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New York Times

Seth Cripe and his mother, Nancy, cure and package bottarga, cured mullet roe sacs, at their facility in Cortez, a fishing village west of Bradenton. Bottarga, which often sells for more than \$100 a pound, is popping up on menus around the country.

MULLET GOES GOURMET

Not unlike the chicken that laid the golden egg is the mullet that lays the golden egg sacs.

BY JOHN T. EDGE
New York Times

CORTEZ

For centuries, fishermen in this fishing village on Sarasota Bay have netted mullet that retails for about \$1 to \$3 a pound. It is savored smoked, or even deep-fried.

But in Italy, where some Cortez harvest is shipped, sacs of roe are removed from the fish, cured and marketed as a delicacy, bottarga, which often sells in the United States for more than \$100 a pound.

Seth Cripe, who was born 34 years ago in this coastal village just west of Bradenton, wants to capture some of that profit for the fishermen and artisans of Cortez.

In 2007, he began salting, pressing and sun-drying the roe sacs in a style that many Americans associate with Liguria and Sardinia, two regions of Italy where cooks frequently finish pasta dishes with a quick grate of briny bottarga. Today, Cripe, working with his business partner, Ed Chiles, who owns the Sandbar restaurant on Anna Maria Island, produces more than 1,500 pounds of Cortez bottarga each year, sold under the Anna Maria Fish Co. label to a few retailers and a growing number of influential chefs.

Christopher Kostow, chef of the Restaurant at Meadowood in St. Helena, Calif., began using Cripe's bottarga last year. "It tastes cleaner than the Italian stuff," he said of the grated Cortez bottarga he placed atop a recent dish of broccoli flowers, agnolotti and farmer cheese. "And it's not overly salty. Instead of cloaking flavors, it brightens and accents."

At Il Buco Alimentari e Vineria in New York, chef Justin Smillie tosses shaved Brussels sprouts with red onions, red radishes and bread crumbs before splashing the salad with colatura, the pungent Italian fish sauce, and finishing with grated Cortez bottarga, which he said "smells and tastes like the seashore." And it's local, he



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Bottarga sacs are cured at Seth Cripe's facility. His business partner is Ed Chiles of the Sandbar, a son of Lawton Chiles.

said. "Or at least a lot more local than Italy."

At a time when many may look to the South as a redoubt of provincial culinary traditions, food culture is actually changing in fast and often surprising ways. Bottarga cured in Florida is a vivid example of that dynamism.

Cripe's product, wrenched from female fish after their necks have been broken, glows with a deep amber color and packs a marine umami punch.

"We want clean roe sacs," Cripe said, standing on a dock recently as a crew of white-booted fishermen worked below, shoveling striped gray mullet from a flat-bottomed skiff onto a conveyor belt bound for the table where workers sorted the females from the males. "If you break their necks instead of cutting off their heads, you keep blood from seeping into the roe sacs, and you get a cleaner-tasting, golden-colored bottarga."

Cripe is not the only Southerner curing roe. Last year, Bryan Caswell, the chef at Reef, in Houston, started curing his own mahi-mahi roe and red snapper roe. In 2011, when Ryan Smith was the chef at Empire State South in Atlanta, he began curing shad roe, which he folds into butter and serves with sliced radishes.

To realize his vision, Cripe said he would have to change prevailing ideas about mullet. Even though the fish is sustainable and is rated a "best choice" by the Seafood Watch program of California's Monterey Bay Aquarium, mullet is often considered a down-market fish, best purchased shortly after harvest, fried and served on a plate with a cup of tartar sauce.

And then there's the name, "the haircut thing," Cripe said, speaking of the much-ridiculed hairstyle (short in the front and sides, long in the back) immortalized in the 1980s by country musicians like Billy Ray Cyrus.

Bottarga, too, can be a hard sell here. When Cripe walked into Cortez Seafood Market, the manager, James Lee, told the young entrepreneur that he far preferred smoked mullet roe, which he sells for about \$20 per eight-lobe sac. (Order a Caesar-style wedge at the Village Idiot Pizza in a Cortez strip mall, and the pizzaiolo, Joseph Yost, chars a romaine head in a wood-burning oven, then drapes it with slices of smoked roe that Lee buys from a man he calls Lurch.)

Cripe, who did not grow up eating bottarga, has endured many such moments since he tasted a dish of pasta topped with Italian-cured mullet roe at the French

Laundry in Yountville, Calif. A light went on that night in 2007. And it was extinguished soon after, when, during a return visit to Cortez, he served childhood friends a similar dish of pasta with bottarga, based on a Martha Stewart recipe.

"They thought I was crazy," he recalled during a recent walk down the Rod and Reel Pier on Anna Maria Island. "None of my friends would even try it."

But Cripe, who moved to California at 17 in search of a job in the wine industry, was determined. Some restaurateurs in the Cortez area have caught on. Derek's Culinary Casual, in nearby Sarasota, has grated Cortez bottarga over handmade pasta since 2009. Caragiulos, 69 S Palm Ave., Sarasota, offers Seth's Pizza, layered with fingerling potatoes, roasted shallots, mascarpone cheese and Cortez bottarga.

Back on the dock, Justin Moore, a friend of Cripe's since childhood, sorted the catch. To determine the sex of each fish, Moore pressed his thumb into the belly of the fish. When a squiggle of milt, which locals call white roe, emerged from beneath the anal fin, he tossed the fish into a bin full of males. When auburn eggs, which locals call red roe, came squirting out, he tossed those fish into a bin full of females.

There is a ready market for red roe, but white roe will most likely prove hard to sell to consumers. The taste is milky, like a summer oyster, said Chiles, a son of former Florida governor Lawton Chiles.

"But we can try. Mullet is who we are," he said, standing at a stainless steel table in the kitchen at his Sandbar restaurant, experimenting with various preparations of white roe, including a crudo made with rice wine vinegar and sliced jalapenos. "They want our sandy-bottom striped gray mullet in Sardinia. They want our red roe in China. Now we have to teach people to see new possibilities in Florida."