

Pufferfish, a tasty treat

One of the last vestiges of fall and one of the first harbingers of spring for bottom fishermen along the Carolina Coast is the lowly puffer fish. Okay, they are not pretty, eat anything they can get their beaks on, average only a pound or less, don't put up a good fight, or any fight for that matter, and puff up like a balloon.

However, they make up for all of that by providing some of the tastiest morsels that come out of the sea.

Also known as blowfish, blow toad or swell fish and technically the northern puffer or scientifically Spheroids maculatus, they are with us in the late fall and early winter and return to our beaches in early spring, when we need them the most to recover us from the long winter doldrums.

Gear and bait are pretty straightforward. Just a simple hi-lo two-hook rig and a three or four-ounce sinker will do the trick. The only real trick on the gear is to use a long-shank no. 4 hook, because it goes deep in their mouth and you can hook them better. Otherwise, they will often just chop your line and hook right off.

The best baits for the puffers are fairly simple, as well.

Most anglers use small bits of shrimp, but you can also use artificial bloodworms (Fishbites, Bag o' Worms), they'll work just as well. They are a bottom feeding fish and they will eat anything you throw at them, including squid, shrimp or whatever, almost anything. I've even hooked them on a green grub meant for a speckled trout!

So, blowfish are very willing victims, one of the least fussy eaters; the gear is not rocket science, but this is where it gets interesting – cleaning the beast.

You must start with gloves. Their skin is about ten times rougher than sandpaper, and they will take the skin right off your hands if not for gloves. And don't forget a good sharp knife.

The easiest way to clean them is to cut them (from the top) right behind the gills, and cut them right down to the bottom skin and then turn your knife away from you and run the knife right down the fish, and the skin will peel right off. You just rotate your knife as you pull it to the back while holding the head, and the skin comes right off, and you end up with what puffer connoisseurs call a "chicken leg."

It looks just like a chicken leg, all nice and clean, and yes it does taste a bit like chicken.

Chicken of the sea, sea squab monikers are designed to hide the "puffer" heritage of the fish, but the taste is tops, and the rule is the KISS proverb, "keep it simple stupid," and simplicity is the best preparation. Some just sauté in butter; I like to lightly coat it in flour and sauté in butter with a little lemon juice; it's simple.

Another connoisseur dips them in an egg wash then coats the fish in some Italian flavored breadcrumbs and then browns them in butter and olive oil.

Oh the puffing? It's for protection. Blowfish can suck in water and puff up to a large spheroid when threatened by potential predators. On the pier they suck in air, I guess in response to human predators. As far as North Carolina regulations, unlike most fish, it's quite easy, there are no size or bag limits.

And just to clarify the toxicity of puffer fish, according to US Food and Drug Administration, Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, poisonings from the puffer toxin, a.k.a. tetrodotoxin, have been almost exclusively associated with the consumption of pufferfish from waters of the Indo-Pacific ocean regions.

There have been no confirmed cases of poisoning from the Atlantic puffer fish. Other remote species of the family Tetraodontidae, which includes many species of puffers that are notably toxic, such as the Japanese Tora fugu (fugu rubripes), should be avoided.

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