



Shell game

Consumers demand conch. Here's how to please them

An unbroken conch shell is a beautiful thing to find on a beach, usually in Florida or the Caribbean. It's also a rare thing to find these days — as is the meat of the animal that lives inside it.

All the conch we used to eat was wild, but things have changed in the past decade. Because of heavy fishing, much conch is now farmed, and since 1992 the species has been included in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

But conch remains a staple on many menus. The most popular conch dishes are chowder, fritters, or cracked conch, and while these remain popular, some chefs are branching out.

Some use both wild and farmed to have it available all year round, particularly in the

Southeast, where it's almost de rigueur on menus, but others prefer to use only wild product, for various reasons.

At the Ritz-Carlton in Rose Hall, Jamaica, executive chef Lee Goble uses only wild conch that's caught locally, usually November through April.

Conch spring rolls on a sesame cucumber salad with sweet-and-sour sauce are one of his most popular conch dishes. Very finely julienned conch, which has already been flattened and tenderized, is pan seared with sesame oil, garlic, ginger, black pepper, and a local product called country pepper, which he said is "fresh and very, very, very hot."

The conch is then sautéed with calaloo (a spinach-like vegetable that has a pungent, slightly bitter taste that lends itself very well

to conch), zucchini, carrots, rosemary, and thyme. Peanuts or cashews are sometimes added. Then the mixture is wrapped into spring roll skins, dipped in eggs and then poppy and sesame seeds for contrasting color, and deep fried.

The spring rolls are served with julienned cucumber salad seasoned with salt and black pepper, and a sweet-and-sour sauce made with pineapple, tomato sauce, onions, basil, red wine vinegar, and honey. The sauce counteracts both

continued on page 6

Should we sell conch?

In a world suddenly aware of damage to the environment, the easy answer is no. We've eaten our way through the resource, and we should stop.

But that response can be as damaging and short-sighted as the hunger that destroyed the conch resource initially. First, consider the human toll.

Too often, the poor pay for the sins of the wealthy. Insatiable consumerism nearly obliterates a resource, enriching a few, but leaving the poor to scratch out a living from the remains. To totally ban the trade of conch meat to soothe our consciences would be to further impoverish people who need to sell conch to live.

It is our view that, even in a world of damaged resources, there are a few places and a few people who harvest conch sensibly and sustainably. We should encourage those enterprises, because they will provide paychecks to those who need them desperately.

Secondly, political support builds only when the endangered species is popular. Everyone loves salmon and is willing to demand its survival. Not so for the many slimy and crawling creatures, endangered but lacking good publicists. Conch should be kept in the first rank.

The best way to save conch is to eat them.

In this case, as for many mollusks, we like farmed product. It is the rare oyster that grows to harvestable size without the intervention of human hands. The same can be said for conch, if it is reared correctly.

Our bottom line: If a cultured seafood creature lives roughly the same life as its wild cousin, if the cultured creature eats roughly the same food, if it functions in roughly the same environment, it is the equivalent to wild.

So, in the case of conch, we urge you to buy from the Caicos Conch Farm in the Turks & Caicos.

Should we eat conch?

Declines in the conch population were first reported in the 1970s, as these gastropods began to be exported to Europe, and Caribbean tourism took off.

Over-fishing of conch for many decades has meant that it is now banned in many areas of the world.

Two operations are doing their best to help replenish wild conch stocks — and do so in a sustainable manner.

The Caicos Conch Farm, in Providenciales in the Turks & Caicos, is one of the only recognized commercial conch farms in the world. It opened in 1984. It collects 400 egg masses from an offshore egg farm.

A conch's egg mass has about half a million eggs, said Catherine Dyer, production manager at the farm. In the wild, only about one of these eggs is likely to survive, she said, but those hatched at the conch farm are likely to generate some 7,500 eggs.

The 400 egg masses that the farm harvests gives a return of about two million adult conch, which are sold both for their meat and their shell. The farm also releases around 500,000 conch (and 2 million larvae) back into the sea every year to replenish over-fished areas.

"We are working towards setting up grow-out facilities — i.e., offshore pens — in other Caribbean islands, which would allow us to produce more harvestable conch," said Dyer.

"However, this company is committed to restoring wild conch populations and will continue to release up to half a million juveniles annually into the wild in addition to millions of larvae."

Also doing its part is the Aquaculture Department of the Center for Coastal Research at the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution in Fort Pierce, Fla. The goal of this department has been to spawn conch in captivity and to develop a hatchery for them, in order to restock local waters.

