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Small Fish, Big Taste: The Dorade Royale Lands in New York. A fish farmed in Israel is the new darling of chefs.

By SUZANNE HAMLIN

Dorade, a mouthwatering fish from the Mediterranean Sea, has captured the imaginations of European cooks for centuries. And now that a variety of dorade has become available in the New York area on a regular basis, it appears to have seduced some of Manhattan's most visible chefs.

Little wonder. Dorade is a small fish with tender white flesh, shimmering silver skin and, when grilled or braised, a rich, succulent, meaty flavor, similar to that of pompano or red snapper.

Culinary travelers have met varieties of dorade under many names. In the United States, it is marketed as dorade. In Spain, it is called dorado; in Portugal, dorada, and in Italy, orata. And in France, one variety of the fish is known as dorade gris, a major ingredient- many would say essential -- in Provence's classic bouillabaisse.

The dorade that New York chefs have been using in recent months, however, is not the wild Mediterranean fish, which has been in extremely short supply because of pollution and overfishing in the Mediterranean. The dorade being served here is a farmed fish produced by an Israeli cooperative called Ardag.

Ardag, founded in the early 1980's near Eilat, a resort area on the Red Sea coast within walking distance of the Israel-Jordan border, has been selling a dorade royale in Europe for eight years. Ardag raises the fish in giant mesh cages in the Red Sea, which is considered a good environment because the water is clean and the temperatures moderate.

Roni Dalal, the managing director of Ardag, said on a recent visit to New York that the fish are bred in a hatchery and then taken to the sea when they weigh only one gram. They are fed pure food (no antibiotics or growth hormones) that is released through underwater tubes into the mesh cages. As the fish grow, they are transferred to larger mesh cages. The fish are harvested when they are 14 months old and weigh at least 1 1/2 pounds.

In several recent home and restaurant tastings in New York, the dorade royale was so similar in flavor to wild Mediterranean dorade that it appeared interchangeable.

Rick Moonen, the chef and a partner of Oceana in Manhattan, has featured a grilled dorade royale on the menu for the last several months. His crisp-skinned fillet drizzled with truffle oil is served on top of mashed potatoes with chive-infused oil.

"Unlike most farm-raised fish, dorade doesn't have that funky, lakewater taste," said Mr. Moonen, who compared the clean flavor and meaty texture of dorade royale to that of pompano, the white-flesh salt-water fish. "The grilled skin is incredibly delicious, and the flesh stays moist because there is a layer of fat between the skin and flesh."

At Montrachet in TriBeCa, Chris Gesualdi, the chef, said that dorade specials always sell out. Montrachet's pan-seared fillets are served with garnishes like butternut squash, spinach and lemon-grass sauce.

Edward Taylor, the owner of Down East, a fish market and the exclusive importer of dorade royale, said that in the last month, increasing numbers of chefs have experimented with the fish.

The dorade royale, 24 hours out of the water, arrive in the United States as whole, deep-chilled fish. One retail and wholesale distributor, Aqua Source, at 101 Crosby Street, (near Prince Street), freezes them when available; two others, Down East, at 402 West 13th Street, and Wild Edibles, at 255 Elizabeth Street (Houston Street), sell them fresh.

Even for consumers paying retail, dorade royale is relatively affordable, at \$5.40 to \$10 a pound for a whole fish. A whole, 1 1/4-pound fish will amply serve two, even though at Il Cantinori and Coco Pazzo, a whole pan-roasted fish, cooked in the traditional Italian style with lemon juice, olive oil and rosemary, is considered a serving for one.

Dorade royale can be braised and used in stews, because its flesh, while tender, does not fall apart. Paula Wolfert, an authority on Mediterranean food and a cookbook author, said: "Dorade is the fish traditionally used in Moroccan tagines. And of course in bouillabaisse. And in a variety of ways in Greece, Portugal, Spain and parts of the Middle East."

"Where can I get some?" she asked a few weeks ago over the telephone from her San Francisco home. When told that, for the time being, dorade royale was distributed only in Manhattan, she sighed.

But late last week at his shop, Mr. Taylor said: "Word is getting out, though. I sent the first shipment of dorade to Los Angeles yesterday."

PanSeared Dorade Fillets (Adapted from Oceana restaurant)

Total time: 10 minutes

- 2 dorade fillets, with skin on, 6 to 7 ounces each
 - 2 teaspoons melted butter
 - Salt and pepper to taste 1 teaspoon olive oil.
1. Preheat the oven to 450 degrees, with rack in the middle.
 2. On top of the stove, preheat a cast-iron or other heavy skillet, not greased, over medium-high heat.
 3. Brush the skin side of each fillet with the melted butter, and sprinkle with salt and pepper. When the pan is smoking hot, brush it with the olive oil.
 4. Put the fillets in the pan, skin sides down, in a single layer. Adjust the heat to medium, and cook for 2 to 3 minutes, or until the edges of the fillets start to brown. Without turning the fillets, put the pan in the preheated oven for another 2 to 3 minutes, until the fish is just: cooked through. Serve the fillets Immediately.

Yield: 2 servings.

Approximate nutritional analysis per serving: 220 calories, 8 grams fat, 70 milligrams cholesterol, 110 milligrams sodium (before salting), 40 grams protein, 0 grams carbohydrate.

Baked Dorade With Tomatoes and Onions Adapted from "Mediterranean Cooking" (HarperCollins, 1994), by Paula Wolfert

Total time: 60 minutes

- 4 dorade fillets, with skin removed, 6 to 7 ounces each
- Juice of one lemon
- 1 teaspoon sea salt, plus to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1/3 cup olive oil
- cups chopped onions
- 2 cups fresh or canned tomato sauce
- 1/2 cup finely chopped parsley
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano, crumbled
- 1/8 teaspoon ground allspice or cinnamon

- 1/3 cup sweet red wine, like Greek Maurodaphne,
 - Italian Recioto or Port
 - 1/3 cup fine bread crumbs
 - tablespoon olive oil.
1. Rinse the fish slices under cool running water. Rub with lemon juice, and rinse again. Rub with a teaspoon of salt and a sprinkling of black pepper. Let stand 10 minutes. Rinse again, and pat dry.
 2. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees, with rack in the middle.
 3. In a large skillet, heat the olive oil, and saute the onions over medium heat for 5 minutes, until soft but not browned. Add the tomato sauce, parsley, oregano, allspice or cinnamon, and wine. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Cook, covered, for 10 minutes.
 4. Arrange the fillets in one layer in a greased 10-inch baking dish. Pour the sauce over the fish. Sprinkle with the bread crumbs, and drizzle with the oil. Bake for 30 minutes, or until the fish is cooked and a nice crust has formed over the sauce. Serve hot, warm or tepid.

Yield: 4 servings.

Approximate nutritional analysis per serving: 520 calories, 20 grams fat, 70 milligrams cholesterol, 910 milligrams sodium (before optional salting), 40 grams protein, 30 grams carbohydrate.