

Clockwise from below: Chef Chris Cosentino holds a fresh-caught giant Humboldt squid; strips rotator blades from its tentacles; and serves it as a confit at his San Francisco restaurant, Incanto.



FEW TOP AMERICAN CHEFS have Humboldt squid on the menu. Occasionally the tough-as-old-tires “calamari steak” will show up at a fish joint, but Humboldt are almost unheard-of in high-end cuisine. Cosentino has taken it upon himself to change that, developing a number of recipes that show off the sea monster’s softer side. The principles

of all these entrées share a theme: Tenderize. Squid are naturally tough — horribly thick-skinned and rubbery — and to take out the fight requires top-chef chops.

The grilled-tentacle confit, for example, involves slow-cooking the appendages in olive oil for six hours to tenderize them. The dish is served on a bed of Italian chicory with boiled Meyer lemon. The tips are crunchy and taste of fire, while the bigger slices are hearty and chewy: Imagine a succulent fish jerky, and you get the idea. His squid’s-ink spaghetti is dressed in a squid-fin *sugo* (Italian for sauce). The trick is to first grind the meat and then simmer it for three hours.

It’s all supertasty, but squid connoisseurship is necessarily more about texture, and so Cosentino’s grilled squid steak with fisherman’s potatoes and salsa verde has a sushi-like tenderness. The dish is testament to just how much Cosentino can bring to a cut that’s regularly compared to vulcanized rubber. “The whole fish has to be scrubbed with rock salt and blanched in order to remove the tough outer layer of skin, and the rotator blades have to be plucked off the tentacles,” he says. “The rest is all about manipulating it with marinade.”

The steak is delicate, smooth, and silky, in contrast to his final dish: braised squid with chickpeas in aioli, which falls from the fork in sinuous flakes like real southern barbecue. It’s a bravura performance: giant squid four ways.

Save the Ocean, Eat a Squid

GIANT SQUID HAVE MOVED TO WARMER PACIFIC WATERS, THREATENING NATIVE FISH. WHAT TO DO? TRY A TASTY TENTACLED MEAL.

by ADAM FISHER

CHRIS COSENTINO AND Manfred Wrembel stand on the rocking stern of the *Huli Cat*, a 53-foot fishing charter. Cosentino is back after a week away from his San Francisco restaurant, filming the second season of his now canceled reality show, *Chefs vs. City*. He’s jet-lagged and squirrely, and his bleached-blond faux-hawk, normally moussed to attention, has gone limp. Wrembel, his sous-chef, briefs Cosentino on what has been happening at their restaurant, Incanto, while he was gone. “Last night was the chicken livers,” Wrembel reports, between drags on a Marlboro. “They came out really good.”

The chefs are headed out to the open ocean on a hunt for the giant Humboldt squid. Ten years ago, the beasts were confined to Mexico’s west coast, but ocean waters warmed by climate change are believed to have lured them

north. Here, off the Northern California coast, the Humboldt have found a whole ocean largely fished out of predators like bluefin tuna and salmon. Humboldt spawn quickly and eat voraciously. By some estimates, there are now tens of millions of them in the northern Pacific, all intent on devouring some of the fishing industry’s smaller traditional catch, like hake and anchovies. It’s a big problem that moves up the food chain and could impact greater varieties of seafood.

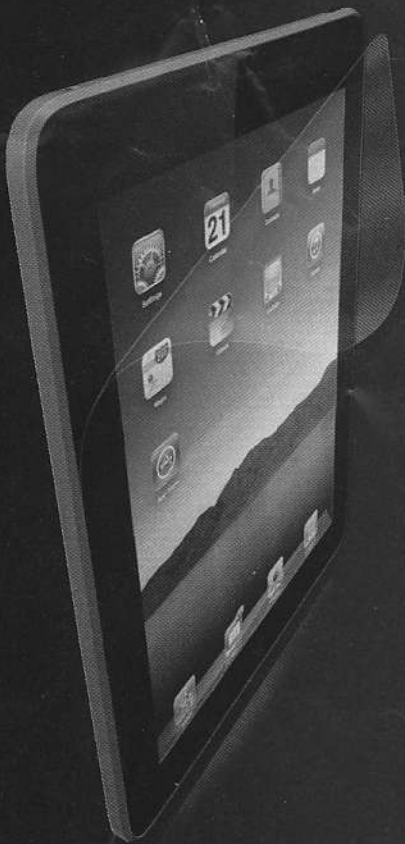
“Squid is now the dominant species in the Pacific,” Cosentino says. “The waters have changed.”

