

Cooking the Bounty of the Big Lake with Karalyn

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Marie: You're listening to The Fish Dish, brought to you by Eat Wisconsin Fish, a campaign of the Wisconsin Sea Grant Program. Are you fish-curious? Or are you a fish expert who wants to learn even more about Wisconsin's fisheries and cooking fish? We'll give you the latest "dish" on fish.

Your hosts are . . .

Sharon: Sharon Moen

Marie: and Marie Zhuikov

Together: Two friends who have been working for Sea Grant seemingly forever and who know a thing or two about fish.

Marie: But that's "forever" in a good way.

Sharon: Sharon runs the Eat Wisconsin Fish campaign

Marie: and Marie is a science communicator.

In this episode, Sharon and I take a Lake Superior fish cooking class at the North House Folk School in Grand Marais, Minnesota. The day-long class was taught by Karalyn Littlefield, a food scientist who teaches at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls.

We'll introduce you to Chef Karalyn, who taught us six, yes SIX new fish dishes. That's way too many to cover in one episode. We'll focus on our experience preparing two of them, which were a smoked fish spread and a salt-encrusted baked fish. Both dishes work with simple ingredients, but they are showy and will make your friends think you've slaved for hours to prepare them. You'll also hear from two of our classmates: Amalia and Chris.

A few days before the class we had a chance to interview Karalyn when she stopped by our office.

Today we have Karalyn Littlefield with us. She grew up in a farm near Turtle Lake, Wisconsin, and started her career in the food industry working in the family bakery and café. After several years of moving around the country for education and a career in the restaurant business, Karalyn's back on the farm. As a lifelong learner, Karalyn continues to take classes around the region – at the North House Folk School – where she has learned boat building and building yurts, right?

Karalyn: Right.

Marie: For many years, she's been taking classes there. She also writes a cooking column for the St. Croix Valley Master Gardener Association newsletter and currently teaches in the Animal and Food Science Department at UW-River Falls.

So, thanks Karalyn for coming here and speaking with us today. We were curious, Karalyn, what got you interested in cooking and cooking fish, specifically?

Karalyn: Well, first of all, thank you for having me today as your guest. As far as cooking, I really started cooking as a young kid. I have memories of when I was in kindergarten standing at the end of the table

on a chair, making two loaves of homemade bread because that's what I could handle. That's one of my first cooking memories.

As you said in my introduction, we had the bakery and café during high school and college and my Mom and my grandmother influenced my cooking. I've been taking classes at North House since 1999 – started boat building and I've taken classes from B to Y. Sometimes you would say everything from A to Z, but I've only done B to Y. And so, carving and boat building as you suggested, made a yurt. I've done a lot of different classes – some basketmaking and all kinds of different things that they offer at North House. After taking classes for several years, I decided that maybe it was time to be an instructor. I've taught cooking classes in other places and it just seemed a natural fit with North House.

Sharon: So, in Wisconsin, what kind of fish do you work with most?

Karalyn: Back in Wisconsin at home I really enjoy the trout I can get from local fish farms as well as any of the lake fish – walleye – panfish are always fun to catch and fun to eat.

Sharon: What's your favorite prep way? How do you cook for yourself? I know we're going to cook a lot of fun and wild things during our class but when you're just home, how do you cook a fish?

Karalyn: Usually, and this is not something we're going to do in class, usually I heat the pan up with butter and olive oil and put the fish in skin side down until it doesn't stick to the pan. Salt and pepper it, turn it over and fry it, eat it that way. Depending on the fish.

Sharon: That sounds classic to me.

Karalyn: Yes, yes.

Marie: So, what can we expect from the class you'll be teaching us?

Karalyn: With all of my classes I hope that you have a good time and that you learn something. We're going to have a good time, and we are not going to leave hungry. Most likely we'll be using whitefish and herring because those are the seasonal fish right now that they're catching, and we're going to look at different dishes with fresh fish and with smoked fish. We're going to make a smoked fish spread and we're going to get a chance to sample – I'll have a variety of smoked fish there so as a class we'll sample them and talk about them. Is it salty or is it wet or is it dry or is it moister, which one's more flaky, which do you like better? Then we'll make the fish spreads from smoked fish. We're going to make a couple of dishes. One that I really like, which is fish cooked in the style of Veracruz, Mexico, with tomatoes and carrots and onions and olives and capers. I like that one very much.

