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FN Dish

Paiche — Iron Chef Ingredients

by [Simon Majumdar](#) in [Shows](#), February 20th, 2012



Kitchen Stadium is a surprising place.

When the [Iron Chefs](#) face off against their challengers, you are never quite sure what they are going to come up with. In fact, I'm positive, neither are they.

The biggest surprise of all, of course, is the Chairman's secret ingredient. Some of the foods revealed are very familiar, but many are unusual (some of the judges may say cruel and unusual), and I have heard many a battle-hardened chef whimper when the altar rises to reveal an exotic ingredient that has never graced their chopping boards before.

But that's what being an [Iron Chef](#) is all about, and one thing is for certain: The Chairman's challenges are not going to get any easier. He is continually searching far and wide for ingredients that will really test the mettle of the Iron Chefs and those who dare to challenge them.

For the upcoming season of [Iron Chef America](#), I am delighted to announce that the good folks at

If an ingredient is well known, I hope to share with you some new information about its culinary history and even some trivia with which you can bore your friends on a rainy day. When an ingredient is less familiar, I aim to inspire you to use it to replicate some of those Kitchen Stadium dishes at home.

First off, let's head to the Amazon, for a bit of fish action.



What is paiche?

It was not until I started traveling the world that I first heard about this remarkable fish. The paiche, which is also known as the arapaima or pirarucu, is a one of the largest freshwater fish in the world and can grow to almost 500 lbs. in size. It is unusual in that it is an air-breathing animal and it lives in the shallow, muddy waters of river-beds, popping up every 15 to 20 minutes for air. Marine scientists consider the paiche to be a living fossil, a direct link back to the Jurassic period.

Where does paiche come from?

Paiche comes from South America, particularly the Amazonian regions of Brazil and Peru. Although the paiche is not much of a looker in the beauty stakes, it has one big disadvantage: It is delicious. Its flesh was considered such a delicacy in parts of South America that it suffered from extreme overfishing that took it almost right to the point of extinction. In the 1980s the situation became so acute that the Brazilian government banned the fishing of paiche by everyone except for a handful of Amazonian tribes who depended on the fish for their survival.

In 2006 a group of Peruvian businessmen began [The Amazone Project](#) to develop the sustainable farming of paiche, and in 2011 it began to appear on the menus of adventurous chefs in the United States.

Paiche is a firm-fleshed white-fish with a delicate flavor that I have heard chefs compare to that other endangered species, the Chilean sea bass. The fish contains high levels of collagen, which I am told, is the reason it develops a delicious crust when it is cooked. The size of the fish means that the steaks are quite thick and can withstand higher temperatures and more robust cooking methods while still retaining the beautiful juiciness of the flesh.

Paiche would be best suited for grilling (as you would a swordfish steak) pan searing or smoking. I have not tried this yet, but I suspect that pre-cooking the fish and flaking for use in fish cakes would produce excellent results. And I have a hankering to try coating paiche fillet cuts in a spiced breading or batter for a different take on fish and chips.

The fish is also now appearing on the menus of some of America's higher-end sushi restaurants.

Where can I buy paiche?

Farmed paiche is not yet at the stage where it can be found on ice at your local supermarket, but it is now being imported into the U.S. by Artisanfish.com, whose website can give you a guide to restaurant and market stockists.



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