

Blow Toads

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

For years now, we have been looking for a signature fish to feature at *Something Different*. We are well known for our dry-rubbed and smoke-cooked salmon served with mustard-dill sauce (we are now using cold-water salmon from the Faroe Islands, which are raised without any antibiotics or dyes), but we also wanted a local fish to fry or broil. Croaker, spot and perch are local, but are boney and inconsistent in size, availability and price. Catfish are too ordinary for us and most are farm-raised elsewhere. Pollock, cod, whiting and haddock are popular restaurant fare but are all rather insipid and certainly not local.

I recently discovered that, after virtually disappearing for about thirty years, blow toads are making a comeback and are available commercially in limited quantities. Blow toads, though little known, are local and are imminently edible in spite of their name: They are undisputedly the sweetest, mildest, and many think the most succulent and best tasting fish in the Chesapeake Bay region. They are also easy to prepare and to eat, as there are no bones to contend with except for the backbone, and they are definitely *Something Different*.



Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.
Credit: Haplochromis

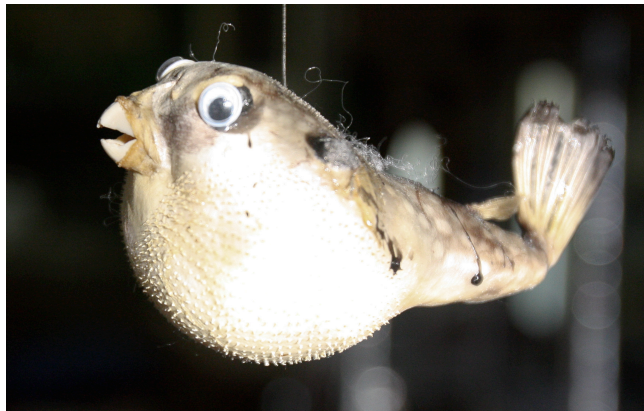
Properly called the *Northern Puffer* (*Sphoeroides maculatus*), the blow toad is a small but striking fish with green eyes, a tiny mouth and sharp little rabbit teeth shaped like a beak. Instead of scales, the skin is covered with small burrs and feels like sandpaper. When threatened they suck in water (or air if out of the water) and puff up so that they are too big for most predators to handle.

Kids love to scratch their bellies so that they blow up like a balloon, and if dropped on the deck they can bounce right overboard. Blow toads are not to be confused with the ugly and slimy *mud toad* (oyster cracker), or with other puffer fish such as the local *burrfish*, or with toxic *Southern Puffers*, or with the deadly poisonous *Fugu* fish of

Japan. There are no toxins in the meat of the Northern Puffer, but the skin, liver and roe should be avoided just to be on the safe side.

Northern Puffers are bottom-dwellers found near-shore and in bays and estuaries all along the East Coast from northern Florida to Newfoundland. They are found in the Chesapeake Bay region from early spring to autumn and they winter in deeper waters offshore. They spawn from May to August along the shallows, depositing their eggs on firm substrate. Males guard the eggs until they hatch. Like flounder, they prefer a hard sandy bottom. When I was young and toads were plentiful, we fished for them and for flounder just up-river from Buoy 8 on the edge of the shelf off of Beach Creek using peeler-crabs or bloodworms for bait. They will bite on practically anything, but with their small mouths and sharp teeth they are masters at stealing bait. We used a fairly small (#4) hook with a long shank so they would not bite through the leader.

Around here watermen call Northern Puffers *blow toads* or *swell toads*, but they are also known and marketed as *sugar toads* or *sugar bellies* because of the sweet and mild taste and the roughness of their skin. Plentiful during the '40s '50s and '60s, blow toads were unintentionally caught by the truckload in pound nets, flounder nets and haul seines.



When I visited Jimmy Sneed at BlowToad, he gave me a stuffed Puffer to hang in the store for show and tell. - Photo by Shelley Gill

Since they were a by-catch and no market had been developed (it was hard to interest uninitiated consumers in anything called a toad) they were often spread on farm fields for fertilizer. Locals loved them, but could only eat so many, so they were eventually marketed nationally as Sea Squabs or Chicken of the Sea. Colonial Williamsburg, for example, featured Sea Squabs as their signature seafood delicacy in their restaurants until toads practically disappeared in the late '70s.

