

## Seafood sensation

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Executive Sous Chef at Sushi Samba on Lincoln Road on Miami Beach Brian Nasajon holds an Amazone Paiche, a farm-raised, environmentally friendly fish, which is arriving at restaurants in South Florida.

A new freshwater fish has landed at select South Florida restaurants, offering diners a rewarding taste sensation and chefs a delectable and sustainable alternative to rival the popular Chilean sea bass.

The Amazone paiche (pronounced pie-ché) gives the health and environmentally conscious a farm-raised option for an endangered wild, prehistoric Peruvian fish, considered one of the largest river fish in the world.

“Unlike most large fish from the ocean, it has no traces of mercury or heavy metals, and it doesn’t have any saturated fat or transfat, and it’s high in protein,” said Adrian Burstein, chief executive of Aventura-based Artisanfish, importer and wholesaler of the Amazone

paiche. “When you put all those things together, it’s a very healthy alternative.”

Paiche is believed to derive its name from the word for ‘king’ in the dialect of an indigenous Peruvian tribe, Burstein said.

Artisanfish is the exclusive importer for the Americas of the Amazone brand of paiche. Amazone, which is part of a privately held Peruvian business group, is the only company aqua farming the fish, free of chemicals, hormones or contaminants, and with an aim to restore the species, Burstein said.

Local chefs who have begun serving Amazone paiche in the past few weeks tout its delicate, non-fishy taste and firm, yet moist texture.

“The fish has character,” said Michael Bloise, executive chef at Sushi Samba in Miami Beach. “It has a meatiness to it, but without being tough or dried out.”

Bloise, who first tasted the fish about a month ago, hurried to add a paiche entree to the Lincoln Road restaurant’s Miami Spice dinner menu (Sunday through Thursday, \$35 for three courses), and a paiche appetizer, (\$12) as a special on the weekends.

He recently served the appetizer cut into pieces, wrapped in kataifi — shredded phyllo dough — flash fried and placed in lettuce wraps, with a colorful and flavorful salad of green mango, watermelon radish and dressed in a lime cascabel vinaigrette.

The entrée is served as a larger piece, as an escabeche, marinated in rice wine vinegar, mirin and lemon juice, then dredged in flour and pan seared, served with a deliciously thick, pureed corn sauce of local corn, julienned snow peas and crispy sweet potatoes.

Down the street, at Meat Market, Executive Chef Sean Brasel offers paiche occasionally as one of three dishes on his mixed grill (\$42 to \$48), cooking the fish in a variety of ways, including taking a thick loin piece, blackening it in a mixture of coffee and ancho, and searing it at a high heat, then topping it with pieces of lobster and king crab, with melted lobster butter on top.

“It’s a sustainable fish, a good quality fish,” said Brasel, who expects to offer paiche individually on his menu in the fall. “You always want something on the menu that’s different than everybody else is doing.”

Unlike many other fish, because of its high collagen content, paiche is able to withstand cooking at a high temperature without burning, crumbling or drying. That creates a crust on the outside, while keeping in the moisture, said Burstein, who founded Artisanfish three years ago, specializing in sustainable, all-natural, high-quality seafood.

The fish’s flavor, which is mild yet not buttery like Chilean sea bass, is best suited for cooking, not for sushi, he said.

While paiche is just making its debut on plates locally, it is already a hit in France, the biggest market so far for Amazone paiche, he said.

“The Americas are a little behind the European market,” Burstein said. In addition to France, the fish is also available in Italy and Spain, as well as in Peru. And soon, it will be sold in Colombia and Canada.

Artisanfish sells the paiche to restaurants in South Florida for \$13 a pound. Burstein is now selling 5,000 to 6,000 pounds a month in the United States, and hopes to reach 20,000 pounds a month by the middle of next year. Other cities in the United States where it is sold include New York, Boston and Philadelphia.

“We are just emerging from a very bad recession, and it’s been interesting to see how to introduce a high end fish in such an environment,” Burstein said.

In South Florida, Amazone paiche is not yet available to the public at any supermarket.

Other local restaurants offering it on their Miami Spice menu, through September, are Area 31 in Miami and Palme d’Or in Coral Gables. Among the additional restaurants that have ordered the fish are Zuma in Miami, Francesco Restaurant in Coral Gables, Tania’s Table in North Miami Beach, Adriana Restaurant in Surfside and La Brochette Restaurant in Cooper City, Burstein said.

The farm-raised fish, with large scales and white meat, is typically sold at up to 22 pounds, while it can grow to 450 pounds in the wild. The fish became protected by international law about 20 years ago.

“People love it,” said Bloise, who orders 100 pounds a week for Sushi Samba, and plans to add a paiche dish to the menu in the fall. “For a piece of fish this thick to be cooked all the way through and not be as dry as a bone, is pretty incredible.”

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