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FOOD

Fish Tales

Stories and recipes on a favorite Southern pastime

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If Southerners did not have accents, fried chicken or sweet tea, and if there were no gospel singings, tobacco growing or guitar playing, folks from the rest of the country could still pick a Southerner out of the pack by simply asking if anybody wanted to go fishing. To be sure, there would be volunteers from every part of the U.S., but Southern folks have a special attachment to fishing that marks them like a red line on a \$20 bill.

Growing up, we ate so much fish in our household that after I married I avoided it for many years. Several years ago, an aunt invited us over for a fish fry with all the fixin's (beans, hushpuppies, cole slaw and fried potatoes), and my appreciation for fish returned just like a scripture learned in childhood will return to an old man decades later. I still don't like the mess that a fish fry creates, but I am always open to an invitation if someone else wants to do the clean-up. Of course, there are those outdoor fish fryers that help to minimize the mess, but there are also a lot of other ways to cook fish that don't require deep fat.

Southern Favorites

Fish is one of the very few foods that is both tasty and healthy. Early American author, Mary Randolph, may have been aware of the benefits of eating fish when she wrote in her 1824 cookbook, *The Virginia Housewife, Or, The Methodical Cook*, concerning her recipe for catfish soup, "A most excellent dish for those who have not imbibed a needless prejudice against those delicious fish." Spoken like a true southerner.

The recipe is basically a fish version of New England clam chowder, minus the potatoes. Randolph writes, "Take two large or four small white catfish that have been caught in deep water, cut off the heads, and clean and skin the bodies; cut each in three parts, put them in a pot, with a pound of lean bacon, a large onion cut up, a handful of parsley chopped small, some pepper and salt, pour in sufficient quantity of water, and stew them until the fish are quite tender but not broken; beat the yolks [sic., yolks] of four fresh eggs. [A]dd to them a large spoonful of butter, two of flour, and half a pint of rich milk; make all these warm and thicken the soup, take out the bacon, and put some of the soup in your tureen, pour in the soup, and serve it up." (The *Virginia Housewife*; or, *Methodical Cook*; Mary Randolph; Baltimore; Plaskitt, Fife, 1838.)

In spite of concerns over the mercury content, fish remains high on the list for healthy eating in a time when the benefits of various other foods seems to fluctuate from week to week. Opinions differ somewhat regarding the impact of mercury levels in various types of seafood, but the Mayo Clinic says that eating 8-12 ounces of fish per week is safe, even for pregnant women. Mayo recommends avoiding "large, predatory fish" such as swordfish, shark, king mackerel and tilefish, which are highest in mercury. This is not much of a concern in our parts, as locally caught crappie, catfish, bass and canned Alaskan salmon are tops for eating in our area.

The main attraction of fish and other seafood is easy to see: nearly all fish are low in calories and great sources of protein, vitamins, minerals, and Omega-3s, the latest poster child for good health.

In addition to their cholesterol lowering abilities, Omega-3s from fish have been shown to enhance levels of serotonin and dopamine in the brain, which



Laura Hunt Angel photo

A beautiful trophy-size crappie caught "somewhere" in southern Hopkins County.

enhances mood. The body does not manufacture Omega-3s, so we need to eat things containing them. The American Heart Association recommends around 500 mg of Omega-3 per day for adults.

Cold water fish are highest in this brain boosting nutrient, with pink salmon and mackerel coming in at 1,000 to 1,500 mg Omega-3 per 3 ounce serving. Depending on the variety, tuna, oysters and shrimp have between 200-500 mg, but even Mary Randolph's humble catfish has 150-200 mg. Incidentally, if you would like a natural source of Omega-3s but absolutely hate fish or are allergic, try wild purslane, which grows rampant in our area. A half cup of raw wild purslane contains between 300-400mg of just one type of Omega-3, along with smaller amounts of other types.

Strange Fish

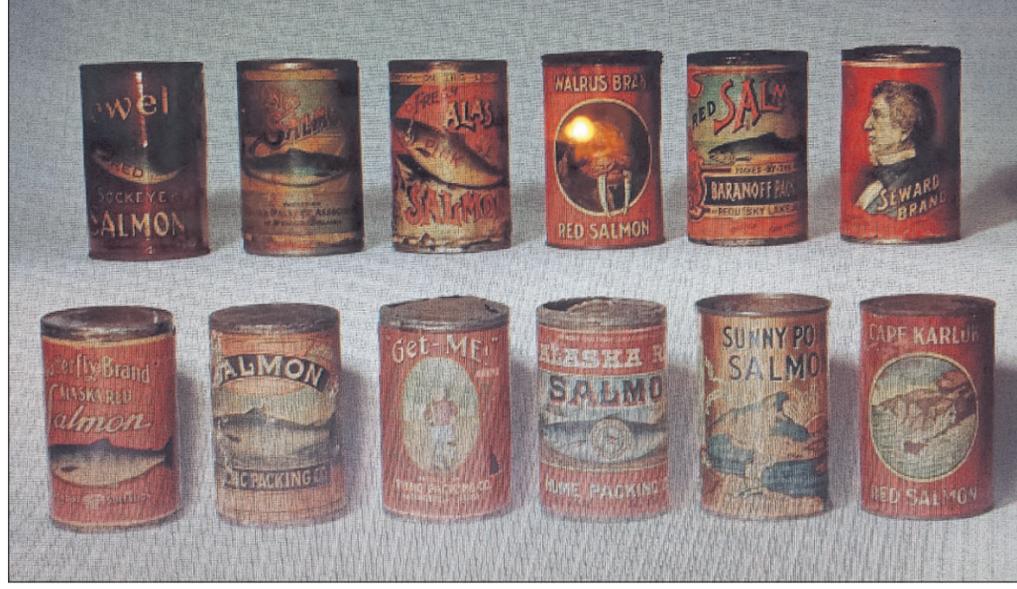
Around the year 1250, mariner's tales of a huge man eating sea monster with mile-long tentacles began popping up in Scandinavia. By the first century, B.C., Pliny the Elder described the creature, called the Kraken, as having 30 ft. arms and weighing 700 lbs.