There is little agreement in the scientific or fishery communities as to why Northern Puffers disappeared so suddenly and dramatically. Fish populations are naturally cyclical and the cycles typically last for decades. Rockfish, croaker and flounder all suffered significant population decreases during the same general time period. Other factors cited include overfishing, climatic events (especially the severe droughts and

exceptionally cold winters of 1977 and 1980), and toxic red tides and anoxic conditions associated with eutrophication and warm waters.

Northern Puffers are starting to return now, but are still hard to come by — partly because of changes in the fishing industry: Haul-seines are a thing of the past and there are very few pound nets set, and then only in early spring (before puffers arrive) to catch bunkers for crab-pot bait; and flounder nets are required to have a larger mesh and no longer catch blow toads in large numbers. Some watermen are now "goin' toadin'" — intentionally catching toads in peeler pots baited with crab scraps and selling them at premium prices.

Once we decided to make the Northern Puffer our signature fish, we needed to decide what we would call them. Most restaurants and seafood vendors around here sell them to the public as sugar toads or sugar bellies. I would certainly never call them Sea Squabs or Chicken of the Sea (abysmal abominations dreamed up by some misguided public relations expert). I voted for blow toads because that is what local watermen call them and what I was brought up with.

Then I went to Google and found out that Jimmy Sneed was getting ready to open a new restaurant in Richmond named BlowToad.

If Jimmy had the *chutzpah* to name his restaurant BlowToad, then we could certainly use the proper local name and both of us would benefit from our mutual notoriety. Jimmy already thinks that I am somewhat unhinged (he actually told people that I was crazy) presumably because, without any background in the restaurant business, I am serving real food in an old country store stuck out in the middle of nowhere — and it's working!



*Jimmy Sneed curing his new anthracite fired brick pizza oven - The first in Richmond.
Photo by Dan Gill*

I called Jimmy and told him what we were doing and he yelled "Don't you dare!" I had visions of Gollum saying, "No! It's mine — all mine!" For those who don't know, Jimmy is a renegade chef of the first magnitude: Though classically trained, he is a minimalist who prepares heritage foods simply so that the food is the star of the show: Sauces, seasonings and preparation only highlight inherent qualities. He is passionate — make

that fanatical — about the quality, freshness, wholesomeness and authenticity of what he serves and was a pioneer of the “farm to table” movement. Jimmy became an ambassador for the Puffer when he operated Windows on Urbanna Creek. Some local watermen brought him a bucket of toads saying “Here ya go, Bunky — try these.” Jimmy had never encountered blow toads and had to ask what he was supposed to do with them. That evening he and his staff cooked and finished off the whole bucket. Jimmy was hooked and soon had sugar toads on the menu and was featuring them in chef’s competitions and elegant *soirées*. He even named his restaurant consulting company “SugarToad.” Several years after closing the Frog and the Redneck, Jimmy opened a classy restaurant outside of Chicago named SugarToad. After getting the restaurant established and training the staff, he sold out and moved back to Richmond. He recently helped his daughter, Jenna, establish her own vegetarian and vegan restaurant on Cary Street named Fresca on Addison. Jimmy then acquired the building that formerly housed Double T’s Barbecue, right across Cary Street from the Byrd Theater, and has been busy converting it into BlowToad (he couldn’t use his preferred name SugarToad because of an agreement with the current owners of the Illinois restaurant).

BlowToad is scheduled to open in early January and Jimmy plans to serve toads as an appetizer when available. Jimmy told me that he often has to instruct customers on the proper way to eat them: The uninitiated will usually try to start from the end like a corn dog and consequently bite through the central backbone, or try to be cultured and use a knife and fork — leaving the sweetest meat behind. Just pick them up with your fingers like you would a chicken drumstick and nibble from the sides as you would an ear of corn, then suck the last sweet, tender morsels from between the bones.



Fried and ready to eat - Photo by Dan Gill

Blow toads do not take well to being “chefficated” - keep it simple. Jimmy coats his with a light tempura batter before frying in peanut oil. I stay true to my roots and roll them in cornmeal and flour — after seasoning lightly with our KA seasoning mix (light salt and pepper work fine) and dipping in buttermilk. We then deep-fry them in beef tallow.

Serve with some form of cornbread — we make spoonbread at home and hoecakes at the store. The flavor is delicate, so if you must use a sauce, make it mild and un-

assertive. And to those who refuse to taste blow toads because of the name, I have only one thing to say: You have a personal problem — do yourself a favor and GET OVER IT!

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