

SundayReview | OPINION

# An Improvable Feast

By PAUL GREENBERG and CARL SAFINA DEC. 22, 2012

LONG ago the Roman Catholic Church decreed Christmas Eve a vigil during which the faithful should solemnly await Christ's arrival and his deliverance of a better world.

It took Romans and the rest of the Italian world about two seconds to blow past the abstinent part and retranslate La Vigilia di Natale as "Here ya go; knock yourselves out." And lo, the most gut-busting piscatorial feeding frenzy ever known was born: the Christmas Eve Feast of the Seven Fishes, in which seven seafood dishes come together to form a repast of oceanic proportions.

If you are fish guys like us, this presents a conundrum. We both love seafood, particularly the Italian preparations that usually make up the feast. One of us was raised and nourished by bona fide Italian-American parents; the other merely wishes the famed Italian cookbook author Marcella Hazan had been his mother. But we also make our living by writing and worrying about the ocean.

So this year we decided to think up a better Feast of the Seven Fishes, a seafood Dream Team.

We start close to home: blue mussels, farmed in the coastal waters of New England and Atlantic Canada. Delicious when prepared as Cozze alla Triestina and as rich in omega-3s as salmon, mussels filter algae and particulate matter, improving water clarity, limiting nitrogen loading and thereby slowing the spread of oxygen-deprived dead zones. Humans have depleted wild bivalves, and in their places dumped untold tons of sewage. Part of reversing this pattern is to farm mussels, and

to encourage mussel farming, we should encourage mussel eating. So, with mussels, knock yourselves out.

We move south for our second course. Introduced into Florida waters from home aquariums about 30 years ago, the beautiful Indo-Pacific red lionfish has reached plague-like proportions across the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. They scarf pretty much anything they can suck into their lightning-strike jaws.

Fortunately, enterprising spear fishermen have started marketing lionfish, making it something of a cottage industry. If you happen to befriend a spear fisherman this Christmas, ask for the biggest, most fecund lionfish in the catch bag and serve it whole in place of the more traditional, food-mile-intensive Mediterranean branzino. (Make sure to avoid the venom-tipped spines.)

Next, a lighter intermezzo from our freshwater coast: some Great Lakes smoked whitefish crostini. Smoked whitefish at Christmas? Well, with a name like Greenberg, the lead author of this article gets to make at least one culturally relevant pick.

You might, too, look askance at a freshwater choice. But get a little patriotic here; the lake whitefish is part of our nation's greatest environmental turnaround. Forty years ago, the Great Lakes were overwhelmed by pollution. One of Lake Erie's tributary rivers caught fire. Fisheries had declined to abysmal levels. Then Congress overrode President Richard M. Nixon's veto and passed the Clean Water Act. The Great Lakes have rebounded, and with them: whitefish.

Heading to the West Coast, let's have some thinly sliced crudo from the California white sea bass, a fish that was also once severely depleted. Today the white sea bass is back, in part because of a Pax Californiana: in 1994 the state banned the damaging practice of targeting big spawning aggregations of sea bass with nearshore gill nets. After sea bass rebounded, California set aside large sections of former fishing grounds as no-fishing breeding areas. If you want to have fish, you can't have just fish-taking areas. You need some fish-making areas. Which is why a few thin slices are appropriate. Just not too much. Remember, the vigil — abstinence.

Next we take a dogleg to Alaska, arguably an unlikely place for an Italian cook to forage. Actually, Italian immigrants were some of the first European fishermen to work Alaska's salmon runs. They're memorialized in Dillingham's enormous Peter Pan cannery, which displays the "Lament of the Italian Fisherman" in a curio case at its entrance: "We pulla da net/to catcha da fish/to makea da money/to buya da bread/to getta da strength/to pulla da net."

And pulla da net we should. Alaska salmon, particularly the sockeye of Bristol Bay, are exceptionally well monitored and managed, with scores of counting towers and subsurface sonar sensors as well as dozens of human census takers.

The only thing threatening this vast salmon-generating wilderness is a massive copper mine proposed for the bay's headwaters. It is up to us, the feasters, to prove to Alaska's politicians that a good piece of eternal wild fish is more valuable than a one-time hunk of copper.

We're getting full, and we're only up to No. 6. This is a good juncture to thank the fish we've enjoyed and consider the fish we outright waste. To make sure as little fish as possible ends up in the trash, we'll head to Hawaii for some rod-and-reel-caught mahi-mahi.

Open-ocean fish like tuna and swordfish are usually caught using longlines: chains of hundreds of baited hooks strung out over what can be miles. They result in tremendous waste: sea turtles, sharks, albatross — all end up on longlines; most get dumped overboard, dead.

Rod-and-reel fishing, though more labor-intensive, has relatively little waste. And with a fish like a mahi, which grows fast and is abundant and quick to take a lure, the fishing economics can work out.

Mio Dio, another fish? Yes, one more. Then the grappa. And though we'll have room for only a very little bit of this last one, its provenance represents the vast majority of the fish poundage that Italians and Americans eat today: farmed barramundi from Vietnam.

While the other six American seafoods mentioned are nice, more than 80

percent of our seafood comes from abroad, mostly Asia. This has tremendous environmental consequences. Shrimp farming has destroyed about a fifth of the world's coastal mangrove forests, which serve as fish nurseries and storm buffers. Tilapia can escape from lake-based farms and overwhelm freshwater ecosystems.

We choose barramundi as a kind of hope for the future. An American company with operations in Vietnam, called Australis, is growing this white-fleshed fish in a way that minimizes escapes, reduces environmental impacts and makes for a better, safer product.

Of course, there's a traditional vegetarian option for the eve. We called 87-year-old Rose Safina, the real Italian mother in the life of this writing pair, for her childhood memories of the feast. "We were too poor for seven fishes," she said. "Your grandmother made pizza from scratch. Her dough was absolutely delicious. We always wanted leftovers on Christmas morning." Rose didn't get to celebrate seven fishes until years later, when a little bit of money finally came through the door. She gives a mixed review: "God," she recalls, "that was a lot of food."

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