



Chef: Demand as food could solve Asian carp nuisance

BY TERRY HILLIG • thillig@post-dispatch.com > 618-659-2075 | Posted: Wednesday, November 3, 2010 12:00 am

GRAFTON • The Chilean sea bass served at many high-end restaurants wasn't nearly as appealing back when it was called Patagonian toothfish.

A Louisiana chef and a group of Grafton-area entrepreneurs are banking on a similar makeover for the dreaded, despised Asian carp, an invader from China that has relentlessly crowded out more popular species in Midwestern waters for more than a decade.

They want to change its name — to 'silverfin' — and its reputation and in the bargain control its growing numbers.

"Can't beat 'em? Eat 'em!" says Philippe Parola, a French-born chef who has developed processing and preparation methods that he thinks will soon make the fish a popular American food item.

"We have a gold mine here," Parola said. "Can we make use of this fish? Yes, we can."

The chef has teamed with Grafton Summit Enterprises LLC, a business formed by five friends with a common interest in protecting and preserving commercial fishing on the Mississippi and Illinois rivers.

Experts say Asian carp — actually two species, bighead carp and silver carp — now make up 75 to 80 percent of the biomass in area rivers. Ben Allen, of the Grafton Summit group, said Asian carp account for about 80 percent of commercial fishermen's catch in that area.

"That leaves 20 percent marketable fish," Allen said. "It's killing the industry." Ten years ago, Allen said, the catch was 60 percent catfish and 30 percent buffalo, both highly marketable.

Asian carp are reviled by commercial fishermen, sports fishermen, recreational boaters and water skiers. The fish are prodigious consumers of plankton, which species need for food at some point in their life cycles.

Silver carp can weigh 40 pounds or more, leap from the water when startled and can inflict serious injury on humans who get in the way. Some suspect the fish may be responsible for unexplained drownings.

Federal and state officials have mounted an all-out effort to keep the carp out of the Great Lakes, fearing havoc for commercial and sport fishing there.

Where others see an ecological disaster, Chef Parola sees an opportunity. Based in Baton Rouge, Parola has his own culinary school and TV show. He was recruited by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries for that state's "Silverfin Promotion," an effort to create a commercial market for the carp.

Parola learned that the fish contain little mercury and are very high in health-enhancing omega-3 fatty acids. He said the name "carp" has a negative connotation but that silverfins are not bottom feeders like common carp or catfish.

"These guys eat plankton," the chef emphasized. "That's what makes the meat taste so wonderful. I compare it to crab meat or scallops."

The fish are quite bony, but Parola said he has developed a steaming process that allows easy removal.

He envisions mass marketing of silverfin that are frozen, boneless and ready for microwaving and packaged in three varieties — pecan crusted, Cajun Treat and lemon butter.

Parola said about 85 percent of the fish now consumed by Americans are imported and that there should be a strong market for a domestic product that is competitively priced and tastes good.

Parola and his Grafton partners want to set up a processing plant in an existing structure off Illinois Route 3 in Grafton, a project that would initially employ about 80 people. The partners talk of expanding later with four or five more plants around the

Midwest.

But the initial investment would be about \$5 million, and the group is looking for state or federal help to get started.

Earlier this year, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity awarded a \$2 million grant to Big River Fish Corp., of Pearl, Ill., to develop a facility needed to process 30 million tons of Asian carp for sale in China and other countries where the bighead carp is highly popular.

Parola said the Chinese like their carp "wild-caught in the USA" because U.S. waters are much cleaner than those in China.

Kirby Marsden, president of the Illinois Commercial Fishing Association, said environmental regulations have greatly improved water quality in the U.S., and the Asian carp have thrived here.

"We've lost most of our sports fish as well as the commercial fish," Marsden said. He said many fishermen have moved to other jobs and many of those left are barely hanging on.

He said he thinks the Asian carp population could be decreased by 90 percent within five years with the development of export and domestic markets, making room for other species.

"I think we'll quadruple the industry and create a lot of jobs," he said. "In the end, we may help our sport fishing friends and increase employment. It could be a great thing, a positive thing."

Marsden suggested that an expanded fish-processing industry would survive depletion of the Asian carp and gradually bring other varieties into their product mix.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources continues to focus on eliminating the Asian carp, said spokesman Chris McCloud. But increased fishing and consumption of the fish "certainly can't hurt," he noted.

"The fish have some value," he said. "Why wouldn't you try to turn these lemons into lemonade? We're on board to do everything we can."

Recipes and more information are online at chefphilippe.com.



Chef turns invasive Asian carp into Silverfin

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