

taste buds
chef Larry
Jones

Catfish aren't funny

I can remember growing up in Wyandotte and riding my bike down to where the Boblo boat used to make its second stop.

Slung over my shoulder was my 10th-birthday present, a Zebeo rod-and-reel combo. Shoved into one jacket pocket was a cottage cheese container of nightcrawlers that my dad and I searched for the night before, after a full afternoon of lawn watering.

The other pocket was crammed with a wafer-paper-wrapped peanut butter sandwich and a quarter that, if memory serves, would get me two bottles of Coke. I went searching for perch but mostly ended up with a few carp and an occasional catfish.

I always cringed when the slimy thing with whiskers that "would sting ya if you didn't watch out" was hauled in. I recall once offering an elderly fisherman to my right a quarter if he would "get it off the hook" for me.

After losing my refreshment money a few times, I figured it was just easier to use the hankie Momma always would stuff into my pants pocket.

Ah, but the image of the bottom feeder catfish is rapidly changing. Granted, they can still be caught downriver, but the grocer or fishmarket has fresh catfish available year-round here in the metropolitan area.

NOT RIVER-FED catfish, mind you, but farm-raised, grain-fed, Delta Pride catfish is what suburban shoppers are discovering to be the "in" fish. What's the difference, you ask?

First off, they're gaining a reputation for being light textured, sweet tasting and totally lacking the fishy odor that plagues most other fish. Seems these farm-raised catfish live an approximate 18-month life in crystal-clear and man-made ponds.

After hatching, the fingerlings are fed a mixture of soybeans, corn, wheat and fishmeal, along with essential vitamins and nutrients that float on the top of the ponds which, in turn, make the bottom sucker naturally seek out nutrition from the surface.

This natural feeding, in addition to the cleanliness of the ponds, makes for a fish that is sweeter and, as this writer can attest after purchasing some in his favorite grocery, has relatively no fish odor. (What will they think of next?)

In addition to a gentle, sweet taste, the fresh farm-raised catfish filets I purchased (at a little under \$5 per pound) cooked up beautifully. First, I experimented with a light coating of crushed Ritz crackers, seasoned with a little paprika and garlic powder. A light dipping in an egg wash and a quick roll in the seasoned cracker crumbs, along with about four minutes in a hot skillet seasoned with about a tablespoon of oil, produced a picture-perfect pan-fried fillet.

THEN TALKED personally with John Fols, executive chef of Delta Pride Catfish, who told me about the many

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Waitress Suki Lee shows customers how to dip raw beef and vegetables into a pot of simmering sukiyaki sauce, during dinner at Akasaka Japanese Restaurant in Livonia. The dish sukiyaki typifies nabemono, which is one-pot cookery.

JIM JAGDFELD/staff photographer

Do it yourself Cook the meal when dining out

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

Imagine dining in a restaurant and cooking the food yourself.

Dining out. Cooking. An obvious conflict of terms that fail to fit one another. A genuine oxymoron, as it were.

But look again.

This is exactly what's happening at two area restaurants where essential ingredients are provided table-side for cooking by diners who pay for the privilege.

Charley's Clandiggers in Farmington Hills has introduced the latest culinary sensation, do-it-yourself hot rock cooking based on ancient technique.

Akasaka Japanese Restaurant in Livonia nurtures traditional, Oriental cuisine that is virtually unknown in the West, do-it-yourself nabemono.

In both instances, diners anticipate more than tasty cuisine. Hot rock and nabemono are dining experiences in which the chef is the guest of honor.

This dining involves more than simply eating. It is a complete dining experience.

"PEOPLE LIKE it very much, especially men. We have lots of male customers," said Suki Lee, one of the Akasaka waitresses most experienced in the art of nabemono. Through her gentle tutelage, Westerners and others who have never before cooked or eaten nabemono quickly acquire the skill.

Loosely translated, nabemono means pot of food or cooking in a pot. Akasaka offers three variations of "pot food," beginning in price at \$14.95 each.



