

Food: Reel Changes

More than a dozen fish species, more than a dozen diverse preparations--all both delicious and sustainable.

By Allison Perlik, Senior Editor --
Restaurants and Institutions, 8/1/2008

When Chef-owner Carlo deMarco opened 333 Belrose Bar & Grill in Radnor, Pa., he took care to equally represent land and sea among the menu's entrées. Now, eight years later, deMarco has made a conscious—and profitable—shift in favor of fish.

"It's impacted my bottom line dramatically, because plate costs are much less for a premium piece of tuna than for a really nice piece of filet," says deMarco, whose menu now is closer to 75% seafood. "The customer is still totally psyched, because they're getting a great product they won't typically find at their local store, and in terms of variety, it seems like there's a lot more out there."

The diverse array of seafood the restaurant receives six days a week ranges from up-and-coming options such as opah and wahoo to guest favorites that include salmon and mahi mahi.

333 Belrose is hardly unique in its approach to seafood or in its ability to source species from around the world. Exotic-sounding names such as **barramundi**, cobia and Arctic char are moving into the menu vernacular alongside the comfortably familiar varieties of salmon, halibut and, increasingly, tilapia. Multiple factors are ramping up interest. Part of it can be attributed to rising awareness of sustainable sourcing, a trend championed by chefs and consumers who make seafood choices that they feel will prevent species depletion. An even bigger factor, though, is customers' continually increasing comfort level in sampling new seafood dishes.

"People are really starting to see fish as less intimidating," says Barton Seaver, who recently left his post as executive chef of upscale seafood restaurant Hook in Washington, D.C. "They see it as one of the better ways to experience a chef's prowess, and they're growing more aware of the diversity that's available."

In the past year, Hook spotlighted a staggering 67 different species on its daily changing menu of sustainably sourced seafood. Even less-familiar species such as bluefish, an oily, flavor-rich seasonal catch with thin skin that crisps beautifully on the restaurant's plancha grill, and wahoo, a firm, white species Seaver grills medium-rare, earned rave reviews from diners, he says.

Getting Diners Hooked

A well-trained waitstaff and customers who trust the kitchen to deliver top-notch dishes go a long way toward encouraging guests to order less-common fish, says Anthony Seta, vice president of product development and innovation at Tampa, Fla.-based upscale-casual chain Bonefish Grill

"We took two fish that were relatively unknown, wolffish and Arctic char, and put them together on a plate with unique preparations, and guests have received it quite well," Seta says.

Wolffish, a firm, sweet whitefish with a flake similar to cod's, is seasoned with Bonefish's house spice blend and sautéed. The small fillet is topped with shrimp, crab and slivered almonds, finished in the oven and served with lemon-butter sauce. Meanwhile, the mild-flavored, high-



A duo of Arctic char tempura and sautéed wolffish proved popular at Bonefish Grill.

What's Sustainable

Sticking to sustainable seafood—choices that are fished or farmed in ways that maintain long-term supplies without damaging the environments from which the fish come—still offers chefs a bounty of options. The species itself as well as how and where it is caught determines sustainability. Below is a partial list of choices.

- Alaskan halibut
- Cobia
- Alaskan salmon
- Haddock
- Arctic char
- Lake whitefish
- **Barramundi**
- Mahi mahi (dorado)
- Black cod/sablefish
- Pacific cod
- Tilapia

fat char is cut in thick planks, dipped in tempura batter and flash-fried. The crispy fish is drizzled with sweet teriyaki sauce.

Familiar species, too, can earn second looks from diners via well-executed approaches. At 333 Belrose, deMarco dresses up classic blackened catfish by topping it with jumbo lump crab. The slightly sweet fish is dredged in blackening spices and butter, seared in a cast-iron pan, topped with crab and baked.

"Catfish is pretty plain, and it has a sweetness to it, so blackening works great," he says. "It's an inexpensive piece of fish, so we use as much as \$2 or \$3 worth of crab. There's no need to skimp."

