: if you’re using a rod, lie it on with either a lounge or line or use a rod holder – otherwise if you get a bite it’ll disappear. Which reel you choose is up to you, but make sure you get one that’s compatible with your rod. Your local tackle shop should be able to help.

Lures or live bait?
If you’re out for the day, live bait is a possibility. Jon brought some small crabs, known as ‘peeler’ crabs, as well as some frozen squid which he cut up into strips. Alternatively, once you’ve caught some small fish, such as mackerel, they can be cut up and used as bait for larger fish. Fish heads are particularly effective. Lures, on the other hand, are much easier to store on board. Bass and mackerel rely on their eyesight and detect movement in the water to feed, so lures, which mimic the movements of small bait-fish, work well and are less smelly and messy than bait. But it’s worth trying both. For trolling, lures are better able to resist the fast flow of water, while bait is generally better for when drifting or at anchor. Different coloured lures are available, depending on the depth you’re fishing at – red light is filtered out at depth, so brighter colours will attract more attention.

Where to fish?
Your best bet for a good spot is to talk to a local expert – a tackle shop or fisherman – who should have some local knowledge. Seabed features like sandbanks, rocks, ledges and wrecks tend to hold fish, and you can identify these from your chart, making sure that there’s enough depth for your boat. These places can often also be identified by surface indications: seals, overfalls and eddies generally denote depth changes. Unfortunately these do also pose a threat to sailing craft, and often the worst time to be dealing with a line full of mackerel is when you’re sailing through overfalls. Sometimes areas of deep-lying, rocky ground – good places to fish for larger fish. Fish heads are much easier to store on board, and you’ve hooked a fish or clump of seaweed. Jon recommends a rod as opposed to sailing purposely to the edge of a steep bank – good places to fish.

Making sure that you get a rod designed for trolling to cope with the high loads makes light work of recovery...
How to catch mackerel

‘Mackerel are easy to catch – they’ll eat anything!’ said Jon Holgate. True to form, we got three bites on feather lures within minutes of dropping the line and hauled in three reasonably-sized specimens. The NFSA (National Federation of Sea Anglers) recommends a minimum size of 30cm.

**Drifting**
Use a rig, comprising a weight with feathers, or baits – we used squid on the hooks. Let it sink to the bottom then immediately wind it back up. Repeat the exercise as you drift with the tides. Make sure the line is oriented so that the lures are upstanding and fall away from the line.

**Trolling**
The easiest way to catch mackerel on a yacht underway is with a paravane, said Jon. ‘You can throw it over the stern and leaving while on passage, and works better at speed than a weight, which will pop to the surface if you travel too fast. For lures, use shiny spinners or feathers.

We drifted slowly past the fort, keeping the weight just off the bottom and the movement of the lures becomes unrealistic. The vane forces the line down, trailing the lures behind it, and will pop to the surface once a fish bites. It’s perfect for deploying over the stern and leaving while on passage, and works better at speed than a weight, which will pop to the surface if you travel too fast. For lures, use shiny spinners or feathers.

How to catch bass

Bass are powerful swimmers and as active predators will eat pretty much anything, from smaller fish to crustaceans, shellfish and squid.

**Drifting**
Bass are slow-growing fish, and ever increasing commercial fishing pressures mean that populations have taken a dive over the past decade, so regulations are now in force to protect them. The NFSA recommends a minimum size of 41cm for bass. Some eels, including the River Hamble and Chichester Harbour, are designated bass nurseries, and purposely fishing for bass there is illegal. If you catch one accidentally, you must put it back.

We used two different rigs, which we dragged slowly over Bembridge Ledge, drifting at around 1 knot over the ground with the tide in 4m of water. They consisted of a weight with a long ‘shooid’ or line to a large hook. You can buy ready-made rigs from tackle shops. We baited ours with strips of squid. An alternative is to use a boom, which holds the snood away from the main line and prevents tangling.

We used a fillet of one of our mackerel as bait. ‘The trick is to keep the weight just off the bottom,’ explained Jon. ‘The bait should trail slowly behind it. We lost a few rigs on underwater snags, and at one point I thought I’d caught a whopper, until it turned out to be a large rock. You just need to be patient,’ said Jon, ‘but be ready to flick it off the bottom the second you feel it snag.’ We also caught two pollack and a pouling with the same rig, and this technique should catch you a variety of species, from bream to smoothhounds and other edible fish, using much the same kit. Deep wrecks are often home to larger fish, such as pollock and cod.

**Trolling**
Much as for mackerel, a paravane works well, although it’s worth using bigger hooks and lures. For larger fish, a lure that looks like a small mackerel is ideal – the one pictured on the right is known as a ‘mackerel killer’. Again, 2-4 knots is ideal for trolling. Bass do much of their feeding at night, so after dusk is a good time to catch them.

**Useful book**
This new book, Fishing by Henry Gilbey, £14.99, Dorling Kindersley Eyewitness Companions, offers excellent advice on rods, lines, lures, baits and techniques for catching and landing fish.

**Fish stocks**
Conservation of fish stocks is vitally important to the future of fishing, so you should keep only what you are going to eat. Throw the rest back in for another day.

**Online**
Follow David Ramsbury’s step-by-step guide in RD July 2008. You can buy a copy online from pbo.co.uk.