To take a step back, when dishes were developed, we're going to cook a fish on a cedar plank. What I really like about that is that each one of you will get a cedar plank or a cross-cut of a cedar tree and a piece of fish and then it's up to you to decide how you want to season that fish. Do you want salt, pepper and dill, do you want to get really extravagant? So, I'll have a lot of different spices to pick from and herbs. Each person will get to design their piece of fish. That has been a fun experience. I had a friend that took this to a family gathering where you might do a make your own taco, make your own pizza. In this case it was season your own fish fillet. That was a party theme.

Marie: Fun, yeah!

Karalyn: Yeah, and we're going to take fresh tomatoes and cilantro and red onions and lime juice and we're going to make a fish ceviche, which is more of a tropical dish where, when the fish are caught in more tropical areas that have a lot of lime juice or other citrus juice, where they can cut up the fish – I've had it with shrimp – and we'll marinate it in lime juice. But we're going to cook our fish first.

Marie: Yes, we've been lectured on the dangers of freshwater fish and parasites.

Karalyn: Yes, we don't want anyone to go off with a parasite.

Sharon: No!

Karalyn: So, we'll cook our fish first, poach it, and then season it and marinate it. I really like the freshness of that dish. And, of course, we have to have a fish chowder.

Sharon: Mmmm, they're my favorite.

Karalyn: Fish chowder, so that's the products that we'll be making and looking at. Potentially, if I can get whole fish – smaller whole fish – we're going to do a salt-crusted baked fish where you encase it in salt and then bake it. It turns out juicy and delicious and wonderful.

Sharon: That sounds like my kind of fish. I love salt so much!

Karalyn: And it's not overly salty.

Sharon: Interesting!

Karalyn: You leave the head on. You leave the skin and the scales, just take out the entrails, fill the cavity with any kind of aromatics you want, and then we pack it in salt and bake it.

Sharon: So, the USDA and the American Heart Association suggest that people eat at least two fish meals a week. How often do you eat fish at your house?

Karalyn: We try to eat at least two a week. Sometimes it's more. In the winter, ice fishing, we eat fish a couple times in a row. As well as, not necessarily Lake Superior fish but all kinds of fish.

Marie: Is cooking a Lake Superior fish different than cooking other wild caught fish or other fish?

Karalyn: In my experience, of cooking different fish from different areas, I use the same techniques regardless of where the fish maybe is from. We were in Spain at a friend of mine's sister's home and we cooked fish there. We picked the fish out and I can't tell you what kind of fish and we put cilantro on it and oil and salt and baked it and that is what I would do at home, as well. To kind of answer your question, I don't differentiate where. It just might be a different way that I cook the fish. So, if I have tilapia, or some farm-raised fish, I'm going to cook it in a sauce, like a tomato sauce or something, to give it a little more pizzazz than the plain-tasting fish. If I have a beautiful trout or a salmon fillet that I really enjoy, I might just salt and pepper it and fry it.

One of the most important things in cooking fish of any type or seafood of any type is to not overcook it. We tend to maybe think it needs longer to cook or cook it too high for too long or forget it in the oven for longer than it should. There's a real skill or talent or maybe it's an art to getting fish cooked so that it's done to your liking and that it is still tender and moist.

Marie: And that, I assume, you kinda learn just from experience, huh? *Laughs.*

Karalyn: From experience and also from talking to other people. I also use temperature a lot. I have a thermometer that has a cord on it so that the reader is outside of the oven or outside of the pan and the thermometer is in the product the whole time.

Marie: Oh?

Karalyn: And then I watch the temperature and I cook things a lot more based on temperature.

Marie: Oh, that's interesting. I didn't know you could do that! *Laughs.* Wow!

Karalyn: From temperature of fish to temperature of baked goods. Everything. Otherwise, I tend to overcook things.

Marie: Well, that's a very good tip!

