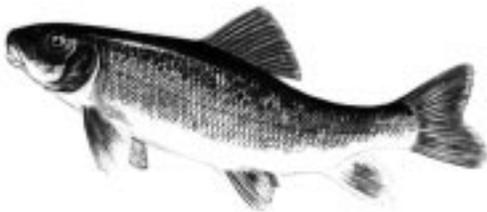


HOOK N' COOK

Suckers



For the avid angler who has been cloistered in their rec room for the duration of a long, fishless winter, their only companions the silent mounted fish trophies taken the summer before, there is another harbinger of spring besides the first robin: the Sucker. Barely after the ice is off the lakes, Suckers move from their winter-time abode to spawn in shallow tributary streams. Their annual spawning runs are a sure indication that spring is on the way and offer the anxious angler their first opportunity to cure their case of fishing fever.

The term "Sucker" no doubt brings a variety of fishes to mind for Manitoba serves as home province to several members of this fish family: the Longnose and White Suckers, the Shorthead and Silver Redhorses, the Bigmouth Buffalo, and the Quillback. They all have a similar mouth structure: The mouth is not located at the end of the snout but, rather under it. This seemingly odd position for a mouth is ideal for the Sucker because they are a bottom feeder. Large fleshy lips surround the mouth and can be protruded to aid in food foraging.

Life histories and habits of the Suckers are similar. All spawn in the spring, moving out from their winter habitats to shallower fast-flowing streams. The male arrives first on the scene to stake out a home territory and to lie in wait for the typically later-arriving female. She is surrounded by up to four males during the spawning act. Suckers are casual about propagation, simply dumping their eggs (~60,000/female) on the gravel bottom leaving them to drift and hatch where they may. The eggs hatch within two weeks; no care is given to the fry. This casual attitude results in a high death rate: only three per cent of the fry live to tell the story of their youth.

Although Suckers do not have a large fan club among anglers, the Sucker has long been an indirect contributor to the success of sport fishing. Young fry have been used as baits by anglers in their quest for northern pike. In the natural world, Suckers under 30 centimetres appease the appetites of these Pike, Walleye and Bass.

Whereas they are a fish of substantial secondary importance in the sport fishing world, the Sucker has not had the status of being a prime fish in the minds of most anglers. This is unfortunate for the Sucker because they have a palatable white flesh which can be served in many ways.

In the spring Suckers are at their prime. The flesh is white, and flaky, albeit bony. Should the inherent boniness of the fish discourage its potential enjoyment, use only the large upper muscle masses which will by-pass the majority of the bones. Other portions of the fish can then be used to make fish stock.





Spread throughout Manitoba, the Sucker is easily accessible to the angler who can take them from any swiftly flowing clear stream. Actually you won't be so much an angler as a netter. Dip-netting for Suckers in Manitoba is legal and this is the fastest way to take them.



"Dip Net"

Suckers are present in very large numbers in the spring and netting them takes advantage of this abundance. The only thing to remember with dip netting is that any game fish that are inadvertently caught must be returned to the stream unharmed. Check with the Manitoba Anglers' Guide to find out where dip-netting is permitted within the province. You will need a regular sport fishing licence to take Suckers in this way.

Aficionados say that the sweet spring of the Sucker comes through best when it is simply pan-fried in butter. Use Suckers that have been pan-dressed or filleted as you would any other fish. Pan-frying is just a beginning; there are a variety of ways to use Suckers.

The flesh of the Sucker may be ground and made into fish patties. The kitchen blender is the machine of choice for this operation. First, the fish are filleted and the heavier bones are removed. Then, the fish is cut into one-inch chunks which are placed into the blender a handful at a time with a 1/4 cup or so of condensed milk. BE careful not to over-blend or you will end up with a fish "suppe". Watch the process carefully. After grinding the fish, make a pattie mixture as you would for meatloaf; add beaten eggs, dried bread crumbs, and a little oil. The amounts used will depend on the amount of fish which you have ground. Any of the dried herbs would be a flavoursome addition; basil, tarragon or savory

would be good choices. Don't use too heavy a hand with the spice shaker as freezing dramatically increases the flavour of herbs.

Large spring-caught Suckers can be shown off at their best when they are stuffed and baked. The Sucker should be about 1 to 1 1/2 kilograms in weight and should be pan-dressed. Sprinkle the outside and inner cavity lightly with any well-seasoned dressing and sew up the opening, in the same way that you would dress a chicken. Place the fish in a baking sheet and bake in a moderate oven (350°F) allowing 30 minutes of cooking per kilogram (about two pounds). Baste the fish frequently with two tablespoons of butter combined with one cup water.

Suckers can also be cut into bite-sized chunks and pickled to grace your hor d' oeuvres tray. The fish must be pretreated in two brine solutions before the actual pickling can be done. The first is a salt solution of 3/4 cup pickling salt to one quart soft water, in which the fish chunks are left for 24 hours. The fish chunks are rinsed off and then placed in the second solution: cover the fish with distilled white vinegar and again let soak for a period of 24 hours.

The fish are then packed into STERILE pickling jars at which time you can exercise your creativity and add any flavour enhancers that tickle your taste buds: onion slices, lemon slices, red pepper or pimento. The pickling solution is prepared by combining the following ingredients in a saucepan: 1 cup soft water, 2 cup white vinegar, 3/4 cup white sugar, and 2 heaping tablespoons of pickling spice. Simmer for fifteen minutes. Cool a little before adding to the packed jars. Allow the jars to mature for a few days and then eat and enjoy.

Since the Suckers are available in such large numbers, it is feasible to take them in large numbers to be canned. The resulting product is said to resemble canned Salmon.

