Students stumping for scup

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PROVIDENCE — What’s scup?

It’s a smallish, beautiful, abundant fish. It’s delicious, with a mild taste that adapts well to other flavors. It’s a local, low-cost, sustainable form of protein.

But because it’s difficult to filet, it is underutilized, undereaten and, some say, underloved.

But that is about to change.

Culinary students at Johnson & Wales University have been working for weeks to develop recipes and ways to popularize the fish, trying to emulate Paul Prudhomme’s success in making the red drum popular with his recipe for blackened redfish, Chef Bill Idell told about 120 people who had gathered to learn about scup and taste-test the dishes produced for Rhode Island Seafood Challenge 2015, held Friday at the university’s Harborside Campus.

The students even talked a little about finding a better name for the fish, said Janet Coit, director of the R.I. Department of Environmental Management. It is also called porgy, but that isn’t much help.

As three teams of culinary students produced their dishes for competition behind the scenes, Coit said that Rhode Island leads the nation in scup, with roughly 7.4 million pounds, worth about $3.7 million, landed in the state in 2013.

But, in Rhode Island, “90 percent of what we eat is imported, and 90 percent of what we produce is exported.”

The goal, she said, is to have 50 percent of food coming from local sources by 2060.

Sustainability isn’t just about keeping the fish populations healthy, she said. It’s also about keeping the fishing industry strong, which means creating demand for easily obtained, underused species.

The R.I. Seafood Marketing Collaborative has created a Rhode Island Seafood seal, already issued to 19 companies, to help promote fresh, local catches in markets and restaurants.

First up in the competition, the Club of Culinary Excellence team demonstrated how to scale, gut, debone and skin a scup.

Students distributed cardboard plates of Beer Battered Scup in a Scup and Lime Broth, accompanied by Ancho Scup Chicharon (fried scup skin), moistened with Cauliflower Lime Puree, served over Cauliflower Cous Cous with pistachios and garnished with Preserved Lime Zest.

All six recipes for this dish, as well as recipes from the other contestants, were provided, along with plastic tableware and a packet of information.

Next up, the Cooking Asia team showed its video of a visit to the Port of Galilee in Narragansett. Aboard the Heather Lynn, First Mate Kevin Jones showed off the nets and the less-than-12-hours-old catch and urged viewers to “ask their fish store to get scup in the store.”

Cooking Asia’s offering was scup and mirepoix en papillote, or Porgy in a Pouch with onions, carrots and celery. The pouch included a variety of mushrooms and thin slices of bell pepper, carrots and ginger and a sauce with black and white sesame seeds. With a garnish of edible flowers and bias-cut snow pea pods, the team tied up its entry with its name on a tag.

Finally, the J&W University Nutrition Society gave a presentation on its poll of seafood vendors and how to choose fresh scup (the eyes should be clear and the flesh should spring back when touched).

Of 30 vendors polled, 43 percent didn’t carry scup, the team found. Those who didn’t said they would if customers asked for it.

The Nutrition Society’s offering was Scup Bouillabaisse made with scup, lobster and clam stock, and ingredients that include saffron, garlic, turnips, tomatoes, potatoes, onion, fennel, baby corn, butter, mushrooms and chorizo, and garnished with smoked mussels and pea tendrils. As the recipe notes, “Bouillabaisse originally was a stew made by Marseille fishermen using bony rockfish which they were unable to sell to restaurants and markets.”

While the votes were being tallied, and just before she moderated a panel discussion, Peg Parker, executive director of the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation, told how the state’s fishing industry is solving the problem of deboning and filleting the fish. "If you have a boatload of fish, you need to be able to get it in a form that consumers can use."

Scup were shipped to companies that make fish processing equipment, and one had a machine for the job, except it missed the pinbone. So more scup were shipped, and a machine that debones salmon was tried. It worked. Now Rhode Island has identified a way to produce a boneless filet for the market.
A panel of Chris Brown, Chris Roebuck, Don Fox, Aaron Williams and Glenn Goodwin spoke of how fishermen are learning to avoid fish that are not the target species, of how they sometimes decline to harvest scup because the market price is too low, and how fishing boats prefer to harvest stocks of fish than have to hunt them.

Saying the United States has the most highly regulated and highly tracked fishing industry in the world, they said any fish that’s legal to catch in U.S. waters has been deemed sustainable.

At the end, all three teams were brought out. Each student received a filet knife and a What’s Scup? T-shirt. Cooking Asia was proclaimed the winner. The prize was gift certificates for team members to eat at the Providence restaurants Garde de la Mer, Nicks on Broadway and New Rivers.

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