

# TASTE

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MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 1993

**TASTE BUDS**



**CHEF LARRY JAMES**

## Freshly caught fish, there's nothing better

I have to stop and think for a minute what it is I enjoy more. Is it the thrill of the catch, sitting in a boat wondering if this will be the day I hook the big one? Or do I relish more the sizzle of the fry pan, the splash of a freshly squeezed lemon, and the delicate taste I savor while I consume the fruits of the lakes and my labors?

Anyone who knows me is keenly aware of my love of fishing — or is it my love of great-tasting fish? Anyone who has ever fished the Great Lakes and their vast tributaries would be hard pressed to choose. In all honesty, what it boils down to is that there is nothing that compares to the stellar taste of freshly prepared, fresh fish.

That's not to say I haven't enjoyed the taste of Atlantic salmon grilled to perfection over an alder-wood-smoked grill purchased from my local fishmonger. Nor would I ever turn up my nose and palate against a cheap fillet of scrod properly prepared. But when it comes to having some of the world's best fishing within a short drive from your doorstep,

I succumb to a few personal rules of habit when I get the opportunity to cook fresh fish. I never rely on heavy sauces, salans or coatings. A fresh fillet of walleye, lake perch or bass requires a simple dusting of bread crumbs, period. The skillet should be heavy. A scant dollop of real butter and a light drizzle of good olive oil is all that's needed to coat the skillet. A microscopic pinch of salt and a few shakes from the white pepper mill coupled with just enough freshly squeezed lemon juice to induce an intoxicating aroma and delicate taste are all that is needed.

**Momma's method**

Momma always deep-fried her lake catches in a well-seasoned batter comprised of Old Bay, Bar-B-Q Mix and a heavy shot of half-and-half. If the beloved grease from the family deep fryer proved as fresh as the fish, all was not lost. The flavor was compromised however, when the pint bottle of store-bought tartar sauce was spooned over the crusty fillets. She would be disappointed knowing I have never opened a bottle of tartar sauce, nor have I ever even served a homemade version with my catch since leaving the realms of Wyandotte. Instead of masking the flavor of well-prepared fish with the taste of Miracle Whip and pickle relish, I have discovered the subtle tastes of fresh chopped parsley Culinarted with butter and fresh lemon juice. My electric stove, when set somewhere between six and seven on the black dial, offers the perfect amount of power to handle the 10-inch cast-iron skillet. Those grilling grates that rest securely on a white ash steved Weber grill work equally as well with delicate fillets, just as they do with green onions, eggplant and a freshly sliced bulb of fennel.

My first choice would only be to enjoy fresh lake fish, leaving the freezing of an overabundant catch, and it's subsequent cooking to that in momma's deep fryer, surrounded by Drake's batter. Couple the fresh fish with a handful of small Michigan potatoes, steamed in their jackets till barely tender, then roasted in a hot oven drenched in butter and sprinkled with more parsley or maybe an ear of Peaches and Cream corn on the cob and that could be all that I would ever ask for.

I discovered these simple tastes after my first fishing expedition when all I had to cook with was a skillet and Coleman stove. I remember crumpling the bread with the back of a hatchet and almost choking on a bone I had neglected to remove. I have also learned that when the time comes to prepare fresh fish the pan should never be crowded. I would rather dine like the Chinese and have great tasting small servings served in repetition than risk covering the entire skillet with fish that were unevenly cooked and much to the elimination of their natural juices. Butter and even low-cost margarines and spreads magically change when generously blended with a handful of fresh parsley, chives or cilantro. There's little need to melt the butter into oblivion, simply allowing the spread to come to room temperature and then briskly mixing in the delicate flavors is all that is needed. A day in the refrigerator does wonders, but a few hours will suffice.

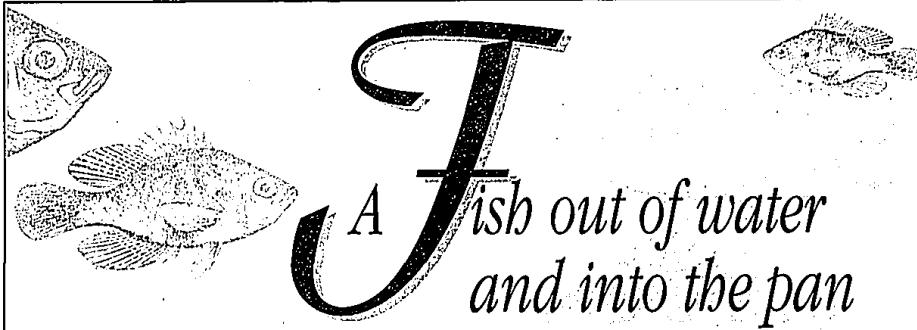
If bread crumbs seem too bland, cornmeal, day-old cornbread and an additional light sprinkling of Parmesan cheese can, as the fishermen say, blow prepackaged seasoned bread crumbs right out of the water.

See Larry James' family-tested recipe inside. To leave a message for Chef Larry, dial 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, then mailbox number 1886.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Find out what kids really like in their lunch boxes.
- Laura Letobar substitutes applesauce for butter in a Recipe Makeover of lemon loaf.



## Fishermen share tips for cooking pan fish



It's fun to fish, but what do you do with them after you catch them? Fish in our area's inland lakes and you might catch bluegills, panfish, perch, walleye or bass. Local fishermen say they're tasty, and they offer tips on how to cook and freeze them.

By ANITA FITCH PAZNER  
SPECIAL WRITER

The tepid waters of inland lakes makes fishing for food an interesting task. The temperatures and depths of local fishing holes seldom get low enough to sustain cold water salmon or tasty brown trout, two of Michigan's best known fish.

