

Handle with care

November 5, 2011

STEVE MANFREDI reveals the secret to enjoying the delicate flavour of the humble yabby.

The difference between prawns and yabbies is immense. In flavour and texture, the yabby is softer, more subtle and delicate than your typical prawn. This is the clue to cooking them successfully.

On Carl A. Rietz's Gustametric chart of flavour intensity, yabbies rate 12 on a scale of 100. Eggs and trout, by comparison, rate 25; crabs, sausages and coffee rate 80; and pepper 100. The trick is not to overpower the yabby with anything too exotic.

In *A Salute to the Humble Yabby*, Peter Olszewski includes a quote from fishing writer Ken Knox, recalling a dish he ate at a small restaurant along the Murray River.

"It was actually an entree called, from memory, 'Yabbies billabong'. The yabbies had been well doused in crushed garlic and had then been rolled in bacon and grilled. They might have just as well been liver, brains, beef or kidney - the flavour of the yabbies had been completely drowned."

A very simple way to enjoy the flavour is to cook them as described in this recipe with peperonata. Let your guests do all the shelling by piling the cooked crustaceans on platters in the middle of the table. Serve with plates of salad and dipping bowls filled with creamy mayonnaise.

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MACCHERONCINI WITH YABBIES, SESAME, BUTTER AND PARMESAN

½ cup sesame seeds

500g maccheroncini or other short pasta, such as shells or orecchiette

125g unsalted butter at room temperature, thinly sliced

100g of grated parmesan

30 yabby tails, cooked and removed as in previous recipe

Salt and pepper

Place sesame seeds in a skillet on a medium flame and toast until golden. Bring a large pot of well-salted water to the boil and cook maccheroncini. Drain and put into a large, hot bowl, retaining ½ cup of cooking water. Add sesame seeds, butter, grated parmesan, yabby tails and salt and pepper to taste. Mix well, adding a little of the reserved cooking water until pasta is creamy.

Serves 4 as a first course

Wine Chardonnay or falanghina

YABBIES WITH PEPERONATA

Peperonata is an Italian dish of capsicum braised with onion, garlic, tomato and basil. It can be eaten by itself as part of an antipasto or as an accompaniment to grilled fish or shellfish. If yabbies are not available, prawns can be substituted.

32 live yabbies

4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

2 red capsicums, seeded and cut into

2cm tiles

2 yellow capsicums, seeded and cut into 2cm tiles

2 medium-size brown onions, peeled and cut into chunks

2 cloves garlic, chopped



Yabbies with peperonata. Photo: Marco Del Grande

6 ripe tomatoes, chopped

1 cup basil leaves

Salt and pepper

Place yabbies in the fridge to slow down their metabolism. In a large saucepan, heat olive oil. Add capsicum, onion and garlic. Raise heat, fry and keep stirring with a wooden spoon for 2-3 minutes until the contents wilt a little. Add tomatoes and basil and simmer for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Cook off the liquid while simmering so the resulting peperonata is fairly dry but concentrated in flavour. Season with salt and pepper and set aside to cool to room temperature. Meanwhile, bring a large pot of salted water to a rolling boil and plunge the yabbies in. When water returns to the boil, use a strainer to remove yabbies to ice water. Remove tail meat but take the digestive tract out - the dark tube-like vein running along the back of the tail meat. Place tails on top of peperonata.

Serves 4 as a main course

Wine Gruner veltliner