Bread and Fishes

Bonefish's Arctic-char tempura offers one example of how simply operators can find success with creative riffs on the classic fish fry. The new Premium Fish Fillet Sandwich from Wendy's, which one-ups standard quick-service seafood with panko breading, tartar sauce and a commmeal-dusted bakery bun, is another:

In a move that indicates clearly the trickle-down effect of high-end-restaurant trends, the Dublin, Ohio-based chain's advertising for its Pacific-cod sandwich (a sustainable choice) emphasizes quality. Playing to consumers' increasing interest in products' origins, the commercial voiceover intones: "Everybody knows, if you don't know what it is, don't eat it. North Pacific cod, hand-cut and panko-breaded: It's not mystery fish; it's Wendy's new Premium Fish Fillet sandwich."

Crisp-fried fish makes a fine addition to upscale menus as well. At Hook, Seaver took an unconventional approach with barramundi, a mild, sweet, delicate-textured fish. The recipe starts with lemons and oranges that are sliced very thin, soaked in saltwater, dusted in flour and deep-fried into citrusy chips for a garnish. The chips left over from the previous day are ground up and used to make unconventional breading for deep-fried barramundi.

"Rather than adding lemon zest to breadcrumbs, we get a crispy, citrus crust this way," Seaver says. "It's a wonderful texture, not at all symmetrical. It kind of looks like panko."

Gentle Persuasion

Steaming or poaching fish grants chefs three big advantages: The gentle cooking yields moist, tender results, provides the healthful profiles customers expect from seafood and leaves plenty of room for creativity.



Guests are becoming more open to trying less-familiar fish, such as the Arctic char menued at Bonefish Grill.

Chef-manager Lori Sakamoto takes a straightforward approach at Grifols Biologicals Inc., a Bon Appétit Management Co. account in Alhambra, Calif. For fish tacos, she seasons cost-effective Alaskan pollock with salt and pepper and steams it over court bouillon. The firm-fleshed fish is tucked inside corn tortillas with tomatoes, onions, cilantro, jalapeño and lettuce, and garnished with chipotle aioli and crisp-fried shallots.

Contemporary restaurant Red Fish in Simi Valley, Calif., amps up flavor with "Peruvian-style" poaching, one of three preparations customers can select for fish such as opah, a rich, fatty flatfish with flesh that runs from dark red to orange to pink. For the poaching liquid, ginger, garlic, cilantro, green onions and lemon juice steep in fish fumet for 24 hours. At service, the fish is poached in the strained fumet with shiitake mushrooms, green onions and cilantro in a combi-oven, which supplies just the right balance of dry and moist heat, co-owner Jeff Sladicka says.

"It's more an elegant flavor, not overpowering—the most predominant is the lemon, with hints of ginger," says Sladicka, who crafted the seafood-heavy menu with sustainability in mind.

At The Harrison, a contemporary American restaurant in New York City, Executive Chef Amanda Freitag poaches flaky Arctic char in olive oil rather than in traditional court bouillon.

"The olive oil permeates all the pores of the fish, and it comes out with this sheen," she says. "It stays super-moist without having a fatty flavor."

Freitag first marks the Arctic char on the grill for a better visual presentation and then submerges it in Greek olive oil (blended with a bit of canola) with thyme, oregano, garlic and peppercorns. An accompaniment of grape-fruit gastrique, hon-shimeji mushrooms, radicchio and caramelized salsify adds earthiness and acidity.

Fearing's Searing

A mesquite grill is often the favored vehicle for preparing fish at Fearing's Restaurant at The Ritz-Carlton, Dallas, but for halibut and wild striped bass, "nothing's better than a great sear," says Chef Dean Fearing. "It's the texture, the flakiness, the amount of oil in the fish [that makes it work]."

In one Southern-accented recipe, thick, meaty fillets are seasoned with a barbecue spice blend that includes four kinds of chiles: aleppo, chipotle, cayenne and ancho. The fish is seared on both sides in cast-iron pans, roasted in a 450F oven and served over crab-and-corn succotash with spicy bacon gastrique.

At Portland, Ore.-based McCormick & Schmick's Seafood Restaurants, Regional Chef John Baker punches up pan-seared preparations with crunchy nut crusts such as those made from hazelnuts, pecans, almonds or cashews. He chooses the latter to coat tilapia, dipping the fillets in egg wash and dredging them in ground, toasted cashews mixed with panko and Cajun-seasoned flour.

Complementing the crispy fish are Jamaican Hot Rum Butter (a reduction of light and dark rums, fresh vanilla beans and habanero peppers finished with butter) and sweetly acidic mango-papaya salsa.

