

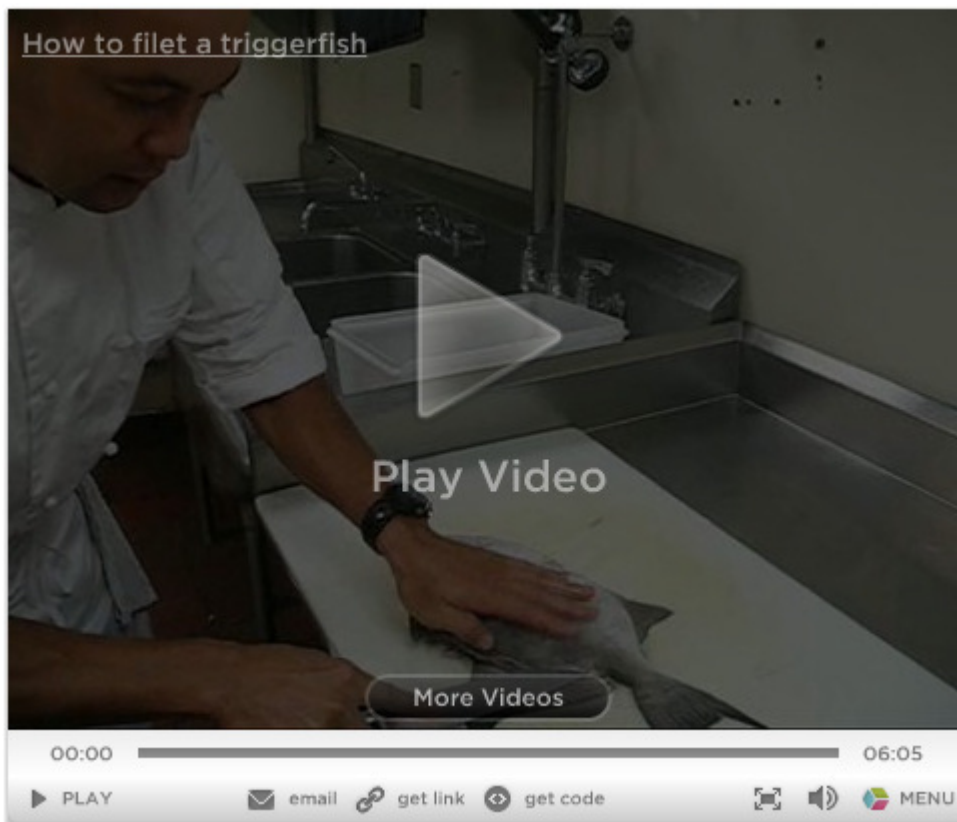
Triggerfish have place in locals hearts and stomachs (With VIDEO and RECIPES)

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DESTIN — According to many local fishermen and seafood lovers, the homely gray triggerfish entered its own when the flashier red snapper became overfished.

“Look at any gourmet food magazine, and if you see a beautiful fish, it’s going to be a giant, pretty red snapper,” said Captain Dale Beebe of the Lady Em in Destin. “It won’t be a triggerfish. They aren’t exactly glamorous.”



Triggerfish, to be honest, are pug-ugly – a dull gray hockey puck of a fish with a serious overbite and a tiny batwing trigger fin up top.

It lives where snapper live – along reefs and wrecks – and can be speared or hooked, just like a snapper.

Triggerfish have a tiny mouth, making them tough to catch.

“They have a reputation as a bait stealer,” Beebe chuckled.

They don’t just look tough. A triggerfish is a fighter, too. Once you ’rassle one onto the boat, you get a fish that’s not only ugly but kinda small and flat as a flounder.

“You pull back those lips, and you see big strong teeth that can crunch through a barnacle, an oyster, eat basically anything,” Beebe said.

According to local charter captains, the first response visitors have when they see a triggerfish is, “Can you eat this?”

According to Tony Martin with Harbor Docks Seafood Market, the lack of eye appeal used to influence eating, too.

“Yeah, they’re popular now, but 20 years ago people used to throw them away after they caught them,” Martin said.

Chef Tim Creehan of Beach Walk Cafe recalls when he arrived in the area 20 years ago, the fish was so unpopular, he could buy the filets from Destin Ice House for \$1 a pound.

“At the time, other restaurants were serving snapper, grouper and tuna, and I wanted something local that no one else was serv-ing. I started serving them at Marina Cafe and people loved them,” he said. “It’s a flaky, slightly oily fish that’s a good cross between the firmness of grouper and the flavor of snapper.”

He even won the Governor’s Cup Seafood Challenge in 1988 with a triggerfish recipe.

Triggerfish, according to the Destin Charter Boat Association, are available all year ’round. You won’t get a lot of meat off them, but what you do get you can use in everything from fish burgers to fancy fillets.

“Very few restaurants are serving real triggerfish, though,” said Martin.

The fish is in high demand, but for commercial fishing, the supply isn’t as plentiful in the gulf. He mostly trucks in triggers from North and South Carolina.

Another problem is that the yield isn’t really high for the fish.

“For every 100 pounds of fish, you can get maybe 33 pounds of filet,” Martin said.

