

The cult of the smelt is alive and well

Written by Sarah McCraw
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It used to be a sign of spring as certain as the return of the robins. Hundreds of fishermen equipped with dip and seine nets would stand shoulder-to-shoulder on the Port Washington breakwater, around the harbor and along the beaches to catch one of the true treats of Lake Michigan — the smelt.

The return on their investment in time spent outside on chilly spring nights was almost immediate and measured by the bucketsful of fresh smelt, whose seasonal trip to the shoreline to reproduce was often a one-way ticket to the dinner table.



“People came out in droves. It was huge,” recalled John Weinrich, whose restaurant, NewPort Shores, is at the north end of the city’s harbor at what used to be the epicenter of smelt fishing activity.

“This whole area out here in the harbor was always filled with smelt fishermen, and they would catch pickup trucks full of smelt.”

Those days are long gone for reasons scientists are still trying to figure out, but while smelt don’t school along the Port Washington shore like they used to, they still exist in the Great Lakes and their tributaries and are caught commercially at this time of year.

So while the smelt fisherman may be an endangered species in Port, you can still find perfectly fried smelt on the menus of a few area restaurants and plenty of smelt connoisseurs eager to indulge their seasonal craving.

“Eating smelt is a pleasure,” said Port Washington resident John Niederkorn, who at age 84

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has eaten his fair share of the delicate little fish. “You grab it by the tail, and you work it down to nothing.”

Smelt preparation is simple. The head is removed from the fish, which averages between three and five inches long, and the fish is cleaned. It's then dipped in egg, breaded and deep fried — bones, tail and all — until golden and crispy.

Weinrich said he learned how to prepare smelt in assembly-line fashion to keep up with the demand while working at the former Smith Bros. Fish Shanty restaurant in Port in the 1970s.



“When I cooked at Smith Bros., we’d call it the sandbox,” he said. “The smelt would be in a pan, the bread crumbs would be in a pan and egg wash would be in a pan. All you did all night long was work the assembly line. That’s all one guy did.”

The proper way to eat a smelt, any aficionado will tell you, is in its entirety. The small, tender bones are almost unnoticeable after the fish is fried.

“They’re delicious,” said Jeff Ewig, owner of Ewig Bros. Fish Co. in Port, which sells raw smelt in season at his market and to Newport Shores. “I eat them whole. That’s why I like the small ones. They’re just like French fries.”

While there’s little debate about eating the bones, consuming the tail is considered optional, at least by some.

“You’ve got to eat the tails,” Niederkorn said. “It’s a sin not to eat the tail. It’s the crunchiest part of the fish.”

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Ewig agrees. “The tails are the best because they’re the crunchiest part of the fish,” he said.

Standard accoutrements are lemon and tartar sauce, but smelt purists often leave those items on the plate.

“I just like the smelt and some salt,” said Niederkorn, who has volunteered at the annual Van Ells-Schanen American Legion smelt fry for decades. “When I was in the kitchen, you’d eat all the smelt you’d want. By the time you would go to bed, you couldn’t sleep because you were so full.”

An indication of how popular smelt is lies in the fact the Legion is expecting to serve as many as 1,200 people during its 62nd annual smelt fry on Friday, April 5, and Saturday, April 6.

Weinrich said smelt remains a popular item at Newport Shores when he can find it. And although the cost of smelt has risen in proportion to its scarcity, it remains a fresh fish bargain.



“The day of all-you-can-eat smelt are over,” he said. “When I started, they were about 99 cents per pound. Now, they are more than \$4 a pound.”

Weinrich said smelt is a great tourist draw.

“They’ll ask, ‘What is this smelt?’ and we’ll say, ‘Oh, it’s a local favorite,’” he said. “As soon as

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they hear the word 'local,' they want to try it."

Norine McGaw, owner of NoNo's in Newburg, said her restaurant is located in what she calls "the smelt belt" and has been serving fried smelt for 28 years.

"I swear if you had all-you-can-eat lobster, you wouldn't have as much of a crowd as you do for smelt," McGaw said.

McGaw said she buys a ton-and-a-half of frozen smelt each spring from a wholesaler who get them from Lake Erie. She serves them on Tuesday and Wednesday nights and for lunch on Fridays.

"There were people here the other night from Oconomowoc, Muskego and the south side of Milwaukee," she said. "If people are in the area this time of the year, they'll stop in for smelt."

Ewig said the problem isn't selling smelt, it's finding them, which is an ironic turn of events.

"Back in the day, you couldn't really sell smelt because people could just go down to the harbor and catch them by the bucketful in five minutes," he said.

Earlier this month, Ewig bought approximately 300 pounds of smelt from a wholesaler in Green Bay that gets the fish from the St. Lawrence River.

Last year, Ewig was not able to find smelt, underlying the fact it's not guaranteed to be behind his counter each spring. But he'll buy it if he can find it because he knows there is always an appetite for what is still considered one of the true delicacies of the Great Lakes.

"People remember this fish," he said. "Even those who have left the area remember how good they were, so they come back to find smelt."

Image Information: A plate of freshly fried smelt and a pan of the breaded fish were held by NewPort Shores chef Rich Plier. Waitress Heather Parsons served customers smelt at NoNo's Restaurant in Newburg alongside restaurant owner Norine McGaw. Jeff Ewig displayed uncooked smelt at Ewig Bros. Fish Co. in Port Washington.