SAVE THE BAY - EAT BLUE CATFISH

While dining at an area restaurant I discovered something new on the menu…..BLUE CATFISH. Curious, I asked what this was, since I had never heard catfish described as BLUE. I wondered was this catfish any different than what I had eaten at fish fry’s from my childhood in the South?

Back at work I asked The University of Maryland Extension, Watershed Restoration Specialist for info and was sent to talk to Steve Vilnit, Fisheries Marketing Director for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Steve, a marine biologist, is passionate about his work and gave me a fast education in this species which is a hazard to the Chesapeake Bay.

Blue Catfish are the largest species of North American catfish. In the 1970’s they were introduced into the Chesapeake Bay watershed for recreational fishing. Four decades later their population has grown exponentially and they are having a negative impact on native Maryland species like blue crabs, perch, shad, and striped bass.

The firm meat accepts most cooking methods like grilling, poaching, blackened, and frying. Because they feed throughout the water column, they do not have the typical muddy flavor associated with bottom feeding fish. They are available year round, available fresh or frozen, whole or filleted and are extremely affordable, making it a great alternative to higher cost fish.

After talking with Steve, who is wildly passionate about his mission to help SAVE THE BAY, our office staff set out to find where it is sold in Frederick County. Calls to area markets revealed the following places currently carry it:

- GIANT EAGLE, 7th Street, Frederick – call other locations before you go
- MOM’S ORGANIC MARKET, Frederick
- WEGMAN’S, Frederick

Encourage other markets to offer blue catfish to help support Maryland’s fledging commercial fishers and remove this invasive species from the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem.
Blackening Seasoning for Blue Catfish from Rockfish of Annapolis

- 2 tablespoons Cinnamon
- 3 tablespoons Cumin
- 5 tablespoons Sweet Paprika
- 3 tablespoons Coriander
- 6 tablespoons Granulated Garlic
- 5 tablespoons Kosher Salt
- 5 tablespoons Brown Sugar

Mix all ingredients together and store in an air tight container.

BLUE CATFISH TACOS (2 Servings, Six Tacos)
From Chef Chad Wells, Rockfish of Annapolis

For the Blue Catfish

- One 12 Ounce skinless filet, sliced into one inch by one inch cubes
- Canola oil, for cooking fish
- Kosher salt

For the Chimichurri Marinade

- 1/4 cup white vinegar
- 2/3 tablespoon dried oregano
- 1/2 tablespoon crushed red pepper
- 1/2 tablespoon kosher salt
- 7 cloves garlic, peeled
- 1 1/2 bunches fresh flat-leaf parsley, stemmed
- Juice of 1 fresh ripe lime
- 3/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

For the grilled Corn Salsa

- 4 1/2 ounces onion, small dice
- 2 ears corn, grilled until blistered, kernels removed
- Juice of 2 ripe limes
- 1 jalapeno, seeded and finely diced
- 1/4 bunch fresh cilantro, stemmed and roughly chopped
- 1/2 tablespoon Kosher salt
- 5 plum tomatoes, seeded and diced
**For the Chipotle slaw**

1 1/2 cups mayonnaise  
1/8 cup sugar  
1/8 cup white vinegar  
1 1/2 tablespoons chipotle in adobo, pureed  
1/2 tablespoon fresh lime juice  
1/2 head cabbage, shaved

Grilled 6-inch tortillas, for serving  
Fried sweet potato sticks, for serving  
Lime slices for serving

**Preparation**

**Chimichurri marinade:** Combine the vinegar, oregano, crushed red pepper, salt, garlic, parsley and lime juice in a food processor. Slowly add in the olive oil while blending. Cover the blue catfish with the desired amount of chimichurri marinade and refrigerate while preparing the Slaw and Grilled Corn Salsa.

**Grilled corn salsa:** Combine the tomatoes, onions, corn, lime juice, jalapeno and cilantro in a mixing bowl and season with salt. Taste and adjust the seasoning as necessary.

**Slaw:** Whisk together the mayonnaise, sugar, vinegar, chipotle and lime juice in a bowl until combined. Slowly add the slaw mix to the cabbage until desired consistency is reached. If you would like more heat, add more chipotle puree.

**Blue Catfish:** Heat a sauté pan over high heat and coat with oil. Once the pan is hot and the oil slides freely across the pan, place the blue catfish in the pan and sprinkle with salt. Cook until tender to the touch and the fish begins to flake when pushed with a spatula. This fish cooks extremely fast!

**Plating:** Place the grilled tortillas on a plate and top with the cooked catfish, Grilled Corn Salsa, Slaw and fried sweet potato sticks. Garnish with lime slices.

**CATFISH GUMBO**

2 teaspoons olive oil  
1 cup chopped onion  
2 teaspoons minced garlic  
1 seeded, minced jalapeno, or to taste  
1 cup chopped celery  
1 cup chopped green bell pepper  
1 (28 ounce) can tomatoes, drained and juice reserved, cut into ½-inch dice  
3 cups water  
1 bay leaf  
1/2 teaspoon dried thyme leaves  
1/2 teaspoon salt, or to taste  
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, or to taste  
1 teaspoon Tabasco sauce or 1/8 teaspoon cayenne, or to taste

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1 package (10 ounces) frozen okra, defrosted, cut into ½-inch slices
1 cup corn kernels, fresh or frozen (optional)
1 pound catfish fillets, cut into 1-inch pieces
1 1/2 cups hot cooked rice
Chopped cilantro or fresh parsley for garnish (optional)

Briefly heat the olive oil in a 4-qt saucepan that has a lid, preferably a pan with a nonstick surface. Add the onion, garlic, jalapeno, celery, and green bell pepper. Saute the vegetables for about 5 minutes. Add the tomatoes with their juice, water, bay leaf, thyme, salt, ground pepper, and Tabasco sauce or cayenne, and stir the ingredients to combine them well. Add the okra, and mix it in gently. Bring the soup to a boil, reduce heat, cover pot, and simmer the soup for about 10 minutes. Add corn (if desired) and the catfish, and simmer the soup for another 5 minutes or until the catfish is just cooked through. Remove the bay leaf. To serve gumbo, place 1/4 cup to 1/3 cup of the cooked rice in each bowl, ladle the gumbo over the rice, and garnish each serving with the cilantro or parsley (if desired). Makes 6 servings.

Preparation tips: Start the rice while the soup is simmering for 10 minutes. As with most soups, this one not only tolerates advanced preparation, but is the better for it. It also freezes well.

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