No Bones about It

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As a child I thought the real miracle of Jesus feeding the multitudes with five loaves and two fishes was that no one was reported to have choked on a fish bone. Given my abysmal track record of trying to eat fish, this was understandable.

Growing up in rural Tennessee, I always had the same experience: an adult would plop a hunk of fried crappie or trout onto my plate and say, "Watch out fer them bones, hon."

This admonition always accompanied fish, never pork chops or meatloaf. I heard more than enough horror stories of people swallowing the tiny, pinlike bones and getting them stuck in their throats. It didn't help that my older brother terrified me with tales of folks who had sprouted leaks like a lawn sprinkler. Summertime family gatherings filled me with boundless anxiety, for I grew up in a clean-your-plate-there-are-starving-children-in-Asia household in which dodging food was not an option.

"Y'all come on over for supper," Aunt Maisie's summons would arrive over the party line. "Uncle Beevo's caught a mess of catfish and we can't possibly eat 'em all." (Even as a small child, I realized there was something suspect about being obliged to eat a mess of something so it wouldn't go bad.) We'd arrive and find Uncle Beevo out back with a catfish suspended from a pine tree, a nail driven through its lower lip, peeling off its skin like you'd remove a tube sock.

"This is gonna make some mighty fine eatin'!" he'd proclaim as the slimy skin would reluctantly let go of the fish with a fwpp!, fly over his shoulder, and affix itself to the pickup truck. I'd fill up on hush puppies and brown-'n'-serve rolls and hold out for the peach cobbler.

And so my bias against fish followed me into adulthood and finally into

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culinary school, where I was forced to face my fear. While other students turned pale over the sweetbreads and raw oysters demanded by classical French training, I found myself growing weak at the prospect of handling whole, fresh fish, complete with every bone God had given them. But then came the moment that forever liberated me from my dread of coughing up a fish bone like a cat working on a hairball. I learned to fillet fish, the single most valuable skill I picked up in culinary school.

I would drive out to the massive Asian food market in Los Angeles's San Gabriel Valley and buy several whole fish at a time, trying to explain to the Fellow with No English behind the seafood counter through pantomime that I wanted him to leave the fish intact, not an easy message to convey through hand gestures alone. He would stand there blinking at me in front of a bank of aquariums filled with all manner of wriggling dinner possibilities, then finally shrug and wrap up my selections in newspapers that only he could read. I'd carry my purchases home and fillet, fillet, fillet, then line up the delicate portions of raw, boneless fish in neat rows across the cutting board and admire them like a kid arranging his collection of Matchbox cars. My fear was vanquished, and in its place blossomed a glowing admiration for what the French call "fruits of the sea."

In fact, I've now come to regard all types of fish as a single species, a remarkable creature that swims the waters of this planet, in every ocean, lake, and stream. It is an amazing and clever animal that sometimes tastes like halibut and at other times like sole or salmon. This creature is versatile, always in season, and plentiful throughout the world, with little risk of ever becoming overfished and endangered. It comes in all sizes and, most delightfully, it has no bones. This superb species of animal even has a crisp little French name. Fillet!

After all these years, I still don't understand why fish was routinely hacked into serving-size lengths, with everyone left to run the fishbone gauntlet. Why didn't Uncle Beevo simply fillet them? That way none of us—himself included—would have faced the prospect of an emergency-room visit after someone had tried to remove a bone from someone else's throat with tweezers and gotten them stuck down there too. Alas, all those who collectively made up Uncle Beevo are long gone, so there's no one left to ask.

I love returning home to our family farm in Tennessee, far from the frenzy of Los Angeles. My favorite meals still center around salt-cured smoked ham, pork barbecue, and, of course, the humble catfish. Mercifully, in the intervening years since I moved away, some compassionate missionaries have visited and taught folks there how to fillet. Forget the loaves and fishes—now, *that's* a miracle.

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