

DINNER IS SERVED:

Asian shore crabs have spread rapidly since their introduction on the U.S. East Coast three decades ago. Here they are served on a “plate” of invasive wakame seaweed and meant to be eaten whole.



ECOLOGY

how
(and why)

to

eat

invasive.
species

What's the best way to control ecological pests?
Feed them to the world's greatest predator—us

By Bun Lai

Bun Lai, a 2013 James Beard Foundation Award nominee, is the chef at Miya's Sushi, a restaurant founded by his mother in New Haven, Conn. He dives and fishes in the Long Island Sound to supply his restaurant with underutilized seafood.



M

Y RESTAURANT, MIYA'S SUSHI, IS JUST a few miles from Long Island Sound. An important goal of ours is to have our cuisine return to the roots of sushi, meaning simply to use what we have available where we live. Often what we find now are invasive species—unwanted plants and animals that humans have introduced to ecosystems. Nationwide, invasive species such as the wild boar and Asian carp are destroying farms and fisheries, causing economic damage that has been estimated at \$120 billion a year.

Our solution? Eat them. By collecting invasive seafood on shellfish beds, for instance, we basically provide a free weeding service. I also hope to convince the world that these invasives can be delicious—if you get into the right mind-set.

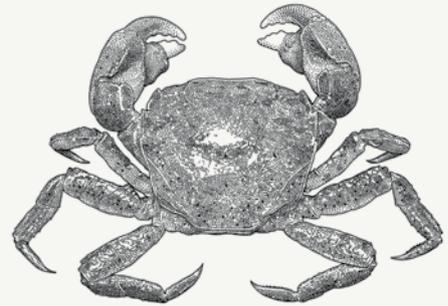
Consider the stalked tunicate—also known by the delicious-sounding name “Asian sea squirt”—which has taken over what used to be blue mussel habitat from Maine to New Jersey. The alien sea squirt, which is indigenous to the Philippines, is considered a fouling organism and a pest by the shellfish industry. In South Korea, however, it is considered a delicacy and even an aphrodisiac.

I first ate sea squirt at a Korean sushi bar in New York City. The saclike squirts were arranged like a sunflower in the middle of a bright orange plate. As I bit into one of the yellow appendages, it burst with salty, viscous, warm liquid. Although I could not see the liquid, I could taste its phlegmy consistency, and it took all my willpower to keep it in my mouth and even more effort to swallow it.

Buckminster Fuller used to say that one should “dare to be naive.” I think it takes a bit of his approach to truly accept new ways of doing things—including, of course, eating. The next time I tried sea squirt, I scraped one off a pier. I sliced open its tough outer membrane, which revealed a soft, orange flesh, like mango. With barely a pause, I slurped it into my mouth from the palm of my hand. This time it was good.

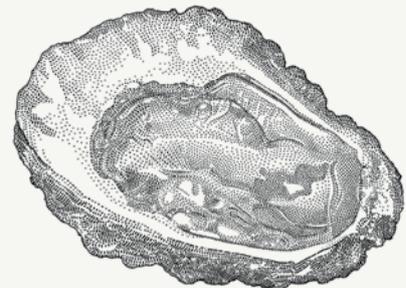
Over the years I have foraged, fished and hunted lots of different plants and animals; the following are just a few of the dishes I have served in my restaurant from the invasive ones. ■

Today's Specials



Le Soupe du Mean Greenies

European green crabs made their way to the U.S. in the 19th century. They voraciously consume the larvae of commercial shellfish species and are considered one of the top 100 most destructive invasive species in the world. I smoke the crabs with applewood, dehydrate with lemongrass and hot peppers, then pulverize them into a powder that I use for the base of a savory crab-miso soup. I then steam whole crabs in a hoppy beer and hot Ethiopian spices and serve them atop the soup as if they are struggling to climb out—a symbol of the durability of invasive species.



