

# OUTDOORS

## Catch and eat; cooking tips for the hunter or fisherman

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Winter in Southwest Florida is a fabulous time to eat the great outdoors.

Yes, eat it. In the last two months, wild turkey, wild hog, oysters, clams, stone crab claws, and mullet have all graced the table at my abode, thanks to our own efforts as well as those of our neighbors and friends.

If you're a vegetarian, a hunter-hater or a catch-and-release purist, then stop reading. If you're hungry or can appreciate game and seafood, read on.

On days when a cold front mauls the region, it's time to pull something out of the freezer and fire up the grill or smoker. Or rely on the generosity of those you know. Most folks are conservationists and want to share so nothing goes to waste. And also so



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTOS BY BETSY CLAYTON  
Get mullet with a cast net, then fry or smoke them. There's plenty to be had in winter's cool water.

they have freezer space for more yumminess once the weather improves.

With that in mind, here's a rundown of my favorites and suggestions for enjoying them:

**Wild turkey:** It's a whole lot more interesting than poultry from the grocery store. I'm not a hunter but have the good fortune of being friends with one. After Florida expanded turkey-hunting season, I started benefiting from his marksmanship.

**Cooking suggestion:** My husband, Stan, and I combine salt, sugar, apple juice, rosemary and basil to make a brine that we soak the bird in for at least 12 hours. Once it has been smoked the appropriate time for its weight, we baste it with Florida honey to create a glaze.

**Wild hog:** These non-native pests do enough damage to our beaches and woods that I'm happy to help clean up the habitat by devouring one. Plus I love smoked domestic pork, and the wild version doesn't taste gamey. It's darker, richer and more flavorful. When done right, it's as moist as the Publix variety.

**Cooking:** Some people recommend making your favorite rub and covering the meat for at least 12 hours before smoking. Our yummiest one for pork includes black and cayenne pepper, smoked paprika, brown sugar and spicy hot mustard.

However, for the wild hog we recently smoked, we used a brine called Wild Things for Wild Game that had ingredients such as mace, parsley, red wine and black pepper. Get this: The last line read, "Use this recipe for venison, elk, moose, bear, horsemeat, antelope, sheep and reindeer." We didn't tell our hunter friend that the recipe mentioned horses and left out hogs. He liked it. So did we.

**Oysters:** Any boater or angler knows our waters are loaded with these shellfish. Com-

mon sense dictates not to harvest them during warm months or closed seasons.

The safest bet is to buy inspected oysters at a local fish house or grocery store. A box of 50 can be had for less than \$15. Once you've got them, you've got the flavor of the sea in your hands.

**Cooking:** Fire up the grill and place oysters on it. Once they pop open, douse each with a dab of hot sauce and a squeeze from a fresh lemon, and then suck them down.

**Note:** Clams are also great grilled. Look for bags of them at local seafood markets, which get them from the aquaculture clam beds in Pine Island Sound. Once the grill's heat causes them to open, toss them in to a large shallow bowl of melted butter, chopped garlic and lime juice. Swish them around, pull one out and devour it.

**Stone crab claws:** They may be \$24.99 a pound in restaurants, but they're free if you dive for them. Check out the regulations at www.MyFWC.com and remember to dive with a buddy on a non-windy day. Go during a weak tide to minimize current and turbidity. If you don't want to don a wetsuit, buy them at a local fish market.

**Cooking:** This is easy because Florida law requires they be sold cooked. So crack 'em and eat 'em. (If you get your own, drop them into boiling water for seven minutes.)

**Mullet:** It's not just osprey and Crackers who should be enjoying this energetic fish that is a vegetarian. It's always in season and it's always "get-able" with a cast net.

**Cooking:** Two methods rule at our house. One involves dragging filleted chunks through a cornmeal- and cayenne pepper-based mixture, and then frying them in very hot peanut oil. Or we like smoked fillets.

Either way is marvelous. Just like everything is when you've put outdoors effort



Oysters from Pine Island Sound are delicious during winter months, particularly when grilled and then dabbled with hot sauce and lemon juice.

into it.

On an outing with a houseguest from New York City, we netted a cooler full of mullet and were eating them mere hours later. The urbanite declared, "This is so cool. We caught our dinner." You can, too. ■

— Betsy Clayton is a freelancer based on Pine Island and also is Lee County Parks & Recreation's waterways coordinator. Contact her at boatingbybetsy@yahoo.com.



Junco Nelson, 9, of Bokeelia, enjoys a local oyster poached on the grill.

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Sincerely, Amy Harkins

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