

Seafood, Kentucky Style!

Aquaculture is producing local freshwater fish and prawns worth their salt

By Steve Coomes

Photos courtesy of the Great American Seafood Cook-Off

Kentucky chef Jeremy Ashby knew his freshwater trout and prawns combo was a long shot to win the annual Great American Seafood Cook-Off in New Orleans last month. But he had no doubts he'd get his chance to give the influential fish folk there a quick lesson in Kentucky sustainable aquaculture.

"Every year we know that coming from a landlocked state is a disadvantage," said Ashby, executive chef at Azur Restaurant in Lexington and a two-time cook-off competitor. The 8-year-old contest's rules mandate any fish ingredient must come from that chef's state's waters.

So far, all of the cook-off winners have come from states abutting salt water, and out of this year's 14 competitors, only three came from landlocked states. "We knew that if we were going to impress anybody, we'd have to be showmen. So we smoked the fish right there at the contest. It made for good TV."

Ashby teamed with John Varanese, chef-owner of Varanese in Louisville and runner-up for the second year in a row to Ashby in the Great Kentucky Seafood Cook-Off, the Bluegrass State's qualifying round for the national completion. Varanese won the state contest in 2009, when he cooked a Kentucky paddlefish dish that also didn't win at the national level. This year the duo presented judges with a bourbon-barrel-smoked Kentucky brown trout stuffed with freshwater prawns, goat cheese and mushrooms served with corn butter sauce and paddlefish caviar.

"I don't know how [fairly] the fresh water product is judged, but that's all we've



Pan-Fried Trout with Bourbon & Black Pepper Glaze

Chef Jeremy's Kentucky freshwater fish dish consisted of many parts. The trout was seasoned with this delicious bourbon and black pepper glaze, which is delicious in lots of dishes, including easy pan-fried trout. The chef uses Louisville-based Bourbon Barrel Foods smoked black pepper for this dish (<http://bourbonbarrelfoods.com/>).

Bourbon & Black Pepper Glaze

- 1¾ teaspoons bourbon-barrel-smoked black pepper
- 3 whole cloves
- 2¼ tablespoons sugar
- ¼ teaspoon (Kentucky) honey
- ¼ cup soy sauce
- ¼ cup bourbon
- 1 tablespoon grated lemon zest
- 2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice

Trout

- 8 trout filets
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 3 tablespoons olive oil

☞ In a small spice grinder, grind the cloves and the black pepper together until very fine (you can also use a pepper grinder for the pepper and leave the cloves whole). Put spices in a small saucepan with remaining ingredients and bring to a boil on medium heat. Boil until the mixture reduces to about ¼ cup. Strain before serving if desired.

☞ Meanwhile, in shallow dish, combine the flour, cayenne, salt and pepper. Dredge fish in flour mixture. Heat oil in a wide, heavy skillet. Add fish (do not crowd filets) and fry in hot oil for about 4 to 6 minutes on each side or until meat flakes with a fork. Keep warm in a low oven if necessary while finishing the remaining filets.

☞ Serve filets with a drizzle of bourbon-black pepper glaze. Serves 4.

Photos courtesy of the Great American Seafood Cook-Off



Jeremy Ashby (left), executive chef at Azur Restaurant in Lexington, and John Varanese, chef-owner of Varanese in Louisville, teamed up to compete in the Great American Seafood Cook-Off competition.

got here," Varanese said, adding that the 2011 winner's plate featured sea bass.

Ashby let the judges know that his entry was made with truly sustainable supplies. "We wanted to put attention on aquaculture and prove that if we can make that kind of fish taste this good, there should be creative applications to move it to a larger scale," he said. Sustainability is important because 70% of the world's fisheries are now exploited, overexploited or have collapsed, according to the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch, and demand continues to climb.

Much as they want to win at the national level, ultimately both men want to impress the guests at their restaurants. Both say customer interest in Kentucky freshwater fish products — prawns, striped bass, largemouth bass, catfish, tilapia, paddlefish (and their prized caviar), crappie and trout—is growing, making it easier for them to prepare dishes with Kentucky "seafood."