Stone Soup

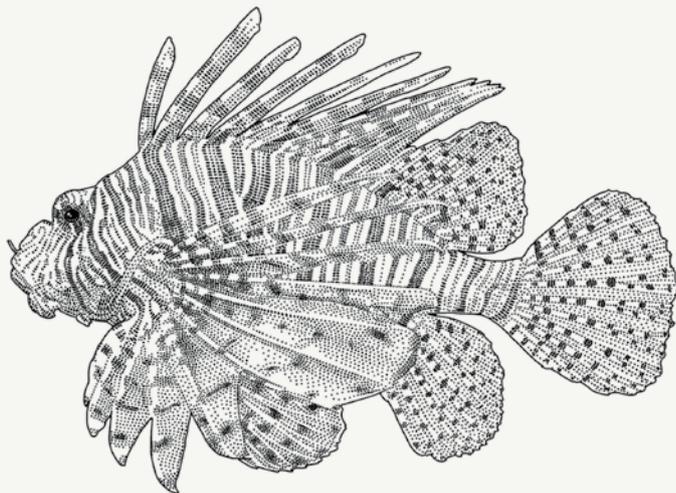
The European flat oyster was deliberately introduced to Maine in the 1940s and competes with native shellfish. I simmer a rock covered in European flat oysters and algae in a clear sake chicken broth flavored with Queen Anne's lace root, wild onions and native morels. Served in a large iron pot and designed to be shared by a small village.

Knot Your Mother's Lemonade

Japanese knotweed grows quickly in clusters and crowds out other herbaceous species. It has been named one of the world's 100 worst invasive species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and is currently thriving in 39 states. The taste is crunchy, juicy and tart—not unlike a Granny Smith apple. In a combination of mineral water and ice, I blend Japanese knotweed shoots with fresh stevia leaves, fresh kefir lime leaves and a splash of lemon juice.

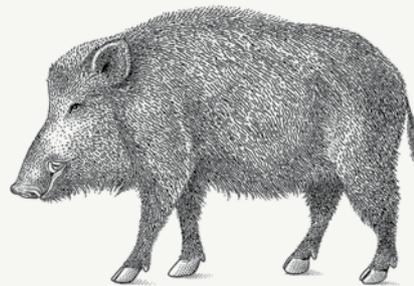
Kudzu Tchaikovsky Sushi

Native to Europe and Asia, the mute swan was introduced to the U.S. as an ornamental species. The swan's majestic looks have earned it protected status in some parts of the U.S., but the swans damage marshes and shallow water habitats by tearing up vegetation. Kudzu, known as the mile-a-minute plant for how quickly it grows, is in the pea family and was introduced to the U.S. from Asia by gardeners in the 1930s. It creates a canopy and suffocates native forests. I rub bow-shot swan in a puree of olive oil, freshly grated ginger and Jamaican jerk seasoning, then slow-roast it. The tender dark meat is finely chopped and mixed with roasted shallots and rosemary. Served in a steamed kudzu-leaf roll stuffed with a sherry-scented sticky rice and wild morels.



Kiribati Sashimi

Lionfish is a voracious, highly poisonous, invasive predator that has been compared with the locust in its destructiveness. This fish is believed to have been introduced to the U.S. by people in the aquarium trade. Protected by highly toxic spines and resembling seaweed, lionfish have few natural enemies. Yet with their dangerous spines removed, their flesh is sweet and delicious. Served raw and sliced thin, with a squeeze of lime juice, a sprinkling of seven different types of crushed peppers, roasted seaweed flakes, toasted sesame seeds and sea salt from Kiribati, an island nation that will soon be engulfed by the ocean because of climate change.



Oinkimo

Feral hogs were introduced by European settlers in the 1500s; their numbers have exploded in recent years. The pigs consume some native and endangered species and fight for resources with others. But feral hog meat is pharmaceutical-free, unlike most commercial pork, which is raised with antibiotics. I wrap roasted invasive daylily buds in seared thin-sliced feral hog meat, then drizzle the pig rolls with a ginger, garlic, roasted sesame and sauvignon blanc soy sauce.

Peanut Butter and Jelly

Feral rabbits are some of the most ecologically destructive animals. They procreate uncontrollably, destroy croplands and contribute to soil erosion. Jellyfish populations are expected to explode because of the acidification of the oceans, yet very few cultures appreciate them as a food source. The warty comb jelly, one of the most invasive species on earth, is linked to the collapse of a handful of fisheries. This recipe is my twist on the classic steakhouse surf and turf. Invasive cannonball jellyfish, trawled off the state of Georgia, is thin-sliced and mixed with steamed invasive Australian rabbit and cucumber. The combination is seasoned with creamy roasted peanut butter.

MORE TO EXPLORE

Eat the Invaders: www.eattheinvaders.org
National Invasive Species Information Center:
www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov

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