

You're eating what?

Group encourages people to eat less popular fish

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

Large, hard-fighting sport fish that can challenge any fishing tackle with lightning runs and devastating strikes, jack crevalle seldom show up on dinner plates because most people believe them unfit for human consumption.

Chris Sherrill, a chef from Orange Beach, and Chandra Wright want to change that perception. They co-founded the Nuisance Underutilized Invasive Sustainable Available Noble Culinary Endeavors, or NUISANCE Group, to convince more people to eat underutilized species like jacks and other species that most anglers consider "trash fish."

"Our purpose is to raise awareness of flora and fauna that are a nuisance, underutilized or invasive, but sustainable and available through noble, culinary endeavors," Wright explained. "Sometimes, people look at us like we're crazy when we offer them a piece of jack crevalle to eat, but we want to educate people on eating these fish and show them how to treat and prepare them. When prepared certain ways, many underutilized species can be quite tasty. Not too many years ago, most people considered redfish trash fish and didn't eat them."

If people eat more undesirable species like jacks, Sherrill and Wright reason, that might take pressure off popular species like red snapper, grouper, redfish and speckled trout. Also, catching something different to bring home for the table could give recreational anglers, charter captains and even commercial fishermen more opportunities to keep different kinds of fish.

When they first started the group, Chandra challenged Chef Chris to invent a recipe that would make jack crevalle appetizing so they could serve it to a congressional staff delegation visiting the Alabama coast. A friend brought the chef a jack to prepare. When cleaning it, Chris noticed that the meat looks similar to beef so he decided to treat it like beef. He cut the dark red bloodline out of the meat and



JOHN FELSHER

John N. Felsher is a freelance writer who lives in Semmes, Ala. He's written more than 2,600 articles for more than 150 magazines. He writes regularly for Alabama Outdoors News, Game and Fish publications, Alabama Living and many other publications. Contact him through Facebook.

marinated it.

"Jack crevalle has been our biggest surprise," the chef admitted. "I thought it was inedible, but the bloody red flesh looks like raw beef. If we cubed it, marinated it like steak and grilled it medium rare, it might taste like steak, I thought. We did and it came out beyond anyone's expectations. We had to check to make sure nobody slipped in some prime rib it was so good."

Now, the chef experiments with many other less desirable fish. He frequently offers samples to his friends, usually without identifying the species until after they taste it. Some other underutilized species include stingrays, pinfish, scorpionfish, bearded brotula, gafftopsail catfish, porgies and others.

"I'm the guinea pig-in-chief," Wright quipped. "I'm the one who gets to eat all the weird stuff Chris cooks to see how it tastes. Many less desirable fish are wasted. If people realized how good they are to eat if prepared properly, they might be more likely to keep some for the table."

The group especially wants to promote lionfish as a delicacy. Native to the Pacific and Indian oceans, beautiful, but dangerous lionfish invaded the Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico a few years ago, probably as aquarium fish released into the wild. Highly prolific with no natural predators on this side of the world, lionfish multiplied and spread rapidly. Now, they displace or eat many native species.

"Lionfish are terribly voracious and prolific invasive species that eat just about anything and outcompete many native species for space and food," Wright warns. "It's a huge threat to native species in the Gulf of Mexico. We want to wipe them out here. They are delicious, but people need to handle them with care. They have 18 venomous spines that people need to avoid. The meat is not poisonous and is very white, flaky and delicious. People can fix it a variety of ways."

Not everything makes the dinner table menu, despite the chef's best efforts. For instance, he doesn't like hardhead catfish, an abundant well-known bait-stealing saltwater pest.

"I'm still on the edge with hardhead catfish," Sherrill said. "When it's ultra-fresh, it has some firmness to it, but it deteriorates rapidly. Another chef made some ceviche and cured hardhead catfish in lots of citrus juices to make it more firm. It's pretty good with that, but it's still probably my least favorite fish along with skip-jack or ladyfish."

For more information on the NUISANCE Group, see its Facebook page at www.facebook.com/NuisanceGroup or send an email to info@nuisance-group.org.