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# Illinois investors, Chef Parola want to tackle Asian carp invasion

St. Louis Business Journal - by Kelsey Volkmann

Date: Monday, September 13, 2010, 1:18pm CDT

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If you can't beat 'em, eat 'em.

That's what a group of Metro East investors and a world-famous chef hope to do with the invasive Asian carp, which has taken over the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers and eaten so much plankton, it's decimating the populations of native game fish.

The big-headed carp, which can grow up to 100 pounds, was brought here 30 years ago from China to help Kansas catfish farmers clean algae from their ponds. But flooding in the 1990s caused the Asian carp to spread from the ponds to rivers and now the epidemic is the worst in Illinois.

Childhood friends and business partners, Gray "Butch" Magee, former owner of a Memphis alloy company, and attorney Ben Allen, an associate at Lakin Law Firm, wanted to do something about it. The owners of the Loading Dock Bar and Grill in Grafton saw the huge fish jump from the waters near another project of theirs, the WindRivers luxury condominium complex at the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers.

"We are trying to save the rivers and the rivers are in trouble," Magee said.

The pair, along with fisherman and restaurateur Oliver Ready; Roger Crone, a retired plant superintendent and maintenance expert; and restaurant builder Bryan Lebeau formed Grafton Summit Enterprises LLC. They approached the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity looking for an innovative way to control the carp population. The state referred them to Philippe Parola, a French chef in Baton Rouge, La., who's become a leading authority on the invasive species.

Parola's first brush with the fish — and what he believes is an opportunity to create jobs and offer good food to restaurants and grocery stores — actually landed at his feet. He was fishing for alligators last summer in the bayou with TV personality Jeff Corwin for a taping of the Food Network's "Extreme Cuisine," when two 25-pound Asian carp, jumped in the boat. [Watch a video of the fish jumping out of the Mississippi River near Grafton.](#)

"I thought, 'What in the world?' and my guide said, 'They are everywhere. They destroy my nets,'" Parola said.

The chef became obsessed. Some people suggested shipping it to China. Others said poison them or use electric fences. But Parola called those quick-fix band-aids. He devoted the last year to cooking the fish and developing a commercial process for removing its floating bones so it can be sold for wholesale and retail as fish cakes, substitute crab meat or as a fillet for \$6 a pound.

Parola said the fish is incredible to eat, a mild white meat that he compares to something between crabmeat and scallops.

"There is no such a thing as a bad fish," Parola said. "Especially when you tour the seafood market in Toyko at 3:30 in the morning. That's when you learn that any fish, in any color, you can eat it."

The chef has already worked to popularize alligator, the nutria rodent as well as wild boar.

Now Parola and the Illinois investors want to open a carp processing plant for between an estimated \$3 million and \$5 million in Grafton. Allen said the group has a 13,000-square-foot former apple storage facility under contract.

"If it were a lousy piece of fish, I'd be out of here in a second. But it's a good fish, and it tastes good and it's good for you," Magee said.

The plant would employ about 60 people, and support about 20 fishermen and an untold number of jobs in the restaurant and marketing industries, the backers said.

And marketing will be key: The negative publicity surrounding the fish demands a name change to silver fin, the project's partners say. The same was done with the Patagonian toothfish, which was rebranded as the Chilean sea bass and is now sold for \$20 a pound. Parola started Silverfin Promotion and serves as president.

Next week, Parola and Allen will present their idea to scientists at the Asian Carp Marketing Summit at Lewis and Clark Community College in Godfrey. If all goes well, they will seek state and federal incentives for the project, and Parola will move to Illinois.

Millions of dollars in grants are potentially available. Last week, the Obama administration named John Goss, former head of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, as the White House Asian carp czar to oversee an \$80 million effort to keep the species out of the Great Lakes.

Parola said he had been approached previously by investors from Louisiana and New York who wanted to "make a quick buck."

But the St. Louis-area investors are serious about tackling the problem, he said. "They were serious about what they were doing and understand the problem because they live with the problem," he said.

02/28/2011

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