

Trying paiche

Amazon River fish is now responsibly farmed

By Cindy Sutter

Camera Staff Writer

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Demian Tierney of Whole Foods Market in Boulder holds up a fillet of paiche, an air-breathing fish that is native to the Amazon River but is now being farmed. (Cliff Grassmick / Daily Camera)

It's the season for Copper River salmon, and many are indulging in their sockeye on the grill, in the smoker or finished in a saute pan.

When it comes to sustainable fish, few things beat wild Alaskan salmon for flavor. But what if you prefer white-fleshed fish and what if your budget is such that Alaskan halibut and various line-caught, Marine Stewardship Certified fishes are a little tough on the wallet.

There's always farmed tilapia.

Sigh.

If you're casting around for something a little different this summer, you might want to try paiche. The — if it can really be called that since it doesn't have gills — is native to the Amazon River basin in Peru. It was endangered in the wild but is now being responsibly farmed in Peru.

And how does it taste?

Rocky Mountain Region. "I'd put it next to sea bass or a nice Alaskan halibut. They eat the same."

But at about \$15 a pound, paiche is about half the price of some of those prime fishes.

Horton explains that the fish has a thick collagen layer under its skin, which makes it great for grilling, since the collagen can take the high temperature required to get a good sear.

"It makes a nice crust," Horton says.

He often grills it plain with a little olive oil, salt and pepper, with a squeeze of lemon to finish. But the fish also holds up well to marinades and spice rubs.

Of the latter, Horton says he has used a Cuban-style mojo rub and a chili rub with good results. He also likes to use ingredients from the region, making a glaze out of dried Peruvian golden berries, for example.

In addition to the taste, the fish offers a fascinating biology lesson as you chow down on the deck. Paiche can grow to 500 pounds and can live as long as 20 years. They represent an evolutionary road less traveled — much less traveled. Not only do the air-breathing fish not have gills, they also don't have lungs, but instead come to the river's surface every 20 minutes or so to oxygenate their blood with an organ called swim bladder. Another interesting fact: They have an armor-like skin of extremely hard and thick scales that cannot be penetrated by piranha. Nor your knife and fork. That's why they're sold skinless. Paiche breed in shallow pools, and the male nurtures the baby fish in its mouth for 4 to 6 weeks before the youngins are left to their own devices.

These factors make them vulnerable to overfishing. Thus the fish farms. The company Whole Foods worked with bought some existing fish farms and brought them up to the stores' standards. These include limiting environmental damage from the farms, as well as specifications about the fishes' feed, according to Ben Brignac, seafood associate coordinator for Whole Foods' Rocky Mountain Region. The feed is mostly corn and soy; it is sourced from the European Union to avoid genetically modified organisms and also includes minerals that are naturally occurring in the diet of the fish. The large fillets are harvested in Peru and quick-frozen before shipment to the United States.

Brignac says the fish are taking a while to catch on, since they're something new. In texture, he likens paiche to cod.

"It has a big, flaky texture and mildness," he says.

In addition to being a mystery ingredient on the Food Network's Iron Chef, paiche has been featured on Animal Planet's "River Monsters." That alone might be enough to get your kids to try it. Which might mean it time to fire up the grill and sink your fork into this responsibly raised evolutionary throwback.

Citrus Paiche Lettuce Wraps with Aji Verde Sauce

For the aji verde sauce:

1/4 cup red onion, julienned paper thin

1/2 bunch fresh cilantro with stems

1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil

3 tablespoons water

1 jalapeno pepper, diced

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

For the fish and lettuce wraps:

1 pound paiche fillets

Canola oil

Salt and pepper to taste

1 head butter leaf lettuce

Lime wedges for garnish

Directions: For Aji Verde Sauce: Add cilantro, cotija cheese, water, diced jalapeno, minced garlic and red wine vinegar to a high speed blender.

Turn blender on medium speed and slowly add olive oil until fully incorporated. Blend until completely smooth. Set aside in the refrigerator until ready to use.

For the paiche: Preheat grill. Cut Paiche fillet into pieces the size of your middle finger. Toss fish in a little bit of canola oil and season lightly with salt and pepper.

Grill paiche until done, browning each side.

To assemble the lettuce wraps: Remove and save larger outside leaves of butter lettuce for another use. Using medium-sized, lighter colored leaves, place one piece of fish in the center of the lettuce wrap, add 2 tablespoons of aji verde sauce on top of fish, a pinch of julienned red onion on top and a squeeze of a lime wedge.

Source: Dennis Horton, Whole Foods

Grilled Peruvian Paiche with Aji Amarillo Goldenberry Glaze

3 pounds paiche fillets, cut into 8-ounce portions

1/4 cup canola oil for grilling

1 cup dried goldenberries

1/4 cup honey

4 tablespoons apple cider vinegar

2 tablespoons aji amarillio, ground

1 tablespoon corn starch

1 tablespoon water

Salt to taste

Fresh cracked black peppercorn to taste

3 tablespoons pink peppercorns

Directions: For the glaze: Rehydrate goldenberries in hot tap water for 1 hour. Drain, saving 1 cup liquid. Add goldenberries, water, honey, vinegar and aji amarillo. In a saucepan, bring to a simmer and continue cooking until goldenberries are very soft.

Pulse in a Vitamix blender or food processor to break up the berries, almost pureeing them. The color should be mustard yellow.

Mix corn starch and water to make a slurry. Add puree back to the pan and adjust viscosity with corn starch slurry. Once glaze reaches desired thickness, fold in the hydrated mustard seeds and pink peppercorns. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Hold glaze warm.

Meanwhile, heat a charcoal grill. You should be able to hold your hand one foot above the grill for 5 seconds.

Lightly brush fish with canola oil, and season lightly with salt and black pepper.

Grill paiche on each side for about 5 minutes, turning 90 degrees on same

side halfway to score. Remove fish from grill and let rest for 10 minutes to ensure even cooking. Spoon glaze over the top.

Source: Dennis Horton, Whole Foods