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In Venice, an ugly fish makes a lovely meal

by Joan Wilder

VENICE - At the restaurant Antica Locanda Montin, owner Luca Carrettin is extremely animated as he talks about monkfish. Even if you don't speak Italian, some of the words he uses are understandable, like brutta (ugly), which he calls the fish, and fantastico, which he uses to describe the creature's means of luring its prey with antennae that look like bait.

Carrettin's parents and aunts and uncles opened the restaurant and 12-room guesthouse in 1950 when he was a boy. Today, he runs the inn with his sister and a cousin. From the looks of old photos scattered among the paintings inside, the rambling building and enormous garden don't seem to have changed much since the family went into business. Montin's monkfish entree hasn't changed for at least 30 years. My mother flipped over it in 1979 on our first trip to Italy.

Ugly fish, lazy fish, poor man's lobster. These are the phrases you commonly hear about to describe mild-tasting, firm, and delicious fish. It's the grotesque look of monkfish, the meaty texture of its boneless tail, and its lazy way of luring prey into its enormous mouth that spawn such epithets. Americans didn't eat much monkfish until 1980, around the time Julia Child introduced us to a hulking specimen on one of her TV shows. But it's been popular in Italy for much longer than that.

Carrettin draws a picture of the fish, which is sometimes displayed on ice in the windows of restaurants here. It has a big, wide head and mouth that make up half its length and a body and tail that are proportionately puny. Montin's kitchen removes the backbone, chops the tail in half lengthwise, seasons it with salt, pepper, and olive oil, and grills it. Ironically, the grill marks make it look very much like Atlantic lobster. And although it has earned a reputation in America as poor man's lobster - because the texture of its meaty boneless tail is closer to lobster than to other fish - it is not as chewy nor does it taste like lobster. It has a more mild, neutral flavor.

All of which makes monkfish versatile.

Across town in a quiet area of Venice near its north shore, Tony Serantoni, owner of Trattoria Storica, throws open the doors to his restaurant's dining room to find a quiet place to talk. Serantoni opened this trattoria nearly six years ago, and he is the man behind its good food. I have just eaten his terrific monkfish with polenta. The dish consists of 1-inch chunks of springy monkfish tail in a spicy sauce, served on top of a soupy polenta. It is flavored with lots of fresh herbs, white wine, tiny red chili peppers, and cooked with the backbone of the monkfish. The bone flavors the dish in much the same way a ham bone might; the fish bone is solid enough to throw in and take out of the dish before serving.

Serantoni buys monkfish at the central fish market, sticking to the smaller ones that weigh a few pounds. Monkfish is available in all sizes; larger ones are hard to come by and more costly, but prized for their cheeks, which are also edible.

When I learn this, I suddenly realize that what I'd eaten at an expensive restaurant in Rome earlier that week must have been monkfish cheeks. At Rome's Antica Pesa, an order of monkfish amounted to three tiny pieces not much bigger than silver dollars. If they hadn't been served on individual mounds of tiny lentils, the \$35 entree would have been laughably insufficient for even the lightest eater. Because the texture of the fish was slightly different from the monkfish tail I've always had, I was suspicious that I

hadn't been served monkfish at all.

Now I'm quite sure that Antica Pesa was, in fact, plating the more prized fish cheeks.

Some sophisticated diner I am: No Italian restaurant is going to pull anything over on *me*.

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