Music from "Zenith City" by Woodblind

Sharon: And now it's time for the Fish-o-Licious part of our podcast.

Picture us in a commercial kitchen with eight likeminded home cooks. The space is full of stainless-steel counters and bowls, sharp knives and industrial ovens. It's a little intimidating. Limes, lemons, onions and tomatoes wait for us at our cooking stations.

Lake whitefish, lake herring and lake trout are on the menu. Throughout this podcast you'll hear us say "herring." This is a regional term for cisco. Cisco are not to be confused with ocean herring, which you can buy in jars as pickled herring and have a much different flavor profile.

Cisco got the name lake herring because they swim in schools. Some of the first fishermen of European descent on Lake Superior thought they looked like ocean herring. Actually, there are many names for this fish: Lake herring, cisco, tullibee, bluefin, *Coregonus artedi* (used by the science crowd), *odoonibiins* (Ojibwe).

You can find recipes for the smoked fish spread and the salt-encrusted cisco on the Eat Wisconsin Fish website (eatwisconsinfish.org) and the Fish Dish podcast page. Now, let's get cooking!

Karalyn: So, what we're going to do, everybody's going to make smoked fish spread and trout, herring and whitefish – a combination, what you desire. But what I want to do first is open them and taste them. So you know the difference between kind of the three and if you have one that you prefer, to get some of that for your fish. We're going to use about 8 ounces of smoked fish so when we get to that point, I'll bring the scale over and (about a third will be skin and bones so we'll get 10-11 oz of fish).

So, what we have, we have lake trout... so I'll just open this up. We have herring. You'll see herring again. And this is the whitefish. The whitefish by far ... whitefish is a little softer. Let me grab these plates...

So, what I'll have you do is dish yourself up a little bit and we'll try them. (Sound of forks, etc.)

Sharon: We're making whitefish spread and we used smoked fish – smoked whitefish from Lake Superior and cream cheese and sour cream and what I love best is there's half a lemon in it. It's very good!

Marie: Real lemon juice.

Sharon: Real lemon juice so it is excellent. And then after we're done adding spices and herbs, we're going to put it in the refrigerator and then after lunch we'll see how the taste has changed. That will be kind of interesting to see how the flavors meld over the course of the day.

Marie: While the smoked fish spread is cooling in the refrigerator, we're turning to our second dish, a salt-encrusted cisco, also known as lake herring. This is such a unique dish. Despite its name, as Karalyn mentioned before, the fish doesn't end up being ultra-salty. Karalyn explains.

Karalyn: We have herring today from this morning, caught right out here on the lake. Lake Superior. They're good-sized herring. Bigger than I thought they were going to be, but that's okay. They say to use nothing bigger than two to two and a half pounds. You don't want to go over that size because it doesn't bake as well.

We have one for each table. I've read a lot about them. I've cooked a few. They've always impressed people and they're not nearly as hard as you might think. So, what we're going to do is you have two pounds of salt. You have a canister and 6 ounces. I can demonstrate how we're going to do it and then... We're just using table salt, fine ground, and egg whites. So, we're going to separate our egg out. What you're looking for is a consistency of wet sand.

Sound of mixing and scraping a bowl with a rubber spatula.

You don't need a thick crust of salt. You just need an even crust. Then we take about half of it – this is where you can make sandcastles or whatever you want to do. Spread this out... The other reason not to use longer fish is you can't fit them on the baking sheet.

Male class member: Can you use any type of fish for this?

Karalyn: Any type. I've done walleye and a lot of the recipes talk about saltwater fish. But we're going to use this beautiful herring. One of the things it says is if you really want to present it – you want to crack open the salt and make it look good in front of people, then you want to oil your fish -- a little olive oil so it doesn't stick to the salt.

I really appreciate the salt sticking to the skin because when you're picking it out then it's skinned. So, whatever your choice may be. I've also seen pictures where they leave the tail and the head out. So, the tail and the head are not our most valuable pieces to eat. You don't need to necessarily worry about those. Once we get it on here, then we're going to fill – that's why I had you save your stems – we're going to fill the body cavity with our aromatics. I have a few odd onion shapes from the ends of my onion. I got a couple little sprigs of dill. Just fill it up with your choice now. We'll just stuff the cavity and you kinda want to get that kind of to close because you don't want a lot of salt getting in there.

