

INSHORE DELICACIES

by Phillip McDonald

It's gratifying to know that when you go to your favorite restaurant on the Emerald Coast you can order a fresh piece of fish that is locally caught. Fresh grouper, snapper and triggerfish are front-runner coastal favorites and are prevalent on menus and fish markets along our expansive coastline. As a chef, my zeal for all things fish (including the recent bans on recreational fishing of snappers and amberjacks) has led me to forage the frontiers of inshore fishing. Fishing along the bay as well as the shoreline of the Gulf offers a contrast of different species and delicacies. Redfish, speckled trout, king mackerel, pompano, black drum and our local favorite flounder call this area home. Several of these game fish will not be found on the menus or at local markets which means you have to go fishing to get dinner. This time of year the inshore fishing is spectacular, and there is no better place to start than the Choctawhatchee Bay. On a good day (or night), dock or kayak fishing for delicious redfish or trout can be very engaging, and within a couple of hours (or beers) you can have a dinner on the table that is guaranteed fresh.

Speckled trout is the South's most popular game fish and with good reason. The meat of this fish is very versatile due to its flaky, delicate, white flesh that is neither fishy nor oily. A great way to prepare fresh trout is to use the "less is more" approach. Season fillets with salt and pepper and place in a smoking hot cast iron skillet with canola oil. Sear a nice crust on one side, flip the fish and add a little knob of butter to the pan and baste until cooked through. The filets are usually thin, so basting in the pan will cook them without the use of an oven. Finish with a squeeze of lemon, some chopped parsley and little first press olive oil. Serve the delicious filets with cream corn, quality grits and a pile of fresh arugula.

Redfish is another tasty game fish that inhabit the bay. The thrill of the fight that this fish puts out, along with its mild flavor and flaky texture, make it very popular with local anglers. Redfish made its fame in the '80s with the popularity of Cajun Cuisine, a la Paul Prud-



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homme the Cajun cooking maestro. In fact, blackened redfish became so popular that it led to its decline in the early 80s due to overfishing. Redfish has bounced back huge, and they swim in scores in our local waters. Redfish can be caught around estuaries or around oyster beds where food is plentiful. Enjoy the filets of this fish by blackening with a traditional blackening seasoning and cooking in a super hot cast iron skillet skin side down until crisp; flip the fish and place in a 400 degree oven for about 10 to 15 minutes or until delicately

cooked through. I like to serve this with some roasted red potatoes and a flavorful herbed butter sauce to drizzle over the fish and potatoes.

The darling of the inshore species is the side swimmer known as the flounder. This unsightly but delectable species is found around the Choctawhatchee Bay and estuaries as well as inshore artificial reefs in the Gulf during the winter months. After the first real cold front of the winter passes, the anticipation for catching or gigging under the lights for flounder is restless. Flounder is delicious, and I only filet them if I catch a big one, which isn't often so most of the time I cook them whole. Cooking the whole flounder is easy, and the more simple the technique the better. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Gut and scale the fish making sure to rinse and pat dry. Score the top of the fish with a sharp knife, season with salt and pepper and dust the fish with a little cornstarch or flour for texture. Grab a large cast iron pan or Teflon coated pan and fire it up smoking hot with canola oil and a little butter. Place fish dark skin side down and sear the fish until crisp and browned; flip and cook in the oven for about 10 to 15 minutes or until cooked through. I like to warm a little garlic, chopped fresh tomato, capers, parsley and lemon in olive oil and pour the mixture over the fish. Finish the dish with a squeeze of lemon, and you will taste a new reason for living on the Emerald Coast.

Eating local fish is a beautiful thing because you are eating truly organic free-range meat. Fish are one of the only meats we eat that are guaranteed

wild. I can tell you how to cook it, but to catch it, check out some of our local inshore fishing guides such as the pros at Yellowfin Ocean Sports in Seagrove Beach for great gear and information on charters. After all, when you catch your own fish it always tastes better.

Phillip McDonald is the owner of Table Five personal chef service. For more information, visit www.tablefivechef.com.