

Flounder is a local favorite

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Talk to someone who has fished in the area for years and you're bound to find someone who has fished for flounder.

This easy-to-catch, easy-to-eat fish is what local chefs think of as their blank slate for seafood dishes.

"It's a lot like pompano, in that it's mild and you can do a lot with it," said Tim Creehan, owner and chef at Beach Walk Café in Destin. "But you can do even more with flounder in presentations because it's not as delicate; it's more pliable. That's why you see stuffed flounder so much in restaurants, because you can work it around the stuffing material more easily."

Flounder is also something locals can enjoy because they can fish for it themselves.

"I have fished and gilled for flounder along our back bays, bayous and Intracoastal Waterways as long as I can remember," said Eric Aden. "I was born and raised here and fished these waterways for the last 35 years. I fish the back bay waters at least one night a week and hit the gulf on the week-ends for the bigger, more popular species of fish."

Flounder has long been a favorite to catch and eat.

"Though catching them with a stingray grub, DOA, or live shrimp is fairly frequent, the most successful way is by 'gig-ging.' This is done using lights placed near the water while slowly drifting the shallows and spotting them buried in a thin layer under the sand," Aden said. "A pitch fork gig is then used to harvest the fish from the water."

He also enjoys cooking what he catches.

"I remove the head and intestines and leave the entire rest of the fish. I cut a straight line across the top running almost to the tail. I then cut down to the horizontal back-bone and open it up cutting towards the top and bottom which makes for a nice open pouch. I fill that with crabmeat stuffing mix and add butter and blackening spice and bake in the oven with or without optional parchment paper on 375 degrees for about 45 minutes."

Catching flounder can also be a matter of going under the water to get them.

John Bunting of Crestview used to gig for plentiful flounder when he was an active scuba diver.

“Although one may find a few flounder anytime of year, it's easy to load up on them during their seasonal migra-tions,” he said. “We used to really catch a lot of them in the fall, around October, when they were heading out of the bays into deeper, warmer water.”

When diving, he and his son would look for them around wrecks in water anywhere from 15 to around 80 feet deep.

“To gig them we would use what we called a ‘pole gun,’ which was a fiberglass shaft with a steel point (no barbs) on one end and rubber cord looped on the other end. We would look for the outline of the floun-ders on the sand bottom and fire the pole gun into them right behind the gill plate. Then we would carefully remove them from the gun and stack them up on a stringer.”

The fish used to fascinate Bunting because not only are they tasty, they are a bit odd looking.

“Flounder are born with eyes on both sides of their bodies and as they mature one eye migrates to the other side of their body,” he said. “So when they are mature, the white bottom side is eyeless and the brown camouflaged upper side has both eyes on it. They hide buried in the sand and usually all you can see is a faint outline and those two eyes looking at you.”

If you'd rather not venture into the deep, local seafood markets like Gulf Coast Seafood have flounder with varying availability depending on the time of year, the weather and water temperature.

“I don't think flounder is overfished, but there's so much waterfront property now and so little grass in the shallows that it's hurting the supply of food for flounder,” said Rick Young with Gulf Coast Seafood.

According to Young, recent prices for flounder have been about \$4.99 a pound for whole fish, \$8.99 for fillets.