To him, assigning blame — to global warming or unsustainable fishing practices — seems beside the point.

“The question is,” Cosentino says of the big squid, “what do we do to stop them?” He thinks the answer is obvious: “We eat them!”

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NOTEBOOK

FOR MORE THAN TWO HOURS, THE HULI Cat climbs up each roller, sent by a nearby storm, and then belly flops into the trough of the next. At the captain's favorite squid fishing grounds, the deckhand passes out rods and reels baited with fluorescent-green torpedoes. Humboldt are so voracious that they'll eat anything that moves or shines.

"Fire in the hole!" Wrembel barks as he drops his lure into the depths.

The trick to fishing for giant squid is to let the lure hit the bottom — Humboldt like to hang out at depths of about 1,000 feet — and then slowly wind the reel back to the surface. Up and down go the lures. Up and down rolls the boat. Cosentino succumbs, sneaking over to the leeward side for a quiet barf.

The squid take the bait. *Bang! Bang!* Every

rod on the boat doubles over in rapid succession — it's a giant-squid feeding frenzy. "I can feel it pulsing," Cosentino shouts, grabbing his pole and staggering around the deck in a fight with an invisible enemy.

Forty minutes later, the squid start breaching, and it's clear that the one Cosentino has caught is humongous — the catch of the day. When the deckhand finally spears a gaff hook through the squid's thick mantle to heave it onto the deck, the sea monster counterattacks in midair, letting loose a fine squid-ink spray that douses everyone.

The 65-pound squid slowly pants, splayed on the deck. Its tentacles whip about, and its beak snaps frantically. The Humboldt lets out a last spray and expires in an inky pool. Cosentino is exultant. One down, millions to go. ■

Eat the Invaders

HUMBOLDT SQUID AREN'T THE ONLY TASTY SPECIES CAUSING CHAOS. HERE ARE FOUR MORE THAT MAKE GREAT CHOW.



LAKE TROUT

The Invader Since it was introduced to Flathead Lake, Montana, in 1905 to attract sportfishermen, the lake trout has dominated. Now it's fast taking over habitats in 10 lakes in the region where the threatened bull trout and the Westslope cutthroat trout live. To help hold back the lake trout, locals host the Mack Days fishing contest every year (*Friday to Sunday, March 11 to May 22, 2011*).

Served Best With The lake trout is known as a "greaser" because its flesh is very oily. It's best to broil or smoke the fish — rather than deep-fry it — to cut down on the grease.



RUSTY CRAYFISH

The Invader This native of the Ohio River was found in north-central Oregon five years ago and has made its way to Wisconsin's lakes. These aggressive crustaceans — which biologists suspect were introduced by elementary-school biology classes — are taking over native crayfish habitats, devouring aquatic plants and invertebrates.

Served Best With Louisiana knows how to deal with crayfish (a.k.a. crawfish): Toss some Rustys into a jambalaya, or fry them up and serve on bread smeared in rémoulade for a classic po'boy.



LIONFISH

The Invader Indigenous to the Indian and South Pacific oceans, the lionfish has traveled — via hurricanes and sloppy aquarium owners — to North Carolina, Florida, and the Bahamas. "They are voracious predators that are significantly reducing reef fish," says Alecia Adamson of the Reef Environmental Education Foundation. "They're outcompeting native species for food," she says.

Served Best With Once you (carefully) fillet away the venomous spines, the buttery white meat of the lionfish works well in a curry or stew.



KING CRAB

The Invader Thanks to changing temperatures in ocean waters, the king crab is migrating to Antarctica. Unprepared for this predator, mussels, worms, snails, brittle stars, sea urchins, and other species in the area are at risk. A team of researchers is now analyzing 120,000 images of the seafloor to determine if the crabs are temporary invaders or becoming permanent residents of Antarctic waters.

Served Best With The king crab has a bounty of flavorful meat. Steam and serve with butter. —AMANDA THAMBOUNARIS