

Another helping . . . of carp?



Jan. 26 -- with apologies to Cheryl, today's recipes are for dumplings, chowder, croquettes, quiche and enchiladas, all featuring one savory, inexpensive and readily available ingredient.

Carp.

No, wait! Don't turn up your nose! Carp may be classified as a rough fish, pale and bloated and known by such names as bugle mouth and hose lips, but carp as food -- good and plentiful and cheap food -- is the thing right now.

Patriotic, even.

You've read or heard, maybe, about the Asian carp invading America's lakes and rivers, hefty 30-pounders threatening other species of fish and downright dangerous to humans, leaping out of the water to smack passing boaters.

The threat to the Great Lakes fishing industry is serious enough that the White House has announced plans to invite Great Lakes governors, including Minnesota's Tim Pawlenty, to a carp summit early next month.

Natural resources departments in several northern states have tried to limit the spread of the slap-happy carp by netting them, zapping them with electricity, messing with their love life and even poisoning them.

Fisheries people in Louisiana propose a simpler solution:

Eat 'em.

But this is not a wholly new solution coming out of the bayous. During World War II, the Minnesota Department of Conservation published a booklet designed to encourage public consumption of Minnesota carp, a different but related species. The campaign was no doubt aimed at saving Spam for the troops overseas, though some GIs might have preferred the carp.

The 1944 booklet was titled, "Carp Can Be Delicious," and included recipes for such taste-tempting treats as steamed carp with tomato sauce, baked stuffed carp, carp croquettes and scalloped carp.

And just a few years back, when the North Country Food Co-op in Crookston received a bountiful donation of boxed ground carp, co-op managers sought recipe advice from students in a food science class at the University of Minnesota-Crookston.

"At first, it was 'Oh, gross!' Nobody wanted to hear about ground-up fish," said Dina Van Dorsten, a student in the class. "But it actually worked better than hamburger in some of the recipes.

"The best was the quiche," she said. "The worst was some kind of casserole we came up with."

The students put their better experiments, including "cheesy fish enchiladas," in a brochure, and the food co-op shared their recipes -- and 1 1/2 -pound packages of ground carp -- with more than 40 homeless shelters, soup kitchens, food shelves and other clients in 21 Minnesota counties.

Feedback was positive, co-op officials said at the time, which would not have surprised authors of the 1944 pamphlet.

"Impartial scientific investigation has shown that the carp is of high food value, being practically equal to beef in protein content," the state's wartime carp promoters wrote. "It is acceptable and palatable when properly prepared, is freest from parasites of all our fishes and should enjoy its proper place on the American food list."

Walleye snobs and other pursuers of game fish often carp about carp, but ol' hose lips has had other defenders, including Rob Buffler and Tom Dickson, authors of a 1990 book, "Fishing for Buffalo: A Guide to the Pursuit, Lore & Cuisine of Buffalo, Carp, Mooneye, Gar and other 'Rough' Fish.' "

Widely respected in China, Japan and Europe, the carp is either ignored or "held in disdain" in the United States, they wrote.

The fish was introduced into this country in the late 1800s. European immigrants asked for it, and their campaign coincided with the government's decision to import a fish to replace native species that were on the verge of disappearing due to overly aggressive netting and pollution.

Within a few years, carp were well established throughout their new country, Buffler and Dickson wrote, citing a delighted testimonial in 1890 from the president of the Minnesota State Fish Commission. "Carp are now to be found almost daily on the stalls of the fish dealers of St. Paul and Minneapolis," Robert Sweeney wrote, "and to the great satisfaction and gustatory enjoyment of many of our foreign-born citizens."

It was that preference by the poor and foreign-born, Buffler and Dickson noted, that eventually caused the well-to-do classes to switch to more socially accepted fish, and carp's image sank to the bottom of the pond.

That's where you'll find them, slurping in mud and spitting out the muck to get at seeds, insects and other food, a feeding style that can stir up sediment and cause problems for game fish -- and headaches for anglers.

Still, some people today enjoy fishing for carp, which are powerful swimmers, grow larger than northern pike and ... dare we say it? Fixed properly, they can be darn good eatin'.

But bighead carp, which began appearing in the Mississippi and Ohio river systems in the early 1980s, probably after escaping from commercial fish farms, are voracious eaters themselves and now threaten the Great Lakes' \$4 billion fishing industry.

Which brings us back to Louisiana, where a state marketing plan seeks to persuade people to lick their chops at Asian carp -- and simultaneously lick the encroaching carp problem.

The marketers suggest dumping the name "carp" and calling the fish "silverfin," pitching the delicacy at an upcoming convention of the National Grocers Association in Las Vegas, and getting endorsements from the likes of Chef Philippe Parola of Baton Rouge, who insists that properly prepared carp has a taste between scallops and crab meat.

"If we can't do something with silverfin, we are clowns," Parola told the Associated Press. "It's too good to ship to Asia, it's too good to use as bait, and it's too good to leave on the bank."

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