

The National

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IT'S SUMMERTIME

SOUTHERN VEGETABLES SHINE

straight talk
*menu-writing
at its best*

hip hoppers
*rabbit on
the table*

in the spirit
*cocktail art
and alchemy*



American Culinary Federation
The Standard of Excellence for Chefs

another man's treasure

Chefs choose to serve and promote trash fish to improve seafood sustainability. / BY KATHRYN KJARSGAARD

While the term “trash fish” is perhaps one of the most misunderstood on menus today, it is behind a powerful movement that is having a positive influence on seafood sustainability. When chefs choose to put trash fish—seafood that is less popular and not as commonly used—on menus, it eases demand for more popular species that can become endangered from overuse and overfishing.

According to Jeremy Ashby, executive chef for Azur and Brasabana restaurants in Lexington, Ky., trash fish is a misnomer. “It’s one of the worst names,” he says. “Most fish we eat now is trash fish. A lot of species we’ve grown to like were somebody else’s trash fish at one time.”

Ashby says what has happened with seafood points to the importance of eating sustainably. “Eating and using food and seafood in a sustainable manner is a position we all have to take. In the future, with population growth, it will be unsustainable to continue as we are now.”

Nico Romo, culinary executive director for Fish, Charleston, S.C., was named a 2014 Sustainable Seafood Ambassador for the Monterey Bay Aquarium, Monterey, Calif., for his commitment to ocean-friendly seafood and sustainable cuisine. “Using trash fish is about raising awareness and helping people understand that what is really important is buying seafood that is fresh and of high quality,” he says.

Susan Feniger, co-chef/co-owner with Mary Sue Milliken of Border Grill Restaurant Group, Los Angeles, also was heavily influenced by the Monterey Bay Aquarium and its educational programs to encourage chefs to change the way they serve and source seafood. “As chefs, we also are teachers who teach staff and customers,” says Feniger. “If you take an underappreciated fish and use it in a restaurant, it creates demand. Then, customers want to go out and try to find it and cook it at home. We can make a strong political statement as chefs by what we serve.”

defined

Robert Booz, director of community networks/events for Chefs Collaborative, Boston, says the organization started a trash fish dinner series in 2013 to raise awareness for sustainable seafood. Chefs Collaborative is a national nonprofit network of chefs that focuses on changing the sustainable food landscape.

“Chefs Collaborative doesn’t consider any fish as ‘trash,’” says Booz. “Good chefs know that you have to have respect for your ingredients, and we have respect for all the fish that come out of the ocean.”

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP:
1) Dill-poached and juniper-smoked hake by Joshua Lewin, left, executive chef, Beacon Hill Hotel & Bistro, Boston, was served at the Trash Fish Dinner held at Area Four, Cambridge, Mass., March 16. Helping to plate are, left to right: Dan Hixson, sous chef, Hungry Mother, Cambridge; Barry Maiden, chef, Hungry Mother and State Park, Cambridge; and Katie Kimball, pastry chef, Area Four.
2) Carolyn Johnson, chef at 80 Thoreau, Concord, Mass., served smoked dogfish pâté at the dinner. 3) Jeremy Ashby's yucca-crusting sturgeon with caramelized boniato, annatto-infused roasted tomatoes and poblanos, and saffron/fennel broth. 4) Grilled romaine and avocados with spicy Caesar dressing and sardine croutons at Border Grill.

PHOTO CREDITS Opposite, clockwise, from top: 1) & 2) Alisha Fowler/Chefs Collaborative 3) Hannah Klim 4) Big Tom Photography





The organization uses the term “trash fish” as a way to call attention to the issues surrounding seafood sustainability, which includes the sustainability of fishing communities. There are fish out there that are delicious and abundant and come from well-managed, sustainable fisheries, but these fish are not getting the respect they deserve in the marketplace, says Booz. Examples include spiny dogfish from the U.S. waters of the North Atlantic; bycatch, which are fish that are accidentally caught, such as sea robin; and invasive species such as Asian carp and lionfish that are doing harm to the environment.

“We want people to expand their palates and try fish like Pacific sardines or U.S.-caught North Atlantic pollock,” Booz says. “These are fish that are plentiful, have a fishery management plan in place, are caught in an ecologically sustainable way, taste good and are undervalued.”

Ashby defines trash fish as fish caught unintentionally that gets thrown back in or discarded. “That’s how the name was created,” he says. “It could be used to describe bait fish, fish used for fishmeal, or fish like pollock used to make processed foods. Some can taste bad, like mackerel, which are oily and many people don’t like.”

He adds that many species labeled trash fish are difficult to harvest because they are dense with bones and cartilage, making them harder to break down and fillet. “Many times, when using trash fish, the pieces are small and broken, so there’s only so much you can do on a classical basis,” Booz says. “Trash fish can be a good revenue source if you can find something to do with it.”

raising awareness

The Chefs Collaborative Trash Fish Dinner Series started with what was intended to be a one-time dinner in Boston in March 2013, held to coincide with the Boston Seafood Expo, says Booz. Several New England chefs banded together and decided the time was right to promote sustainable, undervalued alternatives to overfished species as a way to educate the public about the plight of the oceans and to support local commercial fishermen. Soon after the first successful dinner, chefs from around the country wanted to host trash fish dinners, and events have since been held in Chicago, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and Portland, Ore.