With chopsticks, diners remove cooked food, then dip it into whipped egg.

- Suki-yaki - thinly sliced beef, tofu, bamboo shoots and other vegetables in sukiyaki sauce.
- Shabu-shabu - thinly sliced beef and vegetables in broth.

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Japanese meal in pot

This recipe for sukiyaki is from "The Cooking of Japan" in the Life-Time "Foods of the World" series of cookbooks.

NABEMONO: One-Pot Cookery
In all "nabe" — one-pot, do-it-yourself — cooking, the actual cooking is done at the dinner table, although the uncooked food is sliced and arranged in advance. An electric skillet or casserole is most effective in preparing "nabemono," but a heavy,

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Fanciest desserts come easy

By Ariene Funke
special writer

Sure, that chocolate walnut torte cake sounds heavenly. But who has the time — or desire — to chop, stir, mix and decorate a fabulous dessert?

Nancy Pringle Davis does. Her Plymouth bakery, called Pringle's Pastries of Old Village, produces tasty desserts made the old-fashioned way.

"Everything is made from scratch," said Davis, 46. "Seventy percent of the women are working today. Many of them are probably gourmet cooks, but they don't have the time. They tell me that they want something to complement a fine meal. But they are also looking for quality."

Davis specializes in cheesecakes and torte cakes. She uses no mixers. Among the choices are chocolate walnut torte cake and walnut graham torte. Kahlua milk chocolate cheesecake and chocolate mousse pie. She also makes bite-sized tarts, specialty cookies and cupcakes and miniatures of several varieties.

"I didn't want a traditional cake shop," said Davis, a former Plymouth resident who now lives in Howell.

DAVIS' BAKERY is the fulfillment of a longtime dream. A self-taught baker, she launched her business last year after accepting a buyout from General Motors Corp. when

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BILL DRESLER/staff photographer

Nancy Pringle Davis shows some of the delicious cakes she bakes at Pringle's Pastries in Plymouth's Old Village.

Pringle's Pastries gives its recipe for shortbread

SCOTCH SHORTBREAD

¾ cup butter, softened to room temperature
2 cups all-purpose flour
¼ cup sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla

Mix butter and sugar thoroughly. Measure flour by dipping measuring cup into flour and leveling off with knife. Work in flour with hands. Chill dough. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Roll dough to ¼ inch thickness on surface sprinkled with granulated sugar. Cut into fancy shapes (ovals, squares, hearts). Place on ungreased cookie sheet. Bake 20-25 minutes. (Tops do not brown.) Makes two dozen 1 ½-inch cookies.

TART SHELLS (Bite-Size Shortbread Tarts)

¾ cup butter, softened
¼ cup sugar
1 egg
1 teaspoon almond extract
1 ½ cup all-purpose flour

In a large mixer bowl combine all tart shell ingredients. Beat at medium speed, scraping bowl often, until

mixture is crumbly (2-3 minutes). Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Place balls into mini-muffin pans, press on bottom and sides to form shells. Bake at 350 degrees for 5 minutes or until very lightly browned. Cool slightly before filling. Yield: 3 dozen.

Fill with your choice of fillings. Some suggestions would be: lemon filling, topped with meringue; blueberry topped with whipped cream; or, a favorite at Pringle's Pastries, pecan filling, topped with a pecan half (recipe below).

CARAMEL PECAN FILLING

1 cup powdered sugar
¼ cup butter
½ cup dark corn syrup
1 cup chopped pecans
½ pecan halves

Combine all filling ingredients in 2-quart saucepan, except chopped pecans and pecan halves. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until mixture comes to a full boil (4-5 minutes). Remove from heat and stir in chopped pecans. Spoon into baked shells. Top each with a pecan half. Bake for 5 minutes. Cool. Remove from pans. Makes 36 tarts.

Restaurants to be reviewed

Restaurant reviews will appear in Taste every other week, starting Monday, April 3. Dining spots in communities covered by the Observer & Eccentric will be featured. The critic will remain anonymous, to ensure getting the same service any other customer would receive while dining out.