

Fish Flakes Perform Solo Or As Crabmeat Extender

BY SUSAN USHER

Joyce Taylor blended dry wit with an abundance of practical information Friday at the Calabash fire station as she answered questions and demonstrated seafood preparation techniques for a group of more than 30 cooks.

"Bringing seafood to Calabash is a lot like carrying coals to Newcastle," she suggested, though no lightly battered and fried seafood—synonymous with Calabash—would be on her menu that day.

While there's nothing "wrong" with fried seafood "fat and calories are the big reasons people avoid fried foods," Ms. Taylor said in response to a question from Douglas Kerr of Southport, director of the Robert Ruark Foundation. "Maybe moderation is the key."

Ms. Taylor, a seafood education specialist with Sea Grant, showed her audience alternative ways to prepare seafood that are not only tasty, but also health-conscious and economical. Assisting was Mary Russ, home economist with the Brunswick County Cooperative Extension Service. The agency hosted demonstration talks by Ms. Taylor's in Calabash and Long Beach last week.

Her two-hour program focused on making fish flakes at home to use as an extender, to make an item such as locally-popular crabmeat go farther, just as bread crumbs or Hamburger Helper "extend" ground meat.

A deviled crab recipe made with half crabmeat and half flaked finfish was a hit with testers at N.C. State University's Seafood Laboratory at Morehead City, where Ms. Taylor works when not on the road, and with audience members at Friday's program.

She interspersed her demonstration with tips on buying and storing fresh seafood as well as cooking it.

Ms. Taylor recommended taking advantage of seasonal availability. "Don't go to the market saying,



EXTENSION HOME ECONOMIST Mary Russ dishes up mini-servings of gumbo made with Brunswick County farm-raised catfish as (from left rear) Harriet Olson, Bernice Elwood, Elaine Bowes, Lena Mintz and Shirley Leonard make their way along the tasters' line.

"I'm going to have flounder tonight," she suggested. "Instead go saying, 'I'm going to have fresh fish for dinner.'"

As they watched she steamed red porgy (commonly called pink or silver snapper though there is no such thing) on a bed of sauteed vegetables in broth and poached a fillet of red snapper. The results were fast and similar: tender, lean fish that flaked easily from the backbone when cooled for use in a variety of recipes.

"People are afraid to poach fish and I don't know why," she said. "It's one of the easiest and best ways to prepare fish."

Steaming the fish in vegetables can boost nutritional content by as much as 10 percent, she said. But she uses the vegetables "because they are pretty and they taste good."

If the fish is fresh, the vegetables will retain their own flavor and not acquire a "fishy" flavor.

Most of all, though, she stressed personalizing seafood cookery—from the herbs and spices used for seasoning to basic techniques employed.

"You need to use what you like," she said. Though using fish heads makes a richer, more flavorful broth, if it bothers you, she said, don't use them.

Washing her hands frequently in a bowl of sudsy warm water, Ms. Taylor cautioned, "When handling raw seafood you need to be very careful not to handle uncooked foods or utensils afterward."

When flaking fish, she removes the rib area for food safety reasons and the dark top meat because it is stronger flavored, less attractive in salads, and, she said, "because it's good cat food and I have a 21 1/4-pound cat."

Fish flakes, said Ms. Taylor, are high in protein, but low in fat, calo-

ries, cholesterol and sodium.

They can be used as the star ingredient in dishes such as chowders and salads, or as an extender in items such as deviled crab. They show up in spreads, appetizers, sandwiches, patties, casseroles and sauces.

Fish flakes prepared at home are more economical and also more versatile than canned tuna or salmon, both of which are fatty fish.

A one-pound, dressed fish yields about 1 1/2 cups of flakes. You can use what you need and store the rest, in recipe-size, air-tight packages, in the freezer for up to three months. For better flavor and quality, add a small amount (1/2 cup for each 1 1/2 cups of flakes) of cooking broth to each package.

A moderately flavored fish is preferred for flaking, and it is more economical to choose a less expensive species of fish.

Whole fish, dressed, with the heads left on, give the maximum flavor and yield. But the more expensive fillets or steaks can be used, she said.

Before flaking, the fish should be poached, steam, baked or microwaved. Leftovers from an earlier meal can also be flaked.