"Tilapia is very delicate, with a really small flake, so the crust adds some nice texture for the palate," Baker says. "Cashews hold up very well to the cooking process; they don't absorb too much oil from the pan-searing."

Good and Grilled

When Houston-based fast-casual concept Becks Prime switched its seafood sandwich from swordfish to yellowfin tuna because of customer concerns about mercury levels, the culinary team realized that a thin, sandwich-style cut of the fish wouldn't stand up well to the intense heat of the restaurants' mesquite-wood grills.

As an alternative, the team selected thick, 5-ounce loins that char nicely on the outside but stay medium-rare inside. The cooked-to-order tuna, seasoned with kosher salt and pepper, is sliced and piled atop egg buns with cucumber, red onion, tomato, feta cheese and ginger-wasabi spread.

"It's much more popular than the swordfish was," says Chief Operating Officer Mike Knapp. "Tuna has a fairly delicate taste, so we had to be careful not to have too much more flavor. The spread has wasabi and ginger, but it's not very strong. The feta adds a kind of salty sensation that's a nice contrast to the watery textures of the tomato and cucumber."

At Commander's Palace in New Orleans, where seafood accounts for about 60% of sales, Executive Chef Tory McPhail also uses wood to impart smoky flavors, but he works with a custom-made gas grill instead. He places wood chips—or sometimes, sugarcane pulp called bagasse—in a box that has multiple pipes extending from it to deliver smoke evenly across the grill.

To prepare grilled wahoo, McPhail cuts fillets thin to yield a larger surface area; this allows the lean fish to cook quickly without drying out. Instead of marinating the fillets in oil and citrus juice, he oils them, seasons them and sprinkles them with citrus zest.

"If the marinade has too much water [from the citrus juice], it sticks to the grill—this way, it sears right away," McPhail says. "Then we put the flavors other folks would add to marinades on top of the fish in a sauce."

Getting Salty

Why is salt-roasted seafood so good? Probably because the time-honored method of encasing whole fish in salt and baking it combines the best of two techniques: steaming and roasting. The salt creates a barrier that keeps moisture and flavor inside the fish, steaming it from the inside, while cooking it with dry heat on the outside.

"All the steam, all the water and all the fat is locked in, so it gets into the meat and makes it really tender," says Marc Vetri of Philadelphia's high-end Italian restaurant Vetri, where salt-crusted fish has long been a menu staple.

Starting with whatever whole fish is available that day—it might be American red snapper, orata (sea bream) or local striped bass—Vetri stuffs the cavity with lemon and rosemary, covers the fish with salt and a touch of water and bakes it on a sheet tray at 500F.

Salt also generates great results through brining. Chef Barton Seaver, recently of Hook in Washington, D.C., often relies on this method. "I do a 60-40 salt-sugar brine and let it sit on most fish about 40 minutes," Seaver says. "It adds such incredible moisture and seasons it throughout!"

For another recipe, he cures whole sides of Alaskan black cod (sablefish), then cold-smokes it in the oven by placing a pan of smoldering embers from the wood grill on the bottom rack, placing a pan of ice on the next rack and the fish on the top rack.

"The smoke rises, hits the ice, cools down and billows over to flavor the fish, so you get the flavor without ever cooking the product," Seaver says.

Do They Care?

Although it's safe to say that concerns about sustainable seafood remain more top of mind right now for chefs than for consumers, operators say the issue is gaining traction among American diners.

"We get quite a few inquiries about it," says John Baker, regional chef for McCormick & Schmick's, a Portland, Ore.-based seafood chain. "It's what the media drives—they're responsible for a lot of the education of consumers today."

Executive Chef Dean Fearing of Fearing's in Dallas takes a similar view. "Whatever gets on the news becomes general interest, so it's nice for me to be able to tell our customers that we get our fish from controlled environments."

Jeff Sladicka, co-owner of Red Fish in Simi Valley, Calif., attributes the growing interest in part to diners' increasing vigilance about what they eat. "People are watching what they're putting into their bodies and wanting to know where the products are coming from," he says.

Still, for many diners, taste, preparation and, of course, price remain the top drivers of seafood choices.

"We source fish from around the world to make sure we're not depleting one particular resource, but we're not hearing about it from our customers at all," says Anthony Seta, vice president of product development and innovation for Tampa, Fla.-based upscale-casual chain Bonefish Grill.