

Not So Big Fish

On the verge of being relegated to lobster bait, the sardine makes a briny comeback on restaurant menus.

Pity the poor little sardine. From the 1880s to the 1950s, it was a darling of Maine's seafood industry. With as many as 48 sardine canneries in the state, Maine was the country's sardine capital.

Now, sadly, the tiny things are sold here mainly as lobster bait. Only two companies with Maine connections still sell them for people to eat: Beach Cliff, which operates the state's last remaining sardine cannery in Prospect Harbor but is owned by a California-based company controlled by Connors Bros. Income Fund, a Canadian firm; and Look's Gourmet Foods, which oversees production of Bar Harbor and Look's sardines from a base in Whiting, Maine, although the fish are caught and canned in Canada.

With the industry just barely hanging on in Maine, some chefs here are trying to revive interest in these meaty, briny, flavorful little fish.

Chef Rick Hirsch, who oversees the kitchen at both the Anchor Inn in Round Pond and the Damariscotta River Grill, says sardines "are too often written off as not a 'serious' ingredient." But he thinks they're making at least a minor comeback. This summer (assuming customers respond favorably) Hirsch is offering a Crispy Sardine and Romaine Salad, with fried sardines in a Mediterranean mix with baby Romaine, Greek olives, feta cheese, potato wedges, and a sun-dried tomato vinaigrette.

"We buy as many fresh, local ingredients as we can and don't use a lot of canned foods at either restaurant," he says.

"However, I think canned products have their time and place on any menu. The unique flavor and texture of canned sardines really does pair well with the Mediterranean flavors of the salad, and the light crispiness of them is great against the baby Romaine and soft potato wedges."

At Natalie's in the newly renovated Camden Harbour Inn, Chef de Cuisine Lawrence Klang offers an imaginative beignet on a tapas menu: sardines deep-fried in a tempura batter with a light tomato sauce with sherry vinegar. He also enjoys them in a summer potato salad made with fingerlings, Dijon mustard, mayonnaise, dill, and shallots.

Klang developed his love for sardines in Europe, where they're much more common on restaurant menus, and thinks there's "some sort of bias" against them in the U.S. This is unfortunate, he says, "because they're a great backdrop in the creation of many dishes if you use them as an accent, like a kind of seasoning."

That's exactly how Loryn Kipp, chef at the Captain Fairfield Inn in Kennebunkport, treats sardines. She mixes them with capers, mayonnaise, and lemon to make a tapenade served on biscuits with chive butter for breakfast.

"I try to present foods that are simple but creative, using as many local and seasonal products as possible. I'm not a fan of fussy, complicated food, but I like to put together flavors that aren't necessarily familiar," she says. The sardine tapenade "is something unexpected, a fun surprise."

Chef Josh DeGroot, formerly of Sweet Leaves Teahouse and Restaurant in Brunswick, is known for his love of extremely fresh, local ingredients. Sardines, he says, are one of the few canned foods he likes. To him they're "comfort food" that takes him back to childhood days when his mother served them on crackers.

"They're one of the original fast foods," he quips. "I like their old-fashioned appeal. They're antiquey."

At press time, he wasn't quite sure where he'd be cooking next, but he expects to serve a "Maine Plate" featuring whole sardines with a fresh tomato sauce, aioli, homemade fiddlehead pickles, dressed local greens, and herbed cracker bread. He also will experiment with sardines in dishes that might otherwise include anchovies—such as Caesar salads and tomato-based pizzas.

"Sardines are related to anchovies and can be used in similar ways," he says. "But anchovies kick you in the head. Sardines pat you on the shoulder."

RECIPES

Rick Hirsch's Crispy Sardine & Romaine Salad with Sun-Dried Tomato Vinaigrette

4 heads baby romaine Lettuce
4 medium red potatoes -- steamed, cut each potato into six wedges
1 cup mixed Greek olives
1/2 cup feta cheese
¼ cup olive oil
2 cans Beach Cliff Sardines, packed in oil

Directions: Divide leaves of romaine, wash in cold water and air dry on paper towels or spin gently in lettuce spinner with leaves standing up. Place potatoes, Greek olives, feta cheese and olive oil in baking dish, heat until feta cheese starts to bubble.

Take sardines from can and lightly crisp in hot frying pan.

Arrange greens on plate and drizzle vinaigrette, place olive mixture on center of greens and display sardines on greens around olive mixture.

Makes four individual salads or one great plate

Sun-dried Tomato Vinaigrette

¼ cup sun-dried tomatoes

1 cup olive oil

1/4 cup cider vinegar

¼ teaspoon basil

¼ teaspoon oregano

Directions: Combine all ingredients, blend in food processor. Add salt and pepper to taste.