According to Bill Blacha of Lakeside Fishing Shop in Farmington, what you may catch is bluegills, panfish, perch, walleye, trout or bass.

"Most people who fish on inland lakes primarily try to catch bass because it is a larger fish," said Blacha. "The problem is that bass is not a good table fish."

The smaller fish are actually better tasting, said John Giordano, owner of Annie Up Charters in Royal Oak.

They are also safer to eat according to the Michigan Public Health Department. Bluegills and other sunfish are much less likely to have unsafe amounts of mercury in them because they eat insects instead of other mercury carrying fish.

Growing up fishing on Kent Lake in Kensington park and on Pontiac Lake gave Giordano a great fondness for the smaller panfish.

"Panfish are basically bluegills, crappies or other types of sunfish," said Giordano. "They just happen to be the perfect size for a pan and they taste great."

The problem with bluegills and other panfish is that it is hard to make a really healthy meal with them, said Giordano who prefers to batter fry them.

Chef Pascal Paviani, manager of Scallops in Rochester, disagrees.

"There are many things you can do with panfish," said Paviani. "They can be sauteed over a campfire with a little olive oil and fresh herbs such as dill or thyme."

For a more gourmet approach, Paviani, who was trained at the Culinary Academy of Paris, suggests sauteeing shallots and capers with your fish in a teaspoon of butter. Add white wine and lemon juice, let the liquid reduce by half and serve.

To reduce the fat and cholesterol when frying your fish in batter, Giordano recommends using Egg Beaters or egg whites only to moisten the fish, dip it into seasoned flour and fry.

Bob Mitchell, known as the Hangman on local lakes, has been fishing for 44 years. He suggests deep frying bluegills.

"I clean my fish thoroughly, pat it dry with a paper towel and dip it in a thick pancake batter made of Bisquick. I use ginger ale instead of milk or water and I add a pinch of salt, white pepper and garlic powder to the mix. Then I deep fry the fish until they are crisp and ready to eat."

According to Mitchell, the most important thing to remember when preparing fish is to not over cook it. The second thing is to keep it fresh once you've caught it.

"Don't put the fish on a string or toss them in the bottom of the boat. Kill them instantly and pack them in a cooler full of ice," said Mitchell.

"The instant a fish strikes a lure and begins fighting his body creates an acid build-up in the muscle tissues that can affect the taste of the meat. It is similar to adrenalin in people."

Once the fish are safely in the kitchen, Mitchell separates his large fish from the small, fillets them and follows one of his freezing processes.

The first is for large fish like pike, salmon and trout. He calls it — "Three Stage Wrapping Process. Mitchell rinses the fillets thoroughly with cool water then wraps them in two layers of plastic wrap, a layer of aluminum foil and finishes them off with a layer of freezer paper.

"Be sure to label and date the freezer packages," said Mitchell. "You don't want to keep them more

See FISHERMAN, 2B

## Napa wineries weather uncertain times

**FOCUS ON WINE**



**ELEANOR & RAY HEALD**

A recent trip to California bore witness to the fact that all is not well in wine country — especially the Napa Valley. The spread of phylloxera continues to play a pivotal role. Napa Valley winegrowers are in the early stages of replanting with new, phylloxera resistant rootstock — a most expensive undertaking that will continue until the year 2000.

It is estimated that over the next four to seven years, 60 percent of the Valley's 34,000 vineyard acres will be replanted.

Current decline of Napa Valley vineyards (and

others in California wine country) is caused by a strain of phylloxera that feeds on AxR#1 rootstock. Approximately 60 percent of the vineyards in Napa Valley are currently planted on AXR#1.

Only last year at this time, there were economic forecasts of a grape shortage beginning with the 1993 harvest. This has not come to pass. Recent record harvests and inaccuracy in assessing actual plantings have in fact created an oversupply of grapes causing a sea of wine, especially chardonnay, that has dropped from \$1,200 to \$500 per ton. Will the consumer see a drop in prices? Not for premium wines.

Remember, there will always be a shortage of grapes from the best vineyard sites. However, prices for premium and ultrapremium wines will stabilize.

Our prediction is that the consumer will witness heated competition among the fighting varieties.

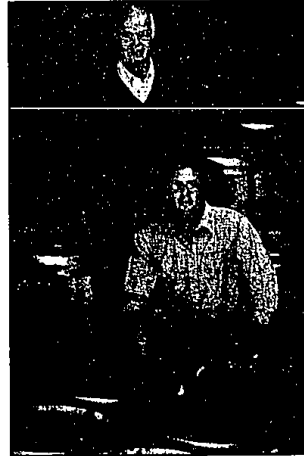
See NAPA, 1B

**WINE SELECTIONS OF THE WEEK - CALIFORNIA BEST BUYS**

The Monterey Vineyard has consistently made quality wine at affordable prices. The following represent exceptional values from this producer: 1991 Classic Pinot Noir (\$6); 1991 Classic White and Red (both \$5); 1992 Classic Sauvignon Blanc (\$5.50).

The following wines, priced well under \$10 are also exciting values: 1992 Pine Ridge Chenin Blanc; 1992 Marlon Sauvignon Blanc; 1992 Napa Ridge Chardonnay; 1992 Gundlach-Bundschu Gewurztraminer; and 1992 Sterling Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc.

At \$10, the tastiest pinot noir is the 1991 Buena Vista.



SHAFFER VINEYARDS

Unbeatable team: John Shafer of Shafer Vineyards with his son, Doug.