

# WHAT'S *the* Alternative?

Undervalued, lesser-known fish species might be the answer for chefs.

By Clare Leschin-Hoar

**FOR CHEFS** who embrace sustainability, from their baby-greens salad starter to their artisan-crafted cheese course for dessert, fish is frequently the pitfall that can trip up even the most earnest of efforts.

After all, it's a complicated topic. A species may be overfished in one part of the country, yet plentiful in another. Ratings by environmental groups can change over the course of a year. Perhaps a specific fish population is strong, but harmful fishing

practices land it squarely in the red "avoid" column. Add the BP oil spill into the mix, and there's no question that substitution skills are being honed in kitchens everywhere.

Savvy chefs have started taking a closer look at undervalued fish. Increasingly, menus are sporting lesser-known species, such as golden tilefish, tripletail, cobia, pompano or black drum. Here, we take a closer look at three alternative fish, and the pros and cons of each.

## **THE INVASIVE ASIAN CARP**

Before launching his food-truck venture, Chicago-based chef Phillip Foss had emerged as the champion of an invasive, much maligned fish: the Asian carp.

Originally imported to the U.S. during the 1970s, the carp was used to clean catfish ponds. It eventually escaped, and has been working its way up the Mississippi ever since, devouring large quantities of plankton and algae and crowding out

The popular fish tacos at Anthony's Fishette are just as likely to be made with sustainable basa as the more traditional cod.

native species while its own population numbers boom. Asian carp can be astounding jumpers, too, and have been known to break the jaws of fishermen who get in their way.

So serious is the threat of this fish that the Obama administration pronounced John Goss the Asian carp czar, with \$78 million to control them. Federal agencies have tried everything from poisoning the fish with rotenone to installing electric barriers to prevent the fish from finding its way into the Great Lakes.

Foss thinks the solution to this invasive species will instead be found on our dinner plates. While the chef was at Lockwood Restaurant & Bar in Chicago, he would serve it as an amuse-bouche or as an appetizer he dubbed Shanghai Bass Ceviche.

"It had great texture. It was moist and mild in flavor, not fishy at all," says Foss. "But the problem is, the bone structure is unusual—you can't get a steak out of it."

While wholesale costs of the fish were low (about \$1 a pound), it became an expensive undertaking, says Foss. "Because of the bone structure, you'd lose 85%-90% of the product, and the price would skyrocket to about \$15 a pound. When [customers] saw Asian carp next to salmon, halibut and scallops, it didn't jump off the page as the item they're going to choose."

Fellow Asian carp evangelist, Baton Rouge, La.-based chef Philippe Parola, CEO of Chef Parola Enterprises and Partran LLC, says if the industry can



overcome the boning issue, chefs will have a tasty, clean, sustainable fish to offer customers. Working closely with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Parola has renamed the fish "silverfin," and is trying to get funding for a processing plant to take the fish from whole to finished product. "The meat is extraordinary," he says. "It's between a scallop and crabmeat."

Whether or not this fish will make it to market in a substantial way remains to be seen, but finding a remedy for this invasive-species problem is something the seafood industry will be watching.

### IS BASA BETTER?

Anthony's Fish Grotto in San Diego is an old-school seafood spot. Family-owned since 1946, it has long been known for serving traditional seafood dishes such as chowders, fish and chips and combo plates. What's decidedly not old school is the restaurant's decision to try basa as an alternative fish for fish tacos and fish and chips. Anthony's Fishette, the walk-up counter next to the downtown waterfront restaurant, serves as the test location.

"We know the taste profile of cod, which is what we've traditionally used, but if another fish has that taste profile, and we can get it

at an affordable price, we'll consider that," says Andrew Aiello-Hauser, director of marketing for Anthony's Fish Grotto.

Basa, and its close cousin, swai—both are in the *pangasius* family—is a river catfish farmed primarily in Vietnam. In 2009, *pangasius* broke into the National Fisheries Institute's Top 10 Consumed Seafoods list for the first time. While it's not specified on the menu, basa has been used at Anthony's Fishette for a year and a half.

"It's always a balance between introducing new things and meeting the needs of old favorites," says Aiello-Hauser. "We need to focus on sustainable fish like basa or tilapia. I think it's probably our job to help educate our guests on new options and the facts behind the fish we serve. So far, we've never had anyone say it should be cod, or mention that they notice the difference."

While the American catfish farmers have been pushing to keep *pangasius* out of the U.S. market, calling foul on the pricing of imported farmed-raised fish, groups such as Seafood Watch and the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) give the fish a yellow rating, which means it's a good alternative.

Tim Fitzgerald, a marine scientist with the EDF, says, "It's a white fish alternative. It's

cheap, and has a year-round stable supply and is neutral in flavor. You can feed them fairly vegetarian diets. As a chef, you can do a lot of things with it, and for an American palate that doesn't like strong-flavored fish, it's ideal. But part of the issue is, the industry is young, and it's grown so quickly that production has outpaced scientific knowledge."