The good thing, Beebe said, is that triggerfish freeze better than practically any other type of locally caught fish.

“You put a trigger in a Ziploc, throw him in the freezer, and six or eight months later, you can take it out and fix it and have a really good-tasting fish. It doesn’t get fishier tasting,” Beebe said.

According to Chef Dennes Weber of Zampiere’s, triggerfish has dry, firm, white flesh with a great taste, but it’s not the easiest thing to clean because of its tough skin.

You also don’t get a huge, meaty fillet; instead, use a super-sharp knife and remove the sliver-thin fillet.

It’s a good thing the “trigger” on the back makes such a good handle for cleaning this fish.

Weber said his mom’s recipe for fish works really well on trigger: Simply coat the fillet with basil mayonnaise (and his mom made her own) and broil it. The fat-laden condiment seals in the juices.

Or, trigger is a great fish to grill. Just put the “presentation side” of the fillet down first, then grill the other side after just a few minutes. If your fish is underdone, that’s fine – you can pop it in the oven on a well-greased cookie sheet, at about 375 degrees for no more than five minutes.

“Don’t overcook the fish,” he said.

Triggerfish also work well as the wrap for stuffed fish, en papillote or baked well in a nut coating.

Graffiti’s specializes in a triggerfish entree that’s graced its menu for quite some time, their popular herb-crusting triggerfish.

“It’s pretty popular, because it’s a good, mild fish,” said J.R. Laughton with Graffiti’s.

“But, triggerfish is versatile anyway. You can grill it, prepare it in a pan on the stovetop or in the oven,” he said.

For Laughton, cleaning the trigger isn't really that difficult.

“Actually, it's harder to filet a grouper or amberjack,” he said.

RECIPES

Grilled Triggerfish with Escarole and Roasted Peppers

Four 7-ounce triggerfish filets

Olive oil

Salt to taste

Black pepper to taste

1 portion sautéed escarole

2 portion roasted red sweet pepper

¼ cup balsamic vinegar

3 tablespoon basil chopped

Prepare the roasted peppers.

Preheat a grill surface. Brush the triggerfish with olive oil and season to taste with salt and black pepper.

Grill the triggerfish filets until thoroughly cooked.

Prepare the escarole and place on the base of four dinner plates. Place the grilled triggerfish filets on top of the sautéed escarole.

Top the triggerfish filets with the roasted peppers and drizzle balsamic vinegar over each triggerfish filet.

Garnish the triggerfish with chopped basil.

Source: Chef Tim Creehan

Grilled Triggerfish with Citrus Butter Sauce

Four 7-ounce fish filet grilled

1 cup heavy cream

½ cup orange juice

1 tablespoon lemon juice

2 tablespoons lime juice

1 tablespoon sugar

2 tablespoons fish stock

2 sticks butter

Salt to taste

White pepper to taste

In a sauce pot, reduce the heavy cream, orange juice, lemon juice, lime juice, sugar and fish stock to half the original volume.

Cut the butter into chips and whip into the reduced sauce until all of the butter is incorporated. Season to taste with salt and white pepper.

Grill the fish filets. Serve topped with citrus butter sauce.

Source: Chef Tim Creehan

Crusted Triggerfish with Banana and Vanilla Bean Sauce

2 triggerfish filets (6-8 ounces)

1 cup coarsely chopped pecans

2 cups flour

1 cup egg and milk wash

BANANA AND VANILLA BEAN SAUCE

1 quart heavy cream

1/2 vanilla bean

4 ounces banana liquer

2 tablespoons blond roux

1 tablespoon sugar

To make banana and vanilla bean sauce, simmer ingredients in small pan and reduce by 1/2. Thicken with roux if needed. Mix pecans and 1 cup flour. Dust triggerfish with flour, and then dredge in egg wash. Press filets hard on pecan flour. Pan sauté in oil or butter and finish in oven. Serve with a starch and vegeta-ble of choice. Lace plate with banana and vanilla bean sauce. Top with triggerfish

Source: Energy Services Pensacola

Wild-Caught Triggerfish with Shrimp and Crabmeat Succotash – with a Pimiento Cheese Butter, Chow-Chow and Peppered Collard Greens

CHOW CHOW

4 cups julienned green cabbage

1 large white sweet onion, julienned

1 tablespoon celery seed

1 teaspoon madras curry powder

2 bay leaves

2 tablespoons turmeric

1/2 ground ginger powder

1 cup julienned or shredded carrots

1 cup sugar

1 cup rice wine vinegar

1 tablespoon salt

Place all ingredients in medium saucepan, place over high heat. Bring to boil, reduce to low and simmer for approximately 40 minutes. Let cool, strain and discard excess liquid.

SHRIMP STOCK

Tails and shells from 30 large shrimp (reserve shrimp for succotash recipe)

2 smoked ham hocks

1 medium diced onion

1/2 cup diced celery

2 bay leaves

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 tablespoon tomato paste

4 cups of water

Place onions, celery and oil in a medium saucepan. Sweat onions and celery for 5 minutes, add tomato paste, bay leaf, ham hock and shrimp shells to pan. Cover shrimp mixture with water and bring to a boil and simmer over low heat for 20-25 minutes. Remove from heat and remove ham hock, let liquid cool, strain and reserve liquid. Pick meat off of reserved ham bone to use for collard greens. Should have about 3 cups stock and approximately 1/4 cup of shredded ham hock meat. Keep warm until service.