Now, before I put the top on, the next thing is, what I set over here we want to bake it to 130-135 internal temperature. If you've got a bigger fish like a 2-1/2-pound fish, use three pounds of salt. The cool thing about salt is it's inexpensive.

Sound of scraping a bowl with a rubber spatula.

Karalyn: So, what's happening in here is the salt is going to firm up. It will form this crust. So, what's going to happen is it's going to steam the fish. So that's what we're going to do. So, here's your fish.

Sharon: Great!

So now we're making salt-encrusted herring that's going to be baked in the oven and it uses over two pounds of salt. But we're not eating all that salt. It's just so we can encrust the fish and steam it with the salt on it is my impression. I feel like we're making a fish blanket or quilt.

Marie: Fish in a quilt!

Sharon: Fish in a quilt because we're keeping the tail out and the head out, and the fish is stuffed with lemon, and cilantro and a little bit of onion...

Marie: And dill.

Sharon: ...and dill is in there, too. These herring were caught just this morning from the North Shore fishery here in Grand Marais. You really can't get fresher fish than this.

Marie: Did we say what the salt mixture is made out of?

Sharon: No. It's just two pounds of salt and three egg whites. So, it's very simple.

Marie: It looks like snow or icing.

Sharon: Yes, it reminds me of icing. You mix it to the consistency of wet sand, but it also looks like it could be frosting on a birthday cake or a wedding cake. *Laughs*

Marie: And if you oil the fish, the salt won't stick to the skin – before you put the salt on. But if you don't oil the fish, which we did not, then, when you take the salt off, the skin of the fish will come off.

Sharon: Right, so it depends on how you want to serve it. Chef Karalyn was saying that if you want to do a big presentation at a dinner party, you would oil the fish so you could take the salt off and it would be a nice display fish.

Marie: Ahhhh.

Sharon: But ours is not for show.

Marie: Ours is for food.

Preparing this dish was a lot of fun. But I would argue the part that comes after the cooking is even more fun! Here's Karalyn working on her fish after it's out of the oven. Her implement of choice? A hammer!

Karalyn: You can be super impressive and have a special hammer for cracking your fish. Maybe even a bigger one than this. Otherwise, use a wooden spoon. And it's hard now. So, crack it ... it has been harder.

Sound of Karalyn hammering.

Karalyn: It should come off in chunks. We'll find out...

Sounds of oooh and ahhs

Karalyn: Ta da! And my fish skin did not stick. And right now, it's 172 degrees. I took it out at 135. So, it's fully cooked. You can do that big reveal at the table or ...

More hammering.

Karlyn: But look at your fish. Beautiful! Beautiful, all right? So, go ahead and take your fish back to your station. You want to tap enough to break the salt. You don't want to smush the fish.

Laughter and various background noises.

Sharon: Marie, what are you doing?

Marie: I'm freeing the fish from its salt.

Sound of Marie vigorously whacking fish with wooden spoon.

Marie: Karalyn later told me I was having way too much fun going at the fish with a wooden spoon. I was hitting it all over. A more effective method is to only hit the crust along the sides of the fish, not the top of it. That will allow the crust to come off in a larger piece, more like a lid coming off a jar.

Sharon: So, I was there to witness that and Marie was going to town on the fish. It was kind of fun.

Laughter

Marie: And everybody else was too. *Laughs.*

Sharon: That's true. We just needed a little more instruction. But I thought it was such a unique way to prepare a fish. I can't wait to try it out this fall. I think I'll have a dinner party. It seems like a fall recipe.

Marie: Yeah!

Sharon: That's when the cisco are really starting to run. That would be in November. When you think November, think "cisco." *Laughs.*

Marie: Yeah, and you can put different tasty things inside of it. They can be leftovers from herbs you've used for a different dish or whatever you have hanging around the kitchen – lemon slices – what else did we use?

Sharon: We did lemon and onion. Little pieces of onion.

Marie: Onion!

Sharon: And herbs. It was very tasty.