Right now, researchers are looking at how to develop hearty conch, that will not become predators' dinner as soon as they're released into the wild. For this reason, restocking is still three to five years away, said Amber Shawl, a research associate.

To this end, the department is looking at ways to help conchs' survivorship rates and is testing ideas such as different stock rates, adding calcium to the water or their diet, genetic work, and even adding a predator to their cage.

They are having some luck. In the wild, she said, one out of every 100,000 conch eggs survives, "but if that's done in a lab it increases five- or 10 fold."

Projects like this one are necessary, said Shawl, "because some people worry that populations are so depleted that they can't recover without harvesting methods like these."

Another way to help conch repopulate, she said, would be to institute an absolute ban. "In some countries they ban it during the reproductive periods (typically the summer months). The only way people are aware [of the conch over-fishing] is if they don't have any choice, and I don't think most tourists [who like to eat a lot of conch] know what the status is."

What you need to know

If you're looking to buy conch, this is how most suppliers provide it:

- Mostly in 1-lb. or 5-lb. boxes, usually frozen but occasionally fresh.
- Prices run from \$9.57/lb.-\$24.95/lb., but vary widely between suppliers. Fresh product can fetch significantly higher prices than frozen with some suppliers.
- Most conch comes cleaned and filleted.

continued from page 5

the spice and any oil from the deep-frying.

"Wild conch has been very hard to find lately," according to Johnny Levins, executive chef at Something Savory in Cambridge, Mass., "and it's beginning these days to get a little pricy." He sources his conch mostly in the Bahamas, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia, "and sometimes if I'm lucky I can find it in China."

"I like wild because you can't beat salt water, and it requires less seasoning," he said. "It also cooks up nicer. Conch can be very chewy or rubbery, so I usually pound it, then boil it and then decide what I'm going to do with it. Wild has much more flavor, and it really looks like conch; the farmed conch are smaller, like little knobs, because they don't have time to mature."

Levins grew up eating conch on Nevis in the Caribbean. In homage to his birthplace he serves curried conch chowder, which has a tomato base, but isn't too spicy. He also serves fritters with a slight twist because the conch is mixed with salt cod.

For the latter, he soaks the salt cod overnight, changing water regularly to wash off the salt. He then boils the conch and the cod and mixes both with tomato paste, green chili peppers, garlic, shallots, and herbs (parsley, cilantro, thyme, sage, savory, oregano, and sometimes dill).

"I simmer all the ingredients together on a low heat for a good half-hour to blend the spices, then cool it."

The next step is adding baking powder, flour, spices, and eggs. Then the fritters are deep-fried and served as an appetizer with a spicy remoulade with chipotle, roasted red peppers, and garlic.

A new addition to the menu is conch with Jamaican Blue Mountain curry. "It's got flavors of southern Asia but also of the Caribbean, with coconut milk, spices, lemongrass, and mixed ground chili peppers," said Levins. This dish is served with braised cabbage, black-eyed peas, and rice. "It's spicy yet lightly creamy," he explained.

Traditional conch chowder is a big favorite at Ceiba in Washington, D.C., and chef de cuisine Victor Albisu works only with wild conch, usually queen conch from Nicaragua, but also occasionally from the Bahamas and Jamaica.

"I've never even looked into farmed," he explains. "I prefer the idea that it comes straight from the sea, and it's more natural."

Albisu's conch comes in frozen. He thaws it as needed, then grinds it through a large-dice meat grinder. He also serves fritters and a rich, Bermudan-style conch chowder that's light to moderately spicy. He makes it from a dark roux and serves it with sides of a sherry-pepper sauce made from Bermuda and Gosling's Black Seal rum.

The wild conch fritters at Zhanra's in St. Augustine, Fla., are as simple as they could possibly be. Executive chef/owner John Doering pounds conch meat with a meat hammer, "and you have to work on it for a few minutes." He then grinds it in a meat grinder and makes small balls that he coats with batter. The balls are deep-fried and served with lemon and key lime wasabi mayonnaise.

"Conch is very Floridian, very tropical," he explained, "so the key lime gives it a nice Caribbean feel."

For a healthier spin on conch, David Fuhrman, executive chef of Conch Republic Seafood Co. in Key West, Fla., offers raw conch. The conch is marinated for four to five hours and then served as a ceviche with peppers, onions, tomatoes, cilantro, and fresh citrus, with tostone chips or twice-fried homemade chips on the side.

Fuhrman uses both wild and farmed, but likes the sweeter flavor of wild.

"I would like more wild because it means people are paying attention to the stock levels and means we're not over-farming like in the past." 