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How Do You Like Your Lionfish?

ENJOY THIS FRESH SEAFOOD AND DO THE
UNDERSEA ENVIRONMENT A FAVOR!

By Antony Bolante

AT THE RAINFOREST HIDEAWAY RESTAURANT IN MARIGOT BAY, SAINT LUCIA, there's something

new on the menu: a delicate, mild fish, dusted with subtle spices and pan fried in butter. Accompanied by caramelized onion mashed potatoes and a fresh, tropical fruit salsa with vanilla, this recent offering has quickly become a favorite.

What is this new delicacy? It's lionfish — and it was added to the menu not just for the flavor, but also as a favor to the environment. The lionfish happens to be the region's first invasive marine species, and its rapid spread threatens the Caribbean's delicate undersea ecosystem. Now, locals besieged by the lionfish incursion espouse the motto: "Eat 'em to beat 'em."

EAT ... OR BE EATEN

Initially, Chef Asa Johnsson was surprised at the swift popularity of the Rainforest Hideaway's latest dish: "I know many North Americans and Europeans think of lionfish as an aquarium fish. They're not used to seeing it on a menu."

Chef Asa's customers are right. Its striking, colorful stripes and spectacular display of spines have made the lionfish a sought-after pet. Most likely, it's through the aquarium trade that lionfish found their way from their native Indo-Pacific range and into the Atlantic, half a world away.

"We've had many species of exotic fish found off the coast of South Florida, but none of them became invasive," says Elizabeth Underwood, lionfish program director at the Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF). "They never became established, took hold and started causing damage. Until the lionfish, of course."

Since it was first spotted off the Florida coast in 1985, lionfish have proliferated in the Gulf of Mexico, up the East Coast of the United States, and throughout the Caribbean. Over the past five years, lionfish numbers have increased sharply in the Caribbean — at great cost to native marine life.

The lionfish owes its sudden ascendancy to several interconnected factors.



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For starters, lionfish are voracious predators. "Studies have found that on some reefs, lionfish can reduce native prey fish populations by 65 percent on average and up to 95 percent," over the span of just 2 years, says Underwood. "We've found more than 70 different species of fish in lionfish stomachs, as well as crustaceans such as crabs."

"They eat ecologically important fish, such as parrotfish that help keep algae numbers low on our reefs. They eat economically important fish, such as juvenile snapper and grouper, and compete with the adults for resources."

Consequently, those species don't get the chance to replenish their numbers, while lionfish are prolific breeders. "An average female will release 30,000 eggs every time she spawns," says Underwood. "Lionfish have the capability to reproduce every 4 days, year round. That comes out to about 2 million eggs per year, per fish!"

In addition, lionfish numbers remain unchecked because they have no natural predators in the region. The same magnificent spines that make the lionfish such an attractive aquarium fish are also venomous. Its colorful markings are nature's way of warning would-be challengers.

To make matters worse, it's impossible to catch lionfish *en masse* using commercial fishing techniques. Dragnets can't be used on a fish that tend to ensconce themselves in protected reefs, and traditional traps yield far too much by-catch to be worthwhile. So until an effective lionfish-specific trap is developed — and people are working on it — divers will have to take spear or net in hand and go after them.

Thus, the lionfish has even discouraged its only potential predator: humans. However, through the concerted efforts of government agencies, environmental groups and enlightened citizens, more people are trying to get the lionfish out of the water — and onto a plate.

HUNTING LIONS

Ironically, it was a lionfish's sting that set off one of the most effective counter-attacks against the invader. While diving off the coast of Green Turtle Cay in the Bahamas, Chris Burdette got a painful stab from a lionfish spine when he reached behind a coral head. The unpleasant incident inspired Burdette and fellow Green Turtle Cay resident Bobbie Lindsay to contact REEF with a novel idea: a tournament that invites teams of divers to hunt lionfish.

"Lionfish are venomous, so divers do need to take precautions," Underwood explains. "They have 18 venomous spines, but as long as you avoid these spines you can't get hurt."

If you are poked, "It is a painful sting, but not deadly."

In 2009, REEF held the first "Lionfish Derby" in Green Turtle Cay. By the end of the tournament, participants removed more than 1,400 lionfish from the water. Now, REEF has four main derbies every summer, says Underwood, and numerous REEF-sanctioned derbies have sprung up throughout the Caribbean, Florida and as far north as the Carolinas. A recent derby in Jacksonville, Florida, set the record for the most lionfish caught in a single day.

The lionfish derbies primarily attract recreational divers who want to make a difference, but can also appeal to macho sportsmen out to prove their fishing prowess. Of course, cash prizes for largest lionfish, smallest lionfish and most lionfish caught provide an incentive, too.