Marie: And then, what did you think of the smoked fish spread?

Sharon: Well, I'm just a sucker for smoked fish in general, so, loved it. Of the two that we made, yours was better. I liked yours better.

Marie: Oh!

Sharon: I put some Cajun spices in mine...

Marie: Oh...

Sharon: ... that didn't allow the smoky flavor to come out as much as I was hoping. In yours, you could really taste the fish and in mine, I just got overzealous with the spices and seasonings, I think.

Marie: Well, I thought it tasted just fine. And I think mine had a little bit more lemon in it, too. That just added a little zing to it.

Sharon: Both were good, and I hope you ate all of yours up when you got home.

Marie: Yes, yes, we savored it over several days. I can't wait to make the smoked fish spread for like the next gathering.

Sharon: I know, I have some company coming tonight and I have some smoked fish. I'm going to make some spread out of this.

Marie: Oh right, yes!

Sharon: So I'm ready.

Marie: You'll have to tell me how it goes and if they think you've slaved for hours. *Laughs.* Okay, so once all our cooking was done, Sharon and I took a couple of our classmates aside and got their impressions of the class and the first one we talked to was Amalia Spagnolo.

Marie: We made six dishes today. Did you have a favorite?

Amalia Spagnolo: I think I really liked very much the smoked fish spread because it's easy. You can take it anywhere. If somebody says, come over, you've got something right away. There's not a lot of preparation. You get all the ingredients, whack it together before you go, stick it in the fridge and bring some crackers. That's it! I like that.

Marie: Yeah, seems like it's classy.

Amalia: It will look like I spent a lot of time. That's important to me, to look like maximum effort, minimum amount of time.

Laughter

Marie: Do you think this class will make you think about fish more the next time you have to make something?

Amalia: Yeah, I think so. We've always enjoyed fish and with dietetic concerns for diabetes and weight control and that, it's important to find simple, clean foods that don't have a lot of stuff that's hard to find or super fatty or something like that. The nice thing about fish is it's got this lovely protein that is delicious, it's filling, there's barely any carbohydrates depending on what you're adding to it. It would work really well for somebody who's a pescatarian, I think, or keto or something along those lines. Or diabetic as in our case.

Marie: Anything else?

Amalia: No, I think this is great because it sort of fulfills the whole top chef fantasy of being in a commercial kitchen with all of the ingredients that have been set out for you. You don't have to do

anything but just do the cooking and oooh and ahh about how amazing you are because somebody put all this stuff out for you ahead of time.

Marie: Yeah, it's a lot easier that way.

Sharon: I wanted to talk with classmate Chris Kantor because I'm always curious to learn more about the barriers people face when it comes to cooking fish. After a day of preparing fish.

As we were introducing ourselves to each other you talked about some trepidation cooking fish coming into the class after living all over the world and after eating fish in restaurants, you wanted to get better at cooking it. How do you feel now after taking this class?

Chris Kantor: I feel confident that I can choose fish and cook it.

Sharon: Excellent. What were some of the barriers to you wanting to cook fish prior to this class?

Chris: Well, the bones. I just feel like I don't want to have to deal with the bones. I don't know how to get the bones out. And if I'm serving fish to other people, I don't want it to be full of bones. So, I've always felt intimidated by that.

Sharon: What do you typically cook for fish at home?

Chris: Salmon. Salmon is easy to cook. I like to do different things with salmon. That's the one that I'm not intimidated by.

Sharon: Now we have whitefish and herring and lake trout to add to your repertoire.

Chris: Yes, yes.

Sharon: Wonderful. It was great meeting you at class today and I hope to hear you're cooking lots of fish in the future.

Chris: Thank you. It was nice to meet you both.

Music from Zenith City by Woodblind

Marie: Well, Karalyn was right. We had a great time in her class, and we did not leave hungry! For more information and Karalyn's smoked fish spread and salted fish recipes, visit Eat Wisconsin Fish on the web at eatwisconsinfish.org, plus Twitter and Facebook. Thanks goes to Karalyn Littlefield for speaking with us and to Amalia Spagnolo and Chris Paz Kantor. Thank you for listening!