



There's a Venomous Fish We Should All Be Eating

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Dear honeymooners in the Bahamas,

The next time you find yourself on a snorkeling expedition, watch your back. If you spot one of those beautiful **lionfish** (a.k.a. *Pterois*) and are quickly trying to adjust your underwater camera for a snap, don't bother.

Yea, it looks pretty, like an aquatic version of those furry beasts at a **Siegfried and Roy** show, but the lionfish packs a painful sting thanks to its venomous spines. Just one prick is all it takes for days of swelling and even paralysis. Sounds like a great time. Native to tropical waters in the South Pacific and Indian Oceans, the fish have become a massive problem in the Atlantic Ocean, where they have been invading since 1985, posing a threat to the overall ecosystem. But the fish—which has no known predators—may have finally found one: restaurant menus. Lionfish have been popping up in restaurant kitchens around the **United States and the Caribbean**. But the concept of eating a venomous fish sounds like just as good an idea as inviting a **cottonmouth snake** into your bed.

“In 2004, the sightings in the coral reef environment in the Bahamas was when we first thought this may be more than just a few isolated sites,” Lad Akins of the **Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF)** said. “It's gotten exponentially worse, it's still getting worse, [and] we haven't seen the worst yet.”

Yes, I'll admit that they're a weird-looking fish not native to the Atlantic Ocean, but I didn't understand what's so bad about them, so I did a little digging.

Lionfish are the hellraisers of the ocean floor for their carnivorous appetites, growing up to a foot in length, consuming more than 70 species of fish and many invertebrate species. They are capable of eating prey up to half of their body length. Total gluttons, the areas that are heavily invaded with lionfish have seen fish populations reduced by more than 90 percent.

"They eat a wide variety of fish," Atkins said. "Pretty much anything that moves and fits in their mouth."

Lionfish also live for decades. No one else is eating them. And a single female lionfish can produce more than two million eggs a year. Good god. That's a lot of carnivorous fish impacting the health of the reefs... not to mention eating fish species that people like to eat.

They were the first exotic fish to invade the coral reefs in the Bahamas and have hurt the reef ecosystem by eating or starving out native species. This depletion has hurt commercial fishing industries and local economies that depend on it. Not to mention the tourism industry.

And the invasion is growing. Lionfish have been spotted as far up the East Coast of the United States as Rhode Island, and as far west as Brownsville, Texas on the Gulf of Mexico.

Thankfully, they've got one thing working against them: They're absolutely delicious.

It seems like we should hunt and kill them all. But following through on the vengeance and preparing these aquatic beasts isn't so easy. Those spines are venomous, so many fishermen won't go near them.

"A lot of the local fishermen were terrified of them," Houston Moncure, one of the owners of Bluefields Bay Villas in Jamaica, said. "We had started to see them and hear guest reports of them when they'd snorkel. Then we had a Peace Corps volunteer who said he had learned how to remove the thorns and cook it."

Bluefields Bay Villas' executive chef, Carmen Hibbert, learned how to remove the spines and safely handle the fish. Grilled, beer battered, or prepared like jerk chicken with a coconut sauce, Hibbert said their guests went wild for it.

"They ask for it all the time," Hibbert said.

In the United States, lionfish rodeos are becoming a popular way to get the fish. Executive chef and co-owner of GW Fins Tenney Flynn first learned about lionfish when he was approached by a South Bend, Indiana restaurant equipment company that was putting on a lionfish rodeo in Del Rey.

"Basically, 100 divers went out and caught around 700 to 800 lionfish and I helped to cook them," Flynn said.

After that, he started participating in more lionfish rodeos as a diver.

"I always wanted to scuba dive and this was a reason to do it," Flynn said.

It was in Florida that another US chef found a lionfish supply from lobster fishermen.

Ryan Chadwick is one of the owners of **Norman’s Cay in New York**, but he first had lionfish 12 years ago in the Bahamas. When he started developing the menu for his Caribbean restaurant, he knew he wanted lionfish on it.

“It’s delicious,” Chadwick said of the fish. But finding a supply of the fish was hard, so he developed his own.

“I would fly down there [to the Bahamas] to pick up a few and fly back with it,” Chadwick said.

That wasn’t cost effective once the restaurant was open, but he found that lobster fishermen in the Florida Keys were catching them in their traps, so he arranged to FedEx overnight fresh shipments. However, lobster season recently ended, so Chadwick is now trying to put together a team of divers to fish lionfish in the off-season.

“They’re the ultimate sustainable seafood,” Moncure said.

The meat is very soft and buttery and similar to any white fish. “It’s a dense, sweet, mild fish that I think anyone would like, and there are lots of ways to prepare,” Flynn said.

Some of the ways Chadwick prepares the fish at Norman’s Cay are grilled or fried with tomatillo, chickpeas, salsa, and fennel, or raw as a lionfish crudo with jalapeno vinaigrette, mango, pickled red onion, and mint.

Rather than freaking out about the invasion, everyone needs to shut up and eat it.

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TOPICS: east coast, food politics, gulf of mexico, invasive species, lionfish, Rhode Island, seafood, sushi, sustainable, Texas

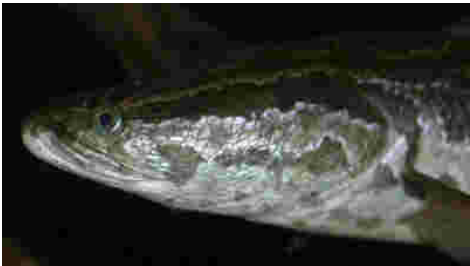
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