"But there's no real advantage to microwaving fish because it cooks so fast anyway," said Ms. Taylor.

The vegetables used to season the broth can be used as is or mashed and returned to the broth as puree. The broth should be cooled in the refrigerator until congealed. Then remove the solid fat layer from the top and strain broth before using.

Fresh, or thawed in the refrigerator, the flakes are ready for use.

Catfish Gumbo

Addition of orzo, a small-size pasta, stretches the gumbo and also

thickens it slightly.

4 medium catfish fillets
1/4 C. vegetable oil
1 C. coarsely chopped celery
1/2 C. chopped green onion, with tops
3/4 C. chopped onion
4 tsp. minced garlic
4 C. chicken broth
2 16-oz. cans of tomatoes, chopped, undrained
1/2 tsp. thyme
1 small bay leaf
1/2 tsp. cayenne pepper
1/2 tsp. oregano
1 tsp. salt
2 10-oz. frozen sliced okra
4 oz. orzo (optional)

Cut fillets into one-inch pieces and set aside. Heat oil in large pot over medium heat. Lightly saute celery, green onions, onions and garlic. Add broth, tomatoes, thyme, bay leaf, cayenne, oregano and salt. Bring to boil and add okra. Cover and simmer 15 minutes. Add orzo. Cover and continue simmering 15 minutes. Add catfish and simmer 10 minutes or until fish flakes easily. Remove bay leaf. Serves 8-10.

Deviled Crab With Fish

Fish flakes can be used as an extender for more costly crabmeat, reducing both the cost and the cholesterol count.

1/2 lb. fish flakes
1/2 lb. crab meat
2 T. chopped onion
2 T. margarine
2 T. flour
3/4 C. skim milk
1/4 tsp. salt
1/8 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
1/2 tsp. powdered mustard
1 tsp. Worcestershire sauce
1/2 tsp. sage
1/16 tsp. cayenne pepper (or to

taste)
1 T. fresh lemon juice
Hot pepper sauce to taste
1 egg or 1/4 C. liquid egg substitute
1 T. chopped fresh parsley
1 T. margarine, melted
1/4 C. dry bread crumbs

Remove any shell or cartilage from crab meat. Cook onion in margarine until tender. Blend in flour. Add milk gradually and cook until thick, stirring constantly. Add seasonings and lemon juice. Stir a little of the hot sauce into egg; add to remaining sauce, stirring constantly. Add parsley, crab meat and fish flakes. Place in greased, individual crab shells or baking dishes. Combine margarine and crumbs; sprinkle over top of each. Bake in moderate oven (350 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, depending on your oven) for 15 to 20 minutes or until brown and bubbly. Serves 6-8.

Fish Flake And Macaroni Salad

Flaked fish stars in this main-dish salad.

1 1/2 C. fish flakes
4 oz. shell macaroni
1/4 tsp. salt
1/2 C. chopped celery
1 hard boiled egg, chopped (optional)
1 small onion, chopped
1/4 to 1/2 green pepper, chopped
1 small jar chopped pimiento, drained
1/2 tsp. celery seed
1/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
Paprika

Cook macaroni according to package directions. Drain. Rinse with cold water. Let drain while cutting up celery, egg, onion and pepper. Mix all ingredients except paprika together lightly, but thoroughly. Chill well before serving. Arrange on lettuce leaves. Sprinkle with paprika. Serves 8-10. (Excellent when made one day and served the next.)

More information on seafood preparation is available from the Brunswick County Cooperative Extension Office at Bolivia, 253-4425.



SEAFOOD EDUCATION SPECIALIST Joyce Taylor quickly flakes fish from a steamed red porgy. The skeleton pulls away neatly, leaving only a few stray bones.

Is It Fresh?

- Eyes bright and slightly protruding?
- Gills bright red, not dark red or brown?
- Colors true, unfaded (Is the red snapper red?)
- Is any blood in the body cavity bright red?
- Is the flesh firm, springing back when touched?
- Is there no "fishy" odor?

Answer yes to all of the above questions and you can feel certain the fish you're buying is fresh.

Mrs. Taylor said she'd rather use month-old frozen fish that has been properly handled and stored than a fish "caught yesterday and not iced".



FISH FLAKES are a primary ingredient in this attractive and quickly-assembled macaroni salad.

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