



WHITHER THE SMELT?

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by Dave deCalesta

When we began to vacation on Keuka Lake in the late 1960's, my father-in-law used a strange net (looked like small cyclone-fence mesh formed into a round, collapsible dip-net) to dip dozens of small, silvery fish that ran up the creek next to his home on the lake. He said they ran only at night, and only for about 3 weeks in April. He froze them immediately in water in quart milk cartons, and later fried them up – they were delicious. Since moving to the lake 3 years ago, I've often thought about my father-in-law and those smelt, and where and how to catch them.

A little research turned up that the fish, called rainbow smelt, freshwater smelt, or ice fish (so named because they produce anti-freeze in their bodies to survive in very cold waters) were not native to Keuka Lake. Rather, they are a coastal saltwater fish that runs up freshwater streams to spawn. Introduced into the Great Lakes in the 1930's, smelt did just fine in freshwater, reaching Keuka Lake in the early 1960's.

Smelt fry (the young fish) first eat zooplankton (small, single-celled animal life that floats in lakes), then graduate to small insects, freshwater shrimp, larval forms of zebra mussels and other smaller fish, progressively eating larger fish as they get larger, and reaching a maximum length of about 6-8 inches.

Smelt were first acclaimed as food for lake trout, bass, and perch. Then people discovered how good these little fish tasted, and began to fish for them, either dip-netting in spring, or fishing through the ice with small hooks baited with pieces of fish or worms. Smelt run up streams when water temperature reaches 40-45° F, starting in April. Smelt may be dipped in a net not exceeding 14 inches in diameter anytime, sunset to sunset – the limit is 9 quarts. They should be frozen immediately, as they go bad quickly.

Excited about the prospects of catching and eating smelt, I began to inquire of local bait shops and fishery professionals just where to go to dip smelt. The answers were not encouraging.

For some reason (some blame the zebra mussel for eating too much zooplankton, others blame predation by lake trout) smelt numbers plummeted in Keuka Lake in the 1990's. Larger creeks had runs, including Cold Brook (Hammondsport) and Guyanoga Creek (Branchport). Now, it seems no one knows where, or if,

they still run.

If you know of any smelt runs, please let us know. And if you catch any, terrific recipes are available at this website: <http://www.seagrant.umn.edu/fish/smelt02.html>.

FRIED SMELTS (Printed from COOKS.COM)



- 2 lbs. cleaned smelts
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 c. bread crumbs
- 1/2 c. all-purpose flour
- 1 tbsp. parsley
- 1 tbsp. Romano cheese
- 1 clove garlic (chopped fine)
- 1/4 c. vegetable oil

Rinse fish in cold water. Drain; set aside. In a large bowl combine bread crumbs, flour, parsley, cheese, garlic and salt. Mix thoroughly. In a separate bowl beat eggs; set aside.

In a large skillet add oil and heat. Using a fork dip smelts into beaten egg, then into bread crumbs. Coat fish completely. Place fish into heated oil in skillet and cook until golden brown. Serve immediately.

