

Don't let pesky silverfins off the hook



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- By [TOMMY C. SIMMONS](#)
- Advocate food editor
- Published: Jan 21, 2010

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Chef Philippe Parola said it's not every day that opportunity jumps in your boat. And, that, he added, is exactly what happened to him last summer when he was fishing for gar near Pierre Part.

As his boat motored to a fishing spot, the surface of the water erupted with large silver-colored fish leaping all around the boat. Two of the fish, each about 12 pounds, jumped into his boat barely missing Parola and his fishing partner.

The amazed Parola looked at the two fish and thought about the saltwater jack fish he caught out of Venice. Jack fish are greatly improved in flavor if immediately bled and chilled, so he pulled out his fillet knife and cut the tails off each fish and put the fish in the ice chest.

"When I started cleaning the fish, I saw how firm and pink the meat was," Parola recalled, "so I decided to cook the fish and see what it tasted like. And, that was the pleasant surprise."

The taste resembled a "cross between scallops and crabmeat," he said. "At that point, I started researching everything I could find out about the fish, which I soon found out is a species of Asian carp."

What Parola discovered in his research is that Asian carp are now considered a pest, an invasive fish, which is displacing native fish in the Mississippi River and its tributaries and distributaries. Fishery experts in the Midwest have recommended that Asian carp be eradicated to prevent the fish migrating into the Great Lakes.

"It's a waste to kill these fish and relegate them to trash fish status," Parola said. "The Asian carp is delicious tasting. It's simply under-utilized, undiscovered."

After more research and work with the fish, Parola called the Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries to offer his expertise in developing a marketing plan for carp.

Gary Tilyou, LDWF inland fisheries administrator, said, "Our experience with eradication is it doesn't work. We think creating a financial incentive for harvesting the fish is a far more effective control. And that's what LDWF wants to do ... increase demand for Asian carp and build a viable fishery based on the fish," Tilyou said.

Selling Asian carp won't be easy because of the name. There are several species of Asian carp in the South and Midwest, and only two are judged marketable: silver carp and bighead carp. The problem is the bones. Asian carp have hundreds of "floating" bones that are difficult to remove.

Parola said he considered the bone problem and talked with crawfish and crab processors about how to steam process the fish to remove the bones.

"As a chef, I see the need for a domestic fishery, a source of pesticide- and antibiotic-free fish ... a need for a good fish to take the place of imported fish, which we cannot monitor for contaminants, a fish rich in omega-3 fatty acids, the good fish oils that promote heart health — really, Asian carp is an answer to a chef and

restaurateur's prayer," Parola said.

The onus is the name, Parola said. Too many people associate Asian carp with the common carp, which is a muddy smelling, unattractive fish, he admitted. Parola and LDWF's solution to improve the marketability of the silver and bighead Asian carp is to designate those two species as "silverfin" fish.

LDWF's plan is to promote "silverfin" to recreational fishers and to food service/consumers. Information on how to handle "silverfin" is posted on the Web site <http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/silverfin>.

Chefs should be able to buy boneless "silverfin" fish flakes, which resemble lump crabmeat, from New Orleans Fish House and Louisiana Seafood Exchange shortly. Rouse's Supermarkets plan to have "silverfin" products, fish cakes and fish dip, initially, by Lent (Feb. 17), and Tony's Seafood Market & Deli will be selling raw fillets starting next week, Parola said.

Here are recipes for two dishes served at the LDWF event:

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