



The essence of Lenten tradition arises from centuries-old religious observance, which – although not seafood – is widely epitomized by the hot cross buns, observing Christianity’s defining moment.

Winter — the perfect time to sell wild seafood

Your customers have many reasons, some cultural and religious, to buy seafood

The beginning of the year can be a challenging time for the dining business.

Still bloated from Christmas, and determined to stick to their New Year’s resolutions *this* year, diners can be a boring bunch.

Fortunately, there are religious observances and a nice food-related holiday to get the taste buds a-watering.

And three New York chefs are doing all they can to take advantage of them.

For many Christians, there’s Lent, a period of six weeks during which they should steer clear of meat every Friday, as well as Ash Wednesday (the first day of Lent) and particularly Good Friday (the last Friday of Lent).

Fish, happily for restaurateurs, fishermen, and consumers, is not considered meat.

Ed Brown, executive chef of Sea Grill in New York, plays up the religious theme of Lent and draws from a Biblical story: During a financially difficult period, when taxes were due on a temple, St. Peter reached into the ocean and picked out a fish with a coin in its mouth for the exact amount due.

So, Brown cooks wild St. Pierre fish, a.k.a. John Dory. This year he will prepare it a la plancha, served with creamed baby leeks, fava beans, and morel mushrooms, probably with a yellow wine sauce.

What helps sell this dish, he said, “is it’s a good story for the waiters to tell to anyone who’ll listen.”

It’s a huge seller, he says, “sweet tasting, with a firm texture and white flesh.” He’ll serve this dish daily during the upcoming Lent period, and said he sees business increase, particularly on Fridays around this season, because the restaurant specializes in seafood. The business builds throughout Lent, with a grand finale of a 10 percent to 15



Because of its color and delectability, wild salmon (here, complemented with horseradish) often finds a place during dreary winter months.

percent increase in diner business by Good Friday.

Bouillabaisse is a big Lent favorite at Cafe Centro, which is located in the former ticket office of Grand Central Terminal. Executive Chef Franck Deletrain prepares it with rouget, monkfish, lobster, scallops, mussels, clams, and shrimp, in the traditional style. It's served every Friday during Lent.

He also opts for John Dory. He likes to cook it with "lots and lots of red wine, and almost treat it like a piece of chicken or veal," although this year he might try something new, and as yet not dreamed up.

"For Lent, I just make sure I have lots of seafood," said Steve Zobel, executive chef at Triomphe. Scallops are a big favorite, especially served in a porcini mushroom butter and topped with shaved foie gras.

"It's actually a signature dish that sells particularly well around Lent, but I leave off the foie gras," he explained.

Passover is an important time for observant Jews, when they are expected to follow a strict kosher diet, especially at the all-important Seder meal on the first night of the observance.

For Passover, which falls April 2-9 in 2007, Brown serves gefilte fish from his great-grandmother's recipe, made with wild lake fish: pike and whiting, which are less commonly used these days, he said.

Eaten at many Jewish celebratory dinners, his gefilte fish is served for only Passover and Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year). To accompany the gefilte fish, Brown serves his house-made horseradish sauce with salt, sugar, and white vinegar. He sometimes adds grated beets to add color and some sweetness.

The special Passover dish at Triomphe is grilled wild salmon over salt cod latkes. The salt cod is rehydrated in milk, which takes a lot of the salt out, said Zobel, then mashed with the potatoes for the latkes. The salmon, sliced very thin and pan-seared very quickly, is arranged over them, then dotted with horseradish cream to finish. This dish is served as an appetizer with one latke, or

as an entree with two.

Valentine's Day draws a bigger crowd, however, and there are no observances to stick to, unless you believe Zobel. "People like to eat fish on Valentine's Day because it gives them a little more energy for whatever they decide to do afterwards," he said with a wink.

KEEPING IT LIGHT

Our New York chefs like to keep it light.

Deletrain serves dishes for two consisting of whole fish, either black sea bass or red snapper, which is cooked in a wood-burning oven (usually cherry wood, sometimes oak) that can be seen from the restaurant, then presented tableside.

Oysters are a perennial Valentine's favorite, and he serves them in a champagne-celery broth. He uses wild kumamoto oysters because "they're perfect for poaching; they're plump and briney and small, so they're just a half bite." He often serves the oysters and broth over his whole fish.

Also popular on this, the most stereotypically romantic of all days of the year, is ceviche, which Deletrain prepares with wild sea scallops, king salmon, or hamachi tuna. To give the ceviche a loving twist, he includes passionfruit and

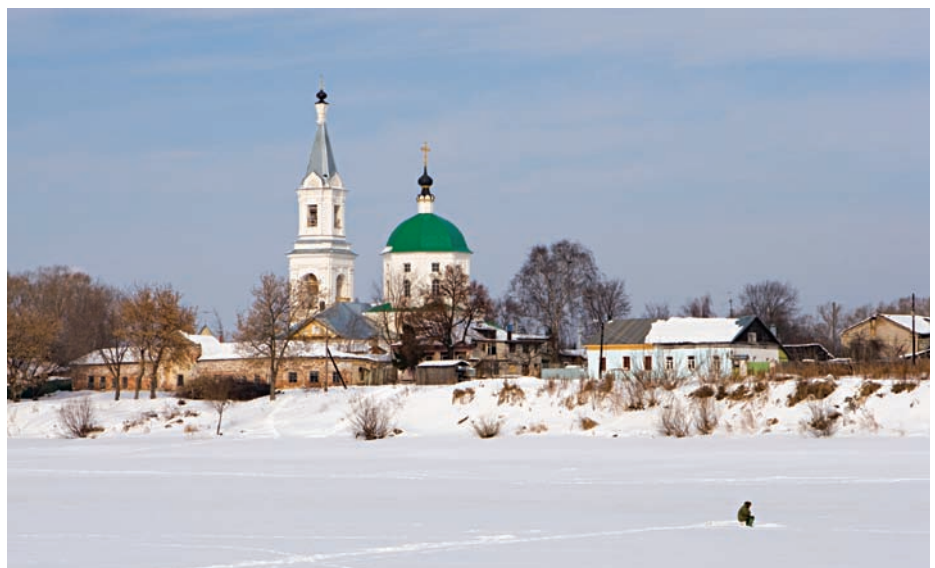
hearts of palm, together with orange juice, cilantro, and some jalapenos for a little kick — all served in a martini glass for a great visual.

Sticking with the raw fish, he also prepares fish carpaccio, with either tuna or salmon, sliced very thin with soy sauce and scallions, topped with American sturgeon caviar.

Zobel also has favorites he likes to serve to couples who will likely spend more time gazing into each other's eyes than into the eyes of the fish on their plate. A popular and "luxurious" dish for this holiday is wild salmon served over parsnip and potato puree. It's topped with two poached shrimp, split in half, and a beurre blanc-caviar (sturgeon and salmon) sauce.

Brown also serves whole fish dishes for lovers — usually red snapper. "Of course, the red plays into it all." He also serves up a section of halibut on the bone, roasted or grilled and served tableside.

Another Valentine treat is large wild striped bass tail. He takes the tail off and includes three to four inches, wraps it in herbs and a salt crust, then roasts it. "It comes out golden, and when we present it at the table and split it open, the whole smell comes out. The gelatin in the tail makes it really succulent," he said. ■



Lenten traditions range from wintry northlands along the Volga River to the winter-sunny south.