"When we started to see such dramatic increases in the lionfish population, we realized that we would need some incentive for people to go out and remove those fish," says Lad Atkins, founding executive director of REEF. When he realized how good they were to eat, he found another powerful motive to hunt lionfish: for food.

To that end, Atkins teamed up with culinary whiz Tricia Ferguson and photographer David M. Stone (both avid divers living in the Caribbean) to create *The Lionfish Cookbook*. Atkins can vouch for every one of the 45 recipes in the book. But when asked for a favorite, he names lionfish ceviche. In addition to being tasty, "it's easy to make, it doesn't require large fillets, and it's much like the conch salad that's prominent throughout the region." Proceeds from the book support marine conservation and lionfish research and control programs.



REMOVING VENOMOUS SPINES

Photos left: Stephen Frink/Gettyimages Right: Fotografieren.net/Alamy



FOUR CARIBBEAN LIONFISH
READY FOR COOKING

GOURMET ECOLOGY

When the forward-thinking owner of the Rainforest Hideaway, Judith Verity, became aware of both the menace and opportunity presented by lionfish, she called upon Nadia Cazaubon, program director of Caribbean Student Environmental Alliance, or Caribbean SEA. The group's "Ridge to Reef" approach to environmental stewardship is broad, and includes educating Saint Lucians about the lionfish threat. "One strategy to deal with the invasion was to introduce the fish to chefs from restaurants, especially at hotels," explains Cazaubon. This aspect of their mission resonates with REEF's cookbook evangelism.

"I've prepared it grilled, baked, fried, poached, in fish broths..." says Cazaubon.

She, too, likes lionfish ceviche, but her favorite preparation was a pan-seared coconut-crusted lionfish served at the Rainforest Hideaway. Perhaps this is her just reward for teaching Saint Lucians — including local fishermen and the chefs at the restaurant — how to safely handle and prepare lionfish.

More than most, Cazaubon appreciates how much Saint Lucia stands to lose to environmental threats like the lionfish. In addition to her role at Caribbean SEA, Cazaubon is

a native Saint Lucian, a mother and an avid diver. When I spoke with her, she was planning to take a snorkeling expedition with a group of children. She herself learned to swim at a young age, and remembers racing home after school so she could head to the beach. Today, she's a certified open-water diver. Among her favorite dive spots are Fairly Land and Superman's Flight (near Saint Lucia's beautiful Gros Piton, which was featured in the movie *Superman II*). For snorkeling, she recommends Virgin Cove and Anse Cochon. So far, she hasn't seen the kind of devastation the lionfish invasion has caused elsewhere. She still finds Saint Lucia's native butterfly fish, angelfish, snapper and grunts in abundance. She'd like to keep it that way.

"When the Rainforest Hideaway first started serving lionfish, it was only as an *amuse bouche*, a lionfish ceviche served to all the guests before their meal," says Chef Asa. The fishermen were scared of the lionfish, and weren't catching enough to make it a regular menu item, she adds. Now, thanks to programs like those offered by Caribbean SEA, local fishermen "know how to handle the lionfish, they know how to catch it. We're getting more lionfish now, so we can put it permanently on the menu."

And whereas most other fish must be transported to the restaurant from afar, lionfish can be handed to Chef Asa on the restaurant's own pier, right from the fisherman's catch bag. "The fishermen come straight to the dock and I take it straight in the kitchen." So although lionfish aren't native, they are local and incredibly fresh.

It's clear that Cazaubon has convinced her fellow Saint Lucians to embrace the "eat 'em to beat 'em" lionfish philosophy. "The only way for us to get rid of the lionfish is to start to eat it," says Chef Asa. "I will be the first one to cook it." Visitors can help create a demand, too. Even if you don't see lionfish on a menu, ask for it. It just might be available as a catch of the day. Most say lionfish tastes something like snapper, though with a texture more like grouper. But Chef Asa insists that it's uniquely delicious, and you should try it for yourself.

ON VIDEO

Watch Chef Peter Lawrence, of Bay Gardens Beach Resort, demonstrate how to safely (and deliciously) prepare fresh lionfish for the table.

In July 2014, Lawrence won the gold in the seafood category of the Taste of the Caribbean culinary competition in Miami.



LIONFISH CEVICHE

FROM *THE LIONFISH COOKBOOK*

REEF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION FOUNDATION

INGREDIENTS:

- 4 fillets of lionfish
- ½ cup onions
- ½ cup olive oil
- 3 tablespoons capers
- ¼ cup and 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 baguette, thinly sliced

Thinly slice lionfish fillets so they are almost translucent. Thinly slice onion. Put the lionfish and the onion on a platter. Stir olive oil, lemon juice and sugar in a bowl together until combined. Add capers. Pour mixture on top of the lionfish and onion platter. Serve with slices of baguette.