"Five years ago, nobody seemed to care about where it came from, but now people are really getting into it," said Ashby, about these freshwater products. "It's a great selling point for us to come to the table and talk about what farm our food is from. Customers talk more about what they're eating and actually feel good about it."

But all the warm fuzzies in the world won't overcome the often-frustrating supply chain issues faced by chefs hoping

to use Kentucky fish. Varanese serves Kentucky bass and prawns only as occasional specials because finding farmers who can supply the quantity he needs when he needs it is challenging.

The products are worth searching for, said Varanese. "The largemouth bass is as sweet and white as can be and the paddlefish is just great. But the problem has been getting regular deliveries."

Varanese said he's talked to other chefs who say they'd use more local fish if they could get them predictably. He also knows that farming is difficult enough, and that selling and marketing puts more work on the farmer. "Their job is to grow, so marketing isn't something they always do as well."

Angela Caporelli hears him. As aquaculture coordinator and marketing specialist for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, she faces the never-ending effort of linking fish farmers and end users. Few retailers carry fresh products consistently, leaving customers going to farmers' markets or visiting fish farms firsthand.

"One problem is the infrastructure needs to be better developed," said Caporelli. "The farms are all over the state, not concentrated like we'd like them to be."

But Kentucky aquaculture is a young industry in a state with centuries of farming history, and it is overshadowed by beef production (Kentucky is the eighth largest



beef producer in the nation). Caporelli said fish farming began here about 20 years ago when it was suggested that spent distillery grain could be used as high-nutrient catfish feed. Funds from the massive tobacco growers' buyout later helped farmers diversify their enterprises by setting up aquaculture production. Kentucky State University joined the effort by conducting extensive studies on setting up and running fish farms, guidance Caporelli called indispensable and internationally recognized.

"You go anywhere in the world and talk aquaculture and they know KSU," she said. "They've done cutting-edge work on bass and freshwater prawn farming."

And yet, the number of fish farms in Kentucky is less than 50, about a third of which are dedicated to prawns. Caporelli attributes much of that modest growth to attrition.

"When the tobacco money was coming in, a lot saw that free money and thought, 'Oh, I can do that. I'll raise fish and make money,'" she said. "As with any form of agriculture, there's a learning curve — and it's a lot of work. A lot who got in also weren't farmers historically. But a lot of those who were are still at it."

Like Rocky Allen at Crystal Bridge Fish, a three-pond tilapia and prawn operation located near LaGrange. Between raising crops and tending beef cattle, Allen

feeds his fish daily and aerates his ponds round the clock. From the moment he pours thousands of penny-size hatchling prawns into his ponds in mid-May until he drains those ponds in mid-September, the muddy depths make it impossible to monitor their growth.

"It's not like growing tobacco or corn, which you can look at and see how it's doing," Allen said. "You just drain the ponds and hope for the best."

In September 2010, Allen's work yielded barely 150 pounds of blue prawns — about

½th of his normal harvest. And despite not knowing what went wrong, he's back at it again in 2011 (his 10th year), hoping he'll have a harvest pondside for customers who buy anywhere from five to 50 pounds.

"I don't sell to restaurants or groceries, just these people," Allen said last year, gesturing toward his patrons. "They've been good to me all these years, so why would I deny them their shrimp?"

Steve Coomes is a former chef and Louisville freelancer.

Fresh Prawns *Macrobrachium rosenbergii* are a tropical species of prawn native to Southeast Asia and India. They are large, not too aggressive, and thrive in fresh water, making them a good choice for aquaculture production in the American South. Because they thrive in warm temperatures, they are harvested in Kentucky in September, before the first frost threatens.

Rocky Allen will be harvesting freshwater prawns at his Oldham County Crystal Bridge Fish farm on Sept. 17 and 24 from 9am until they are sold out.

Directions: Take I-71 to exit 22 at LaGrange. Turn south onto Hwy 53 and drive 3 miles. Look for Crystal Bridge Fish signs on the left.



Photo: CRW Photography