

Chefs' Recipe | Chefs put Kentucky 'seafood' on map at New Orleans cook-off

BY RON MIKULAK • RMIKULAK@COURIER-JOURNAL.COM • AUGUST 3, 2011

Some of the spectators at the Great American Seafood Cook-off this weekend in New Orleans might find it surprising that land-locked Kentucky will be one of the 20 states competing. But for chef Jeremy Ashby of Lexington's Azur Restaurant, his entry — a rainbow trout fillet wrapped around a filling of pureed mushrooms, goat cheese and freshwater shrimp, and then smoked with bourbon-barrel bungs — will be a statement about Kentucky's bounty of lake and stream.

"I want chefs and spectators from all over the country to know about Kentucky aquaculture," Ashby said. "Kentucky produces tilapia and striped bass and trout, shrimp and paddlefish for meat and roe, and not many people even in the state are aware of what we are doing."

The national cook-off's rules require chefs to use fish raised or caught in their state or their state's coastal waters, thus showcasing not only the chefs, but the products they use.

Ashby is a proponent of the state's aquaculture program and enjoys finding ways to make freshwater fish as appealing as ocean varieties, a task he thinks has import beyond Kentucky.

"I'm concerned about the over-fishing of the oceans," Ashby said. "It's a real problem that I think (inland) aquaculture can help alleviate. If consumers understand better the problems ocean fish face, and the quality of farmed fish, they will be more likely to choose farmed fish. That will help ease the demand pressure on ocean species."



Trout with bourbon and black pepper glaze. (By Pam Spaulding, The Courier-Journal)

Chef Ashy's prize-winning smoked trout recipe:

Grilled trout with bourbon and black pepper glaze
4 4-ounce trout fillets
Bourbon and black pepper glaze (recipe below)

Adjust grill for high heat. Place the fillets on grill skin-side up, and grill 3 minutes or so. Flip fillets skin-side down, brush liberally with the bourbon and black pepper glaze and continue grilling until skin is crisped, another two or three minutes.

Use to glaze grilled or sautéed shrimp as well:

3 whole cloves
1 3/4 teaspoons bourbon barrel-smoked black pepper, or other coarse black pepper
2 1/4 tablespoons sugar
1/4 teaspoon Kentucky honey
1/4 cup soy sauce
1/4 cup Kentucky bourbon
1 tablespoon grated lemon zest
2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice

In a small spice grinder, grind the cloves and the black pepper together until very fine.

Place spices in a small saucepan with remaining ingredients, and reduce over medium-low heat until syrupy in consistency or only about 1/4 cup remains (about 10 minutes). Strain through a fine mesh strainer, and reserve.

Serves 4.

Ashby was one of four chefs (or team of chefs, in the case of the Bowling Green Community and Technical College) who competed in the Kentucky Great American Seafood Cook-off several weeks ago at Jefferson Community and Technical College. The competition was under the aegis of the Kentucky Aquaculture Association, the Department of Agriculture and Kentucky State University.

Kentucky has participated in the national competition for the last six of the eight years it has been held, and, according to Angela Caporelli, aquaculture coordinator for the Department of Agriculture, Kentucky was the first state to use a state competition to determine what chef would go to the national contest. (I was one of five judges for the local competition.)

Ashby invited the second-place finisher, John Varanese, owner of Varanese, 2106 Frankfort Ave., to assist him in the national competition. Both are graduates of Johnson and Wales culinary school and worked together earlier in their careers at Magnolia's in Charleston, S.C.

Varanese won the competition two years ago and asked Ashby to work with him then. Last year, Ashby won the state contest and took Varanese. Their experience at the competition has shown them what the judges are looking for, and how they have to plan and execute their entries.

"We are the underdogs," Ashby said. "We are going to be competing with scallops and lobsters from Maine, and a lot of other chefs from coastal areas. But John and I both went last year and learned that we are in a seafood competition, and that the seafood has to speak for itself. That is why I chose to use trout, a freshwater fish that I think can compete."

In addition to using freshwater shrimp, an aquaculture crop raised in ponds in the Bluegrass, in his stuffing for the smoked trout, Ashby created a second dish with shrimp. Ashby likes the taste of the freshwater shrimp, but finds that their texture, when cooked whole, is inconsistent. That is why he likes to chop or purée them.

His second dish was puréed freshwater shrimp molded around the bottom two-thirds of an asparagus spear, rolled in breadcrumbs and fried. The result was a sort of shrimp pop, with the asparagus as the stick. He served it in a pool of rich roasted corn butter, a dish both delicious and subtly spectacular.

Varanese also used corn butter in his entry, sautéed large-mouth bass, a species that is just starting to be available as a farmed crop. His entry, the recipe for which he offers here, was the second-place finisher in the state cook-off.

Ashby's winning entry is a bit complex for the home cook. Here he offers another way to use Kentucky products to complement fish, with a bourbon and black pepper glaze for grilled trout. See recipe above.



Large-mouth bass over shrimp tasso ham grits with poached tomatoes and roasted corn butter. (By Pam Spaulding, The Courier-Journal)

4 tablespoons blended oil (half olive oil, half corn or canola oil)
4 large-mouth bass fillets (or other firm-fleshed fish), about 8 ounces each, skin scored
1 cup seasoned flour
12 ounces shrimp and tasso grits (recipe below)
1 cup cherry tomatoes, poached (recipe below)
8 ounces corn butter (recipe below)

In a large skillet, heat the oil until lightly smoking. Dust the fish with seasoned flour and place in oil, skin-side down. Cook until skin is crispy (5 minutes or so), turn over and finish cooking. Plate the fish over the grits, and garnish with poached tomatoes. Drizzle with corn butter.

Grits
4 cups water
1 cup heavy cream
1 cup stone-ground grits
4 ounces tasso ham, julienned
1 cup freshwater shrimp, peeled and sliced into small chunks
4 ounces (half a bar) cream cheese
Salt and pepper to taste

Simmer the water and cream, then whisk in grits. Simmer for 35-40 minutes, stirring often. Start tasting for doneness at 30 minutes. In a separate pan, brown tasso ham. Add ham, shrimp and cheese to grits, and stir until it all melts. Season to taste.

Corn butter
2 ears corn, shucked and roasted, kernels cut off cob
4 ounces (1/2 cup) heavy cream
1 pound butter
Salt and pepper to taste

In a saucepan, heat the corn and cream and let simmer until the cream begins to thicken. Place in blender, purée, push through a strainer and place back in pan. Bring to simmer, whisk in butter and season to taste.

Oil-poached cherry tomatoes
1 1/2 cups heirloom cherry tomatoes
1 cup olive oil
1 teaspoon chives, diced

Score the skin at the top of the tomatoes, and place in boiling water for 30 seconds. Shock in ice bath. Peel the tomatoes.

In a small pot, heat olive oil and herbs to 120 degrees. Add peeled tomatoes, and poach for 30 minutes. Keep track of temperature, keeping oil between 110 and 120 degrees. Drain and use as garnish.

Serves 4.

Chef Varanese's Farm-raised Large Mouth Bass recipe:

Farmed-raised large-mouth bass served over freshwater shrimp and tasso ham grits, with poached cherry tomatoes and roasted corn butter. Chef Varanese used Kentucky farm-raised bass to showcase Kentucky aquaculture. On occasion, freshwater bass are available at ValuMarket at Iroquois Manor Shopping Center. I did not find bass, and so substituted red snapper fillet, an equally tasty, but non-native, firm-fleshed fish.