PIMIENTO CHEESE BUTTER

1 tablespoon sour cream

1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce

1 teaspoon Texas Pete's hot sauce

1/2 cup diced pimientos

1 cup shredded smoked Cheddar cheese

Zest and juice of one lemon

1/4 cup basil

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup of soft unsalted butter

In food processor, pulse first four ingredients until smooth. Add cheese, lemon zest and juice. Continue to pulse. Add basil, butter and salt and pulse long enough to incorporate all

ingredients.

Using wax paper, roll into a log and chill until needed.

PEPPERED COLLARD GREENS

Leaves from one bunch of fresh collard greens, washed, trimmed and julienned (reserve two collard green leaves for collard green “hay” garnish)

2 tablespoons olive oil

1/2 cup of chopped uncooked bacon (about 4 slices)

1/4 cup diced ham hock meat (reserved from shrimp stock recipe)

1 cup sliced white onion

Pinch of red chili flakes

1/2 cup red wine vinegar

1/2 cup fresh shrimp stock

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon ground Tellicherry peppercorns

In large saucepan over medium heat, render bacon with the onions and chili flakes for about 7-10 minutes. Add collard greens, sear in bacon drippings for approximately 2 minutes, coating greens well.

Add remaining liquids and simmer for 25-30 minutes.

Season with salt and pepper Keep warm until service.

SUCCOTASH

1½ cups baby lima beans or butter beans*

1½ cup fresh corn kernels (2 ears of preferably a sweet variety such as silver queen)

¾ cup black-eyed peas *

1 cup julienned raw applewood smoked bacon (about 6 slices)

¾ cup of diced mild Andouille sausage

1 medium sweet onion, diced (approximately one cup)

1 medium red bell pepper, diced (approximately 1/2 cup)

1/2 cup diced celery

1 cup diced carrot

1 teaspoon paprika

One 14-ounce can of diced unsalted tomatoes

1/2 cup dry sherry

1 cup fresh shrimp stock

2 tablespoon roasted garlic puree

1 bay leaf

1½ tablespoon fresh thyme leaves

Salt and pepper to taste

3 tablespoon unsalted butter (divided)

30 raw shrimp (peeled, de-veined, tails removed)

1 pound of cleaned, picked jumbo lump crabmeat

* Can use fresh, frozen, canned (rinsed and drained) or dried (cooked off and drained)

Melt 2 tablespoons butter in large, heavy-bottomed skillet over medium heat

1. Add bacon, render for 5 minutes until bacon is just beginning to crisp.
2. Add shrimp, season with salt and pepper.
3. Sear shrimp on both sides – approximately 90 seconds on each side. Remove and reserve.
4. Add onions, continue to cook until onions become translucent.
5. Add corn, celery, bell pepper and carrots.
6. Cover and sweat vegetables for 5 minutes until fork tender.
7. Add lima beans, black-eyed peas, tomatoes, roasted garlic puree, bay leaf, paprika, Andouille sausage, fresh shrimp stock and sherry.

8. Simmer uncovered for 40 minutes.
9. Cover and set aside, but keep warm. Ten minutes before service, bring mixture back up to medium heat. Add reserved shrimp, crabmeat, remaining tablespoon of butter, fresh thyme to finish.
10. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

COLLARD “HAY” GARNISH

Using the remaining two collard green leaves. Chiffonade collard greens and flash fry at 350 degrees for 60 seconds. Remove from fry oil and drain on paper towels. Lightly season with salt.

PAN SEARED TRIGGERFISH

Twelve (2½-3 ounce each) skinless and boneless triggerfish fillets

Salt and pepper

4 tablespoons of unsalted butter (may need more)

1. Lightly season fish fillets with salt and pepper on both sides, set aside.
2. In a large, heavy-bottom skillet, melt 2 tablespoons butter over medium-high heat.
3. Place gently in hot pan (don't crowd).
4. Sear for 2 minutes until light golden brown.
5. Carefully flip over and finish cooking until fish is just cooked through (approximately another 1-2 minutes depending on size and thickness of fillets).
6. Remove from pan and keep warm until all fillets are cooked.
7. Add butter as necessary to keep pan well lubricated during the cooking process.

To assemble:

1. Ladle succotash into serving bowl (approximately 1/2 cup per serving)
2. Top succotash with peppered collard greens (approximately 1/3 cup per serving).
3. Place one fillet of fish on bed of succotash/collards.
4. Layer with chow-chow (approximately 2 tablespoons) and top with next fish fillet.

5. Top second fillet with pimienta cheese butter (approximately 1 tablespoon)
6. Arrange 5 shrimp per serving around stacked fish fillets and succotash.
7. Garnish fillets with collard “hay”
8. Serve immediately.

Using wax paper, roll into a log and chill until needed.

Source: Chef Shawn Wellersdick, Port Land Grille from Great American Seafood Cookoff, New Orleans.