It was only in 2013 that a Japanese filming crew finally confirmed the existence of the Kraken's real-life counterpart, the giant squid. While it was not nearly the size of early Scandinavian accounts, Pliny had somewhat underestimated the size of this giant animal, whose tentacles can reach between 40-50 ft. and weighs around 1,000 lbs.

The blobfish, a sad, cartoonish looking member of the puffer fish family, frequents the waters off the coasts of Australia and New Zealand. The fish, although interesting to look at, are not considered useful as food.

In May 2014, approximately 500,000 dead Asian carp washed up along the shores of the Cumberland River. This is not particularly bad news, since Asian carp are an invasive species and no other types of fish appear to have been harmed. The deaths are possibly due to a virus.

Of the approximately 3,000 known varieties of fish, one called the electric catfish inhabits the Nile and tropical waters of West Africa. It can give predators and curious humans a jolt of up to 400 volts, a shock is which not generally fatal but certainly very painful. Another, the blue catfish, holds the Kentucky state record as the largest catfish caught, coming in at a weight of 72 pounds.



Sara Boesser photo

From the Alaska Museum in Anchorage, Alaska, a collection of vintage salmon cans.

And in case you were wondering, it is illegal to shoot a fish in the state of Kentucky.

The Recipes

Included here is a recipe you may never had heard of, along with an old standby that has no doubt been cooked up in 90 percent of Hopkins County kitchens. Enjoy either of these while sharing a few fish tales of your own.

Greek-Style Catfish with Feta and Tzatziki Sauce

This recipe originally calls for Basa, also known as Swai, which is a mild tasting Asian catfish. Personally, I avoid imported fish; around these parts there is no need to use it anyway, since we have an abundant supply of local catfish at our fingertips.

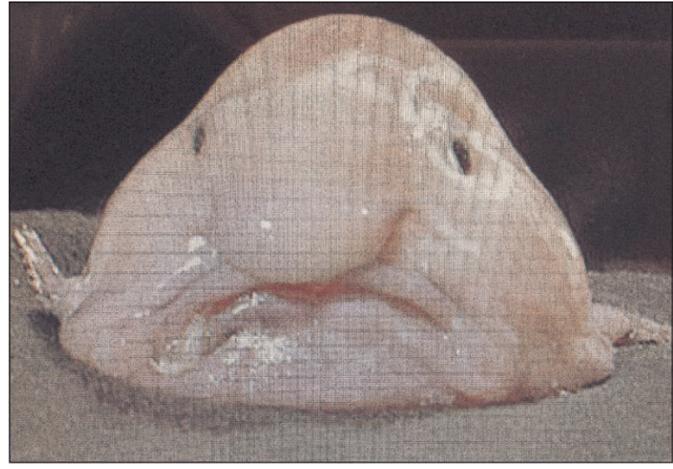
Tzatziki is a deceptively rich-tasting cucumber-dill sauce that is reminiscent of tartar sauce but much lower in fat since it relies on greek yogurt as its base. It is traditionally used to top gyro sandwiches but it also great with chicken or as a salad dressing as well as with this fish recipe.

4 medium catfish fillets
2 cloves garlic, sliced thin
2 tablespoon fresh chopped parsley
Juice from 1 lemon
A drizzle of olive oil
1/2 cup feta cheese

For the Tzatziki Sauce:

1 medium cucumber
1 8-oz container plain Greek yogurt
1 tablespoon olive oil, optional
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1 teaspoon dried dill weed
2 teaspoons (2 cloves) minced garlic
Salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 350 degree. Spray a glass baking dish with non-stick spray



NOAA.gov photo

It's easy to see why this sad sack, *psychrolutes marcidus*, is more commonly called the blobfish.

and lay the fillets in the dish. Sprinkle the fish evenly with the garlic and parsley, then drizzle the lemon juice and olive oil over all. Cover the fish loosely with foil and bake about 20 minutes, or until the fish flakes easily with a fork. Serves 4.

For the Tzatziki: Peel, seed and shred or chop fine the cucumber. Combine the cucumber with the remaining ingredients and mix well. Cover and refrigerate until chilled; stir before using. This is enough sauce for the fish with some leftover.

Classic Salmon Patties

This one fish recipe that I never tired of. Many folks do not like to use salmon with the bones in it, but they do provide calcium and if you break them up with your hands (very easy with canned salmon) they will disappear into the recipe. You can even replace the salmon with tuna if you wish, and the Tzatziki sauce (above) also goes well with these patties.

1 14.75-oz can pink salmon, undrained
1/2 sleeve saltine crackers (about 20)
1/2 cup cornmeal
2 eggs
Salt and pepper to taste
1/2 cup oil for frying

Empty the can of salmon into a large bowl. If you wish, remove the skin and/or bones, but leave all the juice. (leaving them in increases the nutritional value.) Crush the crackers and add them to the salmon along with the remaining ingredients. Mix well with your hands. In a skillet, heat the oil to medium. Form into 6-8 patties, depending on how thick you would like them. Carefully place the patties into the hot oil and fry 3-4 minutes per side, or until nice and crispy. Tips: Be sure that the oil is hot before you place the patties in the skillet and they will fry up crisp, not greasy. You can vary the flavor of your salmon patties by adding lemon pepper, Cajun seasoning or lemon juice.