Booz adds that sharing examples of overfishing can help raise awareness about seafood sustainability. Monkfish is one cautionary tale, he says. It was a trash fish that was suddenly in vogue, and the result was near decimation of the species from overfishing. Through good fishery management and other improvements in fishing technology, monkfish now has made a comeback in the ocean.

He says that Chefs Collaborative is currently working on a list of fish, organized by geographic area, with recommendations for undervalued species that chefs can put on their menus. They look for fish that tastes good, is plentiful, has a management plan in place, is caught in a sustainable way and is undervalued. The list is still in development, but for fish landed in the U.S. waters of

Triggerfish with fennel, carrots and kale comes with goat cheese dumpling and tomato consommé at Fish restaurant.

the North Atlantic, species such as Acadian redbfish, spiny dogfish, Atlantic pollock and mackerel make an appearance.

Feniger and Milliken, along with executive chef Mike Minor of Border Grill Las Vegas and Rick Moonen of RM Seafood, Las Vegas, joined with Chefs Collaborative to host a trash fish dinner at Border Grill Las Vegas in July 2013 to highlight fish species that normally never make it onto dinner plates.

Feniger says getting people to try trash fish is the real challenge. “Chefs are always looking for exciting new products, and like to put things on the menu that people don’t see everywhere. I like to use skate wing, which is one of my favorites. The challenge is getting customers to buy it. You don’t want to have to throw it away. You know if you put salmon or tuna on the menu, people will buy it.”

She plans to use sablefish (also known as black cod) as the entree at an upcoming charity event in San Francisco. “We’ll have 400 people tasting black cod who don’t normally order it,” Feniger says. “It allows them to become more familiar with it and helps raise awareness.”

Feniger also advises chefs and customers to use the Seafood Watch app created by the Monterey Bay Aquarium. This tool for mobile devices provides up-to-date recommendations on ocean-friendly seafood to help with decisions about what to buy and order.

menuing

The key is to use trash fish in dishes that are interesting, but accessible, Feniger says. For the *pescado veracruzano* on Border Grill’s menu, she pan-sears monkfish (or another sustainable seasonal fish) along with tomato, Kalamata olive, jalapeño and oregano/white wine/garlic broth.

“It’s the vehicle you are preparing the dish in that gets people to try it,” says Feniger. “Put the trash fish in with things like avocado and artichokes, and people will go there.”

Ashby says menuing trash fish is difficult because the supply is not always consistent. He feels it is easier to use trash fish as a special or for a special event. On the patio at Azur, his fine-dining restaurant, he held a fish fry using Asian carp and served it buffet-style three ways: rolled and stuffed, baked and cornmeal-fried. “It was inexpensive, because the fish is all but free,” he says. “We used about 200 pounds of fish. It was educational, too, as we invited someone from the state agricultural department to do a presentation and dispel myths.”

At Brasabana, Ashby serves tilapia from a Kentucky State University program that uses aquaculture for farm-raised tilapia. “I consider tilapia a trash fish. It’s of the same caliber and quality of what we consider trash fish,” he says.

“It’s nice to use the student-raised fish in the restaurant, because it’s something fun for us to talk about with the customer tableside,” Ashby adds.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Jeremy Ashby, executive chef for Azur and Brasabana restaurants in Lexington, Ky., says the name of a fish greatly influences its popularity. For example, orange roughy was called slimehead or mudhead until the early 1900s. “Now, people eat it all the time,” he says.

Asian carp is called carp in the U.S. to discourage people from eating it, because common carp has a negative connotation, Ashby says. “Asian carp is a predatory species that is destroying freshwater systems. In China, it is used as food, but it was brought here by accident. It reproduces at amazing rates and wipes out everything around it.”

Susan Feniger, co-chef/co-owner of Border Grill Restaurant Group, Los Angeles, says Chilean sea bass was originally called toothfish. In fact, the name Chilean sea bass was invented in 1977 by a fish wholesaler looking for a name that would make it attractive to the American market. In 1994, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration accepted “Chilean sea bass” as an “alternative market name” for Patagonian toothfish.

“They changed the name, chefs started using it, and it got to the point where it’s now on the Seafood Watch program,” says Feniger. “It became overfished because people were loving it and eating it. Chefs love it because it’s hard to mess up. It was almost extinct, but has now made a comeback because many chefs made a stance and took it off their menus.”

Nico Romo, culinary executive director for Fish, Charleston, S.C., serves triggerfish. “It’s not a well-known fish,” he says. “Fishermen used to catch it and throw it back. No one would buy it.”

Romo notes that local fishing boats in his area used to be called grouper boats, then they were called grouper and snapper boats. Today, they are called fishing boats because they catch a variety of seafood.

Romo says that in Charleston, customers trust chefs and know they are getting fresh local seafood, so they are not as particular about the type of fish served. “They are here to explore and eat what we offer,” he says. “I buy fish directly from a local fisherman, which is hard to do. But it’s an important product and quality and freshness is the key.” ■

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