

WONDER BREADING

FISH STIX: NOT JUST FOR KIDS ANYMORE



Fried cod with beer and yesterday's news: A traditional combination.

by Amanda Chater

Like it or not, frozen and breaded fish is a major destination for wild-caught seafood ... and some of it isn't bad

There were the days when foods were neatly divided up by generation: chicken nuggets and fish sticks for the kids; *coq au vin* and grilled cod for the adults.

But those days are gone and breaded fish is now eaten across the board — from fine dining establishments to fast-food outlets, school dining halls, and health care facilities.

And what's striking is that much of this breaded product is actually wild fish, because that's what consumers want, said manufacturers and food service operators — but also because it produces a better end product.

There's got to be something to it when the world's fast-food giant is using wild fish for its breaded Filet-O-Fish product.

McDonald's uses Alaskan pollock and Chilean hoki that comes from the Pacific Ocean and the Bering, Baltic, and North Seas, according to Vicki Spiller, director of the corporation's supply chain in Oak Brook, Ill. The sandwich tastes so good, she said, because the fish is frozen at sea.

McDonald's has always used wild fish for its Filet-O-Fish. And, said Spiller, "We will continue to review various types of fish that we can use to help us add flexibility to our supply capabilities."

Many people are turning to fish because of its healthy profile, said John van Amerongen, a spokesman for Trident Seafoods, based in Seattle.

Trident's breaded products use a variety of wild fish, including Pacific cod, halibut, Alaskan pollock, salmon, haddock, flounder, and wahoo, and the company is starting to sell them in retail stores and to institutional cafeterias.

The challenge, said van Amerongen, is that these higher-quality products come with a higher price tag.

"But which would you rather buy," he said, "a cheap fish stick that winds up in the dumpster or a premium fish stick that really feeds the kids at school?"

Most products that Gorton's of Gloucester in Massachusetts uses are wild, said spokesman Jud Reis.

"We're looking for a very mild white fish, flaky, that's consistent and available in good supply. Pollock is a very mild, delicious fish, and most American consumers are not looking for



Cod with a beer batter: simple and, in its simplicity, a classic.

Breading itself important

The breading may be the finishing touch on the product, but it's just as important as the fish, said manufacturers and operators.

"We use less breading to keep the fat content lower," said Trident Seafoods spokesman John van Amerongen. "The trick is getting less breading to stick evenly, stay on during transit and handling, and cook up crunchy in the oven."

Crispy seems to be the way to go. Even McDonald's said it has added breadcrumbs to its cracker meal-based breading to make it crunchier.

"A lot of commercial products tend to be heavy on the breading, but I don't want the breading to be the main thing residents taste. We mostly bread to give the fish a nice appearance," said Steve Lunin, director of culinary service at Mease Manor.

"I stress to our chefs: Be crazy! If it sounds unusual, do it anyway because often you come up with a terrific idea and recipe," he said. "I really like to take the handcuffs off my chefs."

Mississippi's cooking up

SHRIMP ETOUFFEE



- 5 lbs. Mississippi Gulf Shrimp, peeled, de-veined and chopped
- 1 c. butter or margarine
- 2 onions, chopped
- 6 stalks celery, chopped
- 3 tbsp. garlic, chopped
- 4 tbsp. flour
- 1 c. mushrooms, chopped
- 3 tbsp. paprika

Salt, black pepper, and red pepper flakes to taste

In a large skillet melt butter; sauté onions, celery and garlic. Stir in flour and cook slowly for 5 minutes. Add shrimp and cook for 20 minutes. Add 2-3 cups of water and mushrooms. Stir in paprika and seasoning. Cook for 30 minutes. Serve over rice with hot French bread.



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WONDER breadding



Trident sells fillet-only, no-transfat white fish sticks.

something too fishy." The company also uses wild haddock and flounder, he said.

Aiming to provide healthier products, all of Trident and Gorton's breaded fish is transfat-free.

"It was a major undertaking that involved not only reformulation of the products, but significant changes to our production systems," said Reis.

Eliminating transfats is a new move for a product that's been around for many decades. As the story goes, breaded fish traces back to Clarence Birdseye, who invented a plate "froster" to rapidly freeze food. The food in question had to be slim rectangular slabs, and fish sticks were created to fit the bill.

Thousands of miles and almost 30 years later, herring dealers in the U.K. were trying to gain ground with their home crowd. In order to make this fishy fish more appealing, they breaded it and ran it past tasting groups against a bland breaded cod product called a "fish finger."

Dumbfounding the test's organizers, tasters overwhelmingly voted for the cod. Thus a new product was born in 1955 and soon, nary a British child's plate was fish finger-free.

And now it's not just on children's plates. Food service facilities around the country are serving breaded wild fish with much success.

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Birdseye had a bulls eye

You can thank — or blame — a Labrador fur trader for the first generation of frozen fish sticks.

Clarence Birdseye (yes, that's really his name) was born in New York City, but as a young man in 1912 got a job trading for furs with Inuit in Canada's Northeast.