That could change with the standards recently put forth by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The guidelines will be used by the new Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC), expected to be operational by mid-2011.

"Once the ASC label is available, it will be the ultimate route to go," says Jose Villalon, managing director for aquaculture for the WWF. "It will be a farm-by-farm verification.

## ESCOLAR EDUCATION

Despite FDA guidelines, escolar is a fish that goes by many names: white tuna, super-white tuna, butterfish, Hawaiian walu. The deep-sea dweller is a by-catch of the swordfish and tuna fisheries. At first glance, escolar could seem like a winner. It doesn't face overfishing pressures. The flesh is snowy white with a mild taste and creamy texture. Its high fat content means it holds well and doesn't dry out easily, a trait chefs often admire. So, what's not to love?

Unfortunately, escolar contains levels of undigestible wax esters (known as gempylotoxin), which can cause severe diarrhea in some eaters. So purgative is the fish that it's actually banned in Japan and Italy. Native Hawaiians call it *maku'u*, which roughly means, "exploding

## ABALONE: ONCE PLENTIFUL, NOW FARMED

Finfish such as Asian carp, basa and escolar aren't the only seafood alternatives. In October 2010, the World Wildlife Fund announced global standards for abalone farming that will be used by the newly formed Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) by mid-2011. (Similar to Marine Stewardship Council certification for wild fish species, the ASC will issue certification to seafood raised by farmers.)

Plenty of Californians can remember when the abalone growing off the coastline was abundant.

"I used to go diving for it with my dad, brother and grandfather," says Deborah Scarborough, chef/owner of Black Cat Bistro in Cambria, Calif. "We used to get it all the time and make abalone chowder, sandwiches, fried abalone."

But plummeting stocks, caused by years with severe el ninos and a disease known as "withering foot syndrome," meant strict regulations were put in place by the state to protect the species. While noncommercial diving for red abalone is still permitted north of San Francisco, the practice remains off-limits further south. Unfortunately, abalone poaching remains a serious problem throughout the state.

intestines," and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration advises against any interstate commerce and requests that buyers be warned of the possible effects of consuming this fish.

But many chefs believe there can be a place for it on menus, if served in small portions.

Executive chef/partner Lewis Rossman of Sam's Chowder House in Half Moon Bay,

But today, chefs like Scarborough are able to keep the cherished seafood on the menu because of good abalone aquaculture. The Abalone Farm in nearby Cayucos, Calif., produces about 100 tons of farm-raised red abalone a year.

"Abalone skipped a generation. And an entire region lost its food icon," says Brad Buckley, sales manager for the farm. "Most young chefs had only heard about it from their parents and grandparents."

But the price tag is steep. Slow-growing, abalone can take four years or more to reach harvest size.

"It's the highest food cost item on my menu," says Ross Warren, chef/owner of Pacific Café in San Francisco. "But it's popular, and we have a lot of regular customers who still look for it."

Scarborough sees that same popularity. "We're a tiny restaurant, and I go through at least three dozen a week," she says.

"There's a sense of nostalgia associated with abalone. I always thought that my story, about diving with my family, was unique, but I hear that exact same story 10 times a year from customers. And I'm in the back. If I were out front, I'd hear it quite a bit more."

Calif., says he's had good success with escolar. Grilled, the fish would get a crispy exterior, Rossman says, and it would pair with almost anything, especially citrus.

"Escolar can thrive in this industry, but there needs to be some education on it, and the public needs to be educated, as well," he says. "I've sold the fish for years, and had nothing but success. That said, I would never put more than five or six ounces of it on a plate, period."

Chef Brian McBride at Blue Duck Tavern in Washington, D.C., first discovered escolar through one of his purveyors, and has had success with it on the menu. For an entrée, McBride is careful to serve only five-ounce portions of the fish, but adds plenty of other items on the plate as a way to limit intake while still providing the customer with a substantial dish.

"We actually slow-cook it in a low oven, then we'd sear it and serve it with chorizo and a tomato/clam broth. Cooked properly, it holds well and doesn't dry out. It sold like crazy," says McBride.

He says educating the wait staff on the controversy over the fish was key, as was being upfront with the name.

Ken Gall, seafood specialist at New York Sea Grant and Cornell University, agrees. "FDA requires that if this product is going to be sold in the U.S., it needs to be called escolar. Proper labeling is absolutely essential so people know what they are eating. And small portions can minimize the impact."

Cooking methods may reduce any distress, as well. Gall says he's heard that broiling

or other cooking methods that allow fat to drain away means customers get less of a dose of waxes.

"No one has proven that, but, intuitively, it makes sense," he says.

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