



Print This Article
 E-Mail This Article

Summer Heats Up Catfish Fries on the River

The Upper Mississippi Feasts on Bottom Feeder

Advertisement

By Robert Gutsche Jr.
Special to The Washington Post
Monday, July 5, 2004; Page A03

BLUFF SIDING, Wis. -- Less than an hour into the dinner rush one recent Friday night, Paul Hermann ducked out of his kitchen, sweating from the heat. Already, he had broiled, fried or blackened more than 50 catfish fillets.

It was a busy night at his Hillside Fish House in this small town on the Mississippi River, the beginning of another summer of filling deep fryers with catfish. For at least a couple hundred miles of the Mississippi River, from here down into Iowa, that ugly bottom feeder is a local delicacy. In rivers and lakes elsewhere in the country, fishermen don't think twice before throwing catfish back. Not here.

Along these muddy banks of the Mississippi, catfish beats out cod and haddock during popular Friday night fish fries. Restaurants deep-fry the catfish -- head, tail and all -- and often serve them with cheap beer and deep-fried baked potato.

In some parts of Iowa, even Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets sell catfish fillets on Friday nights.

"Catfish can be ranked right along with carp and other gross fish, other bottom fish," Hermann said. "But catfish have provided a living for a lot [of] people here, and the people make a celebration out of it."

Bob Crandell visits Bluff Siding each Friday night for catfish. As a



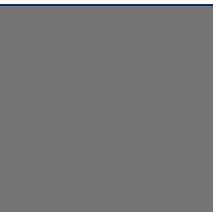
Potosi, Wis., firefighters, from right, Vaughn White, Jerry Leibfried, Rod Blindert and George Pennekamp prepare fried catfish during the annual Potosi Catfish Festival. (Brett Roseman -- Dubuque Telegraph Herald)

Free E-mail Newsletters

- **Today's Headlines & Columnists**
[See a Sample](#) | [Sign Up Now](#)
- **Daily Politics News & Analysis**
[See a Sample](#) | [Sign Up Now](#)
- **Federal Insider**
[See a Sample](#) | [Sign Up Now](#)
- **Breaking News Alerts**
[See a Sample](#) | [Sign Up Now](#)

FEATURED ADVERTISER LINKS

- [Lawsuit: Hydroxycut Liver, Cochlear Implants, Zicam, Yaz](#)
- [Erin Brockovich, Lawyer: Mesothelioma, Asbestos, Lung Cancer](#)
- [Get your credit score range from Equifax 100% Free.](#)
- [Call Around the World with Vonage for \\$24.99/mo!](#)
- [Russia Now: In-Depth Coverage of Russia News, Business, and More.](#)



RSS NEWS FEEDS
 Top News
 Wisconsin
[What is RSS? | All RSS Feeds](#)

child he would catch catfish from the Mississippi, sometimes with his bare hands, and deep-fry them in lard over a bonfire. His wife questions his childhood wisdom, and taste in food, but he says locals along stretches of the river have similar stories and experiences that have made catfish a staple.

"You take the fish, cut off its head, leave the tail and throw it on a plate. It's the best," Crandell said.

A catfish dinner with coleslaw, french fries and clam chowder at most restaurants can run about \$10. But the real catfish treats are the cheeks, the little gummy portions in the fish's forehead. A small plate of cheeks costs \$6 to \$8.

Although it's hard to find fried catfish cheeks, because it takes too many of them to make a meal and restaurants rarely put them on the menu, locals say they're worth searching for.

"Filletted catfish is good, too, don't get me wrong," said Keith Turner, 70, a commercial fisherman, who prides himself on his ways of frying cheeks, "but the cheeks are really the best."

Just south of Bluff Siding in Trempealeau, Wis., as in at least a dozen other small river towns on the upper Mississippi, community groups fry catfish at summer festivals. Last year, this town sold 800 pounds of catfish sandwiches -- and 60,000 cans of beer -- to crowds of nearly 10,000, according to Glenn Brommerich, who helps organize the city's Catfish Days every July.

Other festivals have shoveled out more than 2,500 pounds of catfish at their summer events.

Still, not everyone welcomes the ugly fish.

Besides their reputation for living in less than desirable digs, catfish can crowd out other, more prized fish. And some say catfish are too gross to eat because of the long, fleshy feelers, or barbels, around their mouths that resemble a cat's whiskers.

"When people say they don't want to eat [catfish] because of they way they look, if they saw a lot of the fish they eat at the store, ones that come out of the ocean, they may not like them either," said Ron Benjamin, a fisheries supervisor for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Wisconsin's commercial fishermen hunted the upper Mississippi for its channel and flathead catfish, harvesting them by the millions.

Unpredictable fishing seasons here made for poor catches and unhappy customers. Southern states then seized the new market and began farming catfish under controlled environments, hurting business up north. "A lot of people went out of business when that happened," Benjamin said.

Now, commercial anglers here haul out about 275,000 pounds each year.

Further south from Trempealeau along the river, the towns shrink beside a mishmash of twisting Wisconsin highways. Modest boat docks and bait shops line the river.

At Potosi, Wis., an old lead-mining village several miles off the Mississippi, where dozens of deep tunnels still scar back yards and the police department doubles as the area's tourism bureau, hundreds

of people gather on the river each summer to stuff themselves with catfish.

Here, in the self-proclaimed "catfish capital of the world," Mary Fiorenza, the mayor's wife and an avid angler, said parents teach their children at young ages how to catch -- and eat -- catfish.

"After kids learn how to use a fork and knife, they usually learn how to use a fishing pole," she said. "And if people at restaurants know they're served farm-raised fish [mostly from the south] and not fish from the river, they won't eat it. It's like eating batter-dipped cardboard."

South of Iowa there's Arkansas-fried catfish served with hush puppies and iced tea. Restaurants offer catfish stew and charred, Cajun catfish. But locals along the upper Mississippi say there's still nothing like the dedication they have for their catfish.

Just beyond Princeton, Iowa, near the end of the Mississippi's catfish craze for dozens of counties until Louisiana, Kevin Kernan, an owner of Kernan's Riverview Restaurant, said only in his area do people know the right ways of treating catfish.

"When I go south, they think catfish are like carp," another bottom feeder that dirties the water by displacing mud and bacteria from the river bottom. "I don't know why people don't eat them. It's really bizarre."

 [Print This Article](#)  [E-Mail This Article](#)

© 2004 The Washington Post Company

[NEWS](#) | [POLITICS](#) | [OPINIONS](#) | [BUSINESS](#) | [LOCAL](#) | [SPORTS](#) | [ARTS & LIVING](#) | [GOING OUT GUIDE](#) | [JOBS](#) | [CARS](#) | [REAL ESTATE](#) | [RENTALS](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#)

SEARCH:



washingtonpost.com



Web: Results by 

[Search Archives](#)

washingtonpost.com: [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Search Terms](#) | [Topics Index](#) | [Make Us Your Home Page](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [Mobile](#) | [RSS](#) | [Widgets](#)
The Washington Post: [Subscribe](#) | [Home Delivery Service](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [PostPoints](#) | [e-Replica](#) | [Online Photo Store](#) | [The Washington Post Store](#) | [About The Post](#)
The Washington Post Company: [Information and Other Post Co. Websites](#)

© Copyright 1996-2009 The Washington Post Company | [User Agreement and Privacy Policy](#) | [Rights and Permissions](#)

[Help](#) | [Contact Us](#)