There, natives knew that food frozen quickly would retain much of its taste and texture.

Here's how scientists explain it: If water freezes slowly, it creates large ice crystals. Those crystals puncture the skin of cells in the food, producing limp and tasteless result.

Slow freezing was used by food technologists to freeze and ruin test samples.

But Birdseye saw Inuit throw fish onto the ice — and saw that the fish, when thawed, retained much of its value.

The "plate" freezer was born, and Birdseye immediately patented the concept in the United States.

The company he started is now known as General Foods.

Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind., uses wild-caught North Atlantic cod, haddock, and Alaskan pollock, and is adding Alaskan salmon and wild crab cakes to its menus this year.

“With the trend towards healthier lifestyles, we are offering more baked items today,” said Shelly Cochran, assistant director of food stores and seafood buyer. Last year, 45 percent of seafood consumed on campus was battered or breaded wild fish, she said.

Breaded fish is usually fried, but there’s a breaded Cajun wild cod product that is baked and is a big hit because it’s spicy (breaded buffalo pollock and firehouse cod are favorites for the same reason).

Most of Purdue’s fish is frozen at sea or at the dock.

“We use frozen because it’s available year-round and it’s usually fresher,” said

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**– Shelley Cochran,
Purdue University**

Cochran, “and it’s usually cut to size so there’s no added labor.” She opts for single processors because the university is state-funded, so tries to support American producers.

On the other fin, Maine Medical Center in Scarborough tends to use mostly fresh wild product out of Norway. If that’s not available, it opts for frozen-at-sea products “because the quality is better since it’s frozen a little quicker,” said Mark Boucher, chef/manager at Cafe at the Atrium.

The most popular dish is a baked, breaded haddock that’s served every Friday and brings people to the hospital just to eat it, he said. Boucher breads the fish himself using plain white breadcrumbs, crackers, a little paprika for color, and parsley.

It’s a 5-ounce portion of haddock and the breeding is about 2 ounces, he said, so the breeding does not overpower the fish. The fish can be served either as a meal or in a sandwich with a slice of melted cheese.

“People nowadays are more conscious of what they’re eating and expect a hospital to have healthy choices,” he pointed out.

Another popular dish is haddock topped with a breeding of crackers, Cheddar cheese, and Dijon mustard, that’s served once every three weeks.

Another health care operation, this one for the elderly, also opts mostly for wild breaded fish.

“I just don’t find farmed fish to be of as good quality,” said Steve Lunin, director of culinary service at Mease Manor, a nursing center/assisted living/independent living facility in Dunedin, Fla.

The different levels of care here require a different approach, he said. “In the nursing center, we look for flaky, easily chewed, boneless fish without thick skin; in the independent facility, most of these things aren’t as important.”

Mease Manor serves a fish of the day, and half of the time this product — mostly crab cakes and cod strips — is breaded.

“We take fish and bread it, which gives it a whole new taste, texture, and appearance,” said Lunin. “We bake or broil it, so it’s healthy, and the breeding helps keep it moist; I think it locks in the moisture.”

At the other end of the age range, East Baton Rouge Parish School System in Louisiana serves two wild breaded products: a fish and cheese breaded patty made of cod or Alaskan pollock and a breaded fish stick made of Alaskan pollock.

Both products are purchased pre-breaded, said Emily Hartman, purchasing coordinator, because the district does not have the labor to bread fish products.

“Children like any kind of patty, and most patties have breeding,” she explained.

Wild fish is used because it falls within the price range that the district must meet.

“We only allow our cafeteria managers a budget of 66 cents per meal served,”

said Hartman. “Milk costs approximately 25 cents per carton, so the manager only has 41 cents to spend for the rest of the meal.”

The Calhoun School, a private school in New York City, serves breaded wild flounder about once a semester. “The kids know fish sticks, so I try to attract them by giving them fish they know, like goujonettes [of flounder]. They go crazy about them and say that’s how fish sticks should be,” said Chef Bobo, executive chef and director of food services. He serves the goujonettes with oven fries or rice and a green vegetable.

By way of comparison, Chef Bobo budgets \$3 a day per student, with most of that — he didn’t say how much — devoted to lunch. ■

Green bedfellows

After noting that McDonald’s fish sandwiches have probably the best-handled and certifiably sustainable fish in the world, British author Charles Clover writes about the proposal that eventually led to certification of Alaska’s pollock fishery by the respected Marine Stewardship Council:

The very idea that McDonald’s, hated by greens and foodies, could make capital out of being on the side of the angels — and that their customers were therefore more virtuous than the denizens of exclusive restaurants — caused shivers of revulsion among the righteous in U.S. environmental groups.

When the Alaskan pollock fishery proposed itself for certification as one of the world’s best-run fisheries, they accused it, in the words of one campaigner, of “strip-mining the ocean and treating the fish like a crop of corn in Iowa.”

— *The End of the Line: How Overfishing Is Changing the World and What We Eat*