

INSATIABLE: CATCH OF THE WEEK: COMING TO A TORONTO BISTRO NEAR YOU

The icy waters at this time of year mean Ontario fish is fatter and firmer

SASHA CHAPMAN

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'Don't you just feel sorry for the people in Florida?' asks the white-haired skier as we pause on the crest of the hill, buffeted by howling winds and driving snow. It's tempting to laugh off the remark, but he has a point: There is something wonderful about winter in Ontario, once you bundle up for the elements and get outside. Really, it's the only sane response to living in such a harsh climate.

And cold weather has its culinary rewards. Though February and March are the leanest months for a locavore, there is one Ontario ingredient that actually tastes better at this time of year: lake fish, especially whitefish, the delicate-fleshed species that takes so well to smoking. The icy waters at this time of year mean the fish itself is fatter and firmer. It also arrives in Toronto from Lake Huron and Lake Erie in pristine condition: no warm weather to spoil the shipment.

Jamie Kennedy of the JK restaurant brand will tell you that, hands down, whitefish is his favourite freshwater fish to cook. "It's the original Ontario fish, one of the few native species in our lakes," says Mr. Kennedy, who often smokes it over local apple wood.

"Even pickerel was introduced by the Europeans."

It's also an irreproachable choice for the dinner table: Not only is it sourced locally (with the twin benefits of supporting neighbourly businesses and keeping food miles to a minimum), but it's also low on the food chain, which means its methylmercury levels are negligible. Consuming bottom feeders is easier on the ecosystem than dining on predators such as pickerel and lake trout.

Though the stock of lake fish is slowly improving in the city, it's still hard to find at fishmongers who are more accustomed to dealing with international chains of command. For them, it's easier to source Tasmanian ocean trout than some of the trout fished in our own lakes.

Generally, you're better off looking for lake fish on restaurant menus or at locally minded shops such as Culinarium and the Healthy Butcher. But for the really intrepid, nothing beats going out on the ice to fish them yourself.

Operating on the assumption that food always tastes better when you harvest it - or maybe just desperate to do something to make the long winter pass by faster - a handful of righteous-minded chefs (all of them Slow Food members) headed northeast to go ice fishing in the Kawarthas earlier this week.

Scott Vivian, Jamie Kennedy's right hand at the Gardiner Museum, Victor's David Chrystian (well known for his way with fish, even though he's desperately allergic to them) and Mark Cutrara of Cowbell followed farmer Mark Trealout onto Gull Lake for a crash course in ice fishing. They came with a care package from Paul DeCampo, Slow Food Toronto's convivium leader, a portable ice hut and several bottles of VQA wine to warm their gullets. First lesson: Drill the six-inch fishing holes before you start drinking and make sure they're well signed so you don't fall into them as you stumble back home.

Mr. Cutrara, a chef so devoted to the local movement he has a pull-down classroom-sized map of Southern Ontario right in the middle of his tiny restaurant kitchen, was hosting a dinner for Slow Food members at his restaurant the next evening. The ice-fishing crew hoped to catch enough lake trout and whitefish to give everyone a taste.

The next day, the three chefs cooked a four-course Slow Food dinner (Mr. Chrystian wearing gloves to avoid an allergic reaction) for Toronto members, and even Jamie Kennedy turned up, rolling up his sleeves to put together a finely minced mignonette for some gorgeous fillets of pan-fried pickerel.

Not that their catch was any fresher than the stuff supplied by Purdy's of Lake Huron or Jim Giggie, a trout farmer in Holland Centre, Ont.: Mr. Cutrara says the fish he orders for the restaurant arrives only hours after it's been caught. "The yellow perch I get from Lake Erie is so fresh it's still in rigor!" he says.

Which poses the question: Why do we eat fish from halfway around the world when we have so many great-tasting species in our own backyard?

Insatiable runs every other Saturday

schapman@globeandmail.com