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One Giant Leap

The ravenous, unstoppable Asian carp is threatening to take over American lakes and rivers. One Louisiana chef is trying bite back. Hungry?

Author Ethan Brown **Photography** Peter Frank Edwards



Image – Peter Frank Edwards

IT'S AN EXCEEDINGLY strange story with a fable-like quality: In the early 1970s, catfish farmers in Kansas imported shipments of Asian carp—a huge, heavy-bodied fish known for its ability to jump and its insatiable appetite—all the way from China in order to clean out algae from his catfish ponds. Widespread flooding in the early '90s washed them into nearby rivers and streams, where they took up residence. That's when the trouble began. Carp are such hearty eaters that they can gobble up nearly 40 pounds of plankton per day, which is why farmers chose them for cleaning the algae out of their catfish ponds in the first place. In their new habitat in the

Kansas River Basin, however, they ate and multiplied so prodigiously that the local food sources were soon depleted, sending native species into rapid decline.

Since then, the fish, which can weigh up to 100 pounds and have become infamous for causing Jet Ski accidents and vaulting across roads, are now plentiful in the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and are threatening to conquer the Great Lakes. Indeed, among fishermen, state wildlife officials and the federal government, fear of this invasive species has grown so great that in early February the Obama administration announced a \$78.5 million initiative to prevent its spread.

The carp, however, has so far made chum out of the various antifish technologies deployed by its opponents: It's reportedly already bypassed an electric barrier meant to hold it back, and its arrival in the Great Lakes now seems assured. Environmentalists, wildlife experts, politicians—the carp has outsmarted them all.

But down in the steamy bayous outside Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the wily carp may have finally met its match, in the form of a highly motivated and crafty chef/entrepreneur named Philippe Parola, who is wagering that the best way to combat the carp is to learn to love it—as dinner.

Parola's introduction to the fish happened accidentally, in a slapstick episode in the late summer of 2009, when he was angling for catfish from a skiff in the Atchafalaya Basin—a delta in south central Louisiana near the Gulf of Mexico. Around midday, he and a friend, Cajun fisherman Billy Frioux, were about to dig into lunch when two carp—weighing 25 pounds each—leaped into their boat, landing right at the startled Parola's feet.

“They just jumped into the wrong boat,” Frioux quipped to the chef. An adventurous eater, Parola quickly dispatched the carp and put the fish on ice. That night, he cooked them up, finding their meat far more flavorful than he'd imagined.

“They were pretty tough to clean,” he says, “which is sometimes a bad sign. But the taste was great—somewhere between crabmeat and scallops.” The maligned carp, he realized, might actually find a place at the New Orleans table beside staples such as tilapia, trout and the wise, whiskered catfish.

Parola has a history of innovating with exotic foods, such as alligator meat and nutria (a semiaquatic rodent), which he introduced to diners in the French Quarter. With the Asian carp, his first step was to change the name to silverfin (also the title, coincidentally, of a book about the young James Bond). “Carp isn't exactly the most inviting of names,” he explains. Then, with the backing of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (which, like other state wildlife agencies, is struggling to battle the species' growth), Parola mapped out a scheme to bring the fish to supermarkets and the dining rooms of fine restaurants. He began by partnering with the New Orleans Fish House to distribute frozen, deboned silverfin steaks and prepared cakes to established grocery store chains in Louisiana, such as the family-owned Rouse's, which is an enthusiastic proponent of the “buy local” ethos.

Getting the word out hasn't been easy. A quick silverfin survey of chefs in New Orleans brought a series of brusque dismissals. “Have never used it or tasted it before,” said Alon Shaya, executive chef at popular New Orleans Italian restaurant Domenica, which is part of the sprawling Louisiana restaurant empire of chef John Besh. “I couldn't comment on the quality of the fish since I've never used it.” Beyond that, the major obstacle to marketing the silverfin is its complex skeletal structure—it's bony, which is why Parola's currently hard at work on inventing a machine that can debone silverfin fast enough to match a professional kitchen's pace.

Louisiana food writers and bloggers believe that if Parola is able to resolve the deboning issue, he has a good shot at getting silverfin onto Louisiana menus. Diners in the New Orleans area and the broader Gulf Coast are often more interested in the manner in which fish is prepared than the actual fish itself, notes New Orleans–based food blogger and *Off Beat* magazine food critic Rene Louapre. According to Louapre, diners wouldn't mind a bit if one day their trout almondine becomes silverfin almondine. "If restaurants substituted Asian carp for trout, I honestly don't think anyone would be any wiser," Louapre says. "Especially if it is inexpensive and is served in a style that people are accustomed to eating."

Parola's silverfin quest is still a grassroots operation. His rollout of the fish to restaurants has been slow and is dependent on younger, less established chefs willing to take a gamble on it. For now, just one restaurant in the Gulf South—Oceana Grill in the French Quarter—has added silverfin to the menu, though Oceana chef Rami Bader says he is hugely enthusiastic about its prospects after experimenting with a silverfin cake appetizer in late February. "I served the silverfin cake with jambalaya and a mushroom cream sauce," he says, "and the reaction from the customers was great. The meat was very white, and it had a very clean taste; it was not fishy at all. Plus, the silverfin turned out to be easy to debone. I just boiled it."

Meanwhile, the carp is out there, gobbling up algae and multiplying. "The only answer," says Parola, "is to get the fish on the dining room table."

New Orleans writer **ETHAN BROWN** *is the author of* *Shake the Devil Off, Snitch and Queens Reigns Supreme.*

SILVERFIN CAKES

Makes four servings

- 1 lb. silverfin filet
- 8 tbsp unsalted butter, melted
- 1 tbsp Dijon mustard
- 1 tbsp lemon juice
- 1 egg, beaten
- 2 tbsp bread crumbs
- 1 cup seasoned flour
- 4 tbsp vegetable oil
- Seasoning and hot sauce to taste

Poach or steam silverfin until fully cooked, then break it up into pieces to remove bones. Place the meat into a mixing bowl. Add butter, mustard, half the egg and lemon juice, and mix well. Add bread crumbs, seasoned to taste. Form small cakes. Coat with remaining egg wash and seasoned flour. Fry in cooking oil over medium-high heat for four to five minutes until golden brown. Serve with a beurre blanc or lemon butter sauce.

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1. [Terry](#) Says:

[September 9th, 2010 at 4:05 pm](#)

After reading this article I tried the fish. My wife and I loved it, especially with the sauce they ladled over it. They served it as an appetizer but the fish cakes were so large we made it our meal. They served two to a plate. We asked where we could buy the fish and were told the only grocery store selling it right now was a chain called Hi Neighbor in Baton Rouge. Too far to drive so we will have to keep going to Oceana Grill in New Orleans until the product is more commercially available.

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