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Tofu of the Sea

Jellyfish on the Rise

By Jeff Nield - Photo by Jenn Pentland

It is with some trepidation that I bring the chopsticks to my mouth and insert the jellyfish. My concern isn't flavour, it is texture. Jellyfish are the tofu of the sea; they take on whatever flavour a chef throws at them. Since I'm standing at the bar to the open kitchen at Blue Water Cafe watching chef Frank Pabst prepare the dish, I trust I'm good on the flavour front. But what he's placing in the clear glass bowl on a spiral of cucumber slices and topping with black sesame seeds looks suspiciously like tentacles.

My brain is telling me that tentacles = rubbery and rubbery = yuck! OK, here goes nothing. As my semi-adventurous taste buds connect with the marinade, and my teeth dig into the first strand of what surely must be rhopilema esculentum (known by Chinese connoisseurs as "the white one"), my anxiety dissipates like a drop of rain in the ocean.

Jellyfish is famous for its texture. "It's a weird line between crunchy and chewy," says UBC jellyfish researcher Lucas Brotz, a member of an international coalition of scientists studying the worldwide population. His description of the texture is dead on. Not quite al dente pasta, with a touch of the chewiness that you'd expect from well-cooked squid or octopus. And what I thought was tentacle is actually the bell, or top, of the jellyfish cut into strips.

The process of catching and preserving jellyfish is easy, but quite involved and time sensitive. In Japan, Jellyfish Masters are on board ships to begin the closely guarded tradition of processing the catch as soon as it's hauled aboard. While I'm not privy to the secret world of the Jellyfish Master, the basic process involves scraping the bell of the jellyfish of its primordial guts, and drying what remains.

By now you may be asking why the hell we would want to eat jellyfish anyway? Jellies have been eaten in China as a delicacy on special occasions for over a thousand years. They are categorized as a Yin, or cooling, food, and are also revered as a treatment for numerous afflictions, including gout, arthritis, and bronchitis. The Australian Aboriginals prescribe dried jellyfish to treat burns. According to Brotz, Western medical science is just beginning to test some of these traditional claims, with positive early results in treating arthritic mice and rats.

A more urgent and compelling reason to eat jellyfish comes from increasing reports that the populations are exploding due to rising ocean temperatures.

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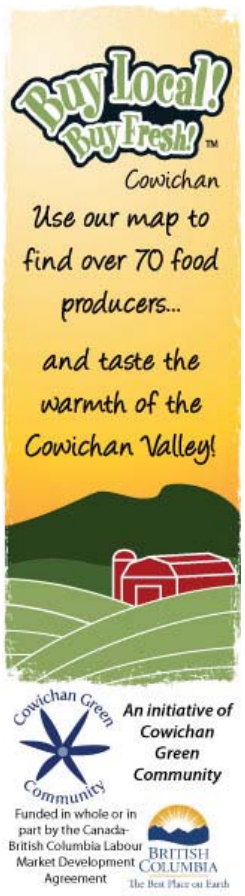

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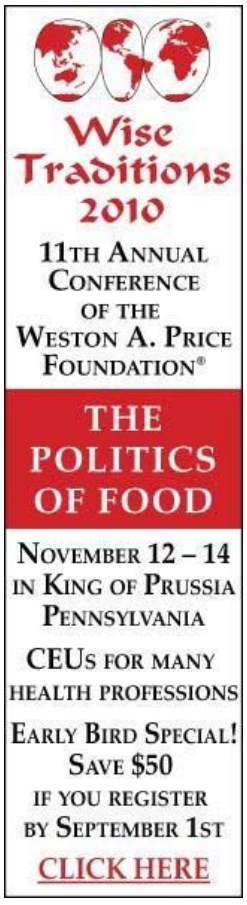
Brotz cautions that, although this may be the case, the science is not yet synthesized enough to know if there is truly an explosion of jellies throughout the oceans. There have undoubtedly been localized spikes in populations, and over the next five years a group of international scientists will be meeting to get a clearer picture of global jelly numbers. Brotz is happy to speculate on how and why we could or couldn't eat jellyfish, but raises a couple of red flags in thinking about this as a viable use for these ocean dwellers. Even if the science corroborates evidence of a population explosion, eating them would in effect simply shift our baseline, and not address the root cause. As well, if there's an economic benefit to eating the creatures, we could see further spikes from fisheries' managers seeding areas with jellies to increase numbers.

"The global catch is massive," says Brotz. Southeast Asian countries haul in over 250,000 tonnes of jellyfish every year, over 99 per cent of the global catch. Most of the edible varieties are of the order Rhizostomae, including Catostylus mosaicus, or blue jellies (pictured above) and Stomolophus meleagris, more commonly called Cannonball jellyfish.

In 1984 the Department of Fisheries and Oceans experimented with developing a fishery based around the Cannonball. DFO contracted a catch in Trevenen Bay and Okeover Inlet in the northern Strait of Georgia amounting to 2820kg. They had the catch processed, (no word if a Jellyfish Master was hired), and offered it to local Chinese and Japanese restaurants to try. The DFO report states that "processing [the Cannonball jellyfish] into a marketable product was unsuccessful." The biggest complaint from the test batch was that even after several different processing methods, the Cannonball jellies just didn't have the sought-after crunch. That all being said, it's not like our native species are poisonous—we could eat them if we had to. But I'm not sure we're ready to invest in a fishery that most of us would probably only embrace as a last resort.

About halfway through the small portion of jellyfish served up by Chef Pabst, I feel like the biggest hurdle to eating it is the time needed. As I take what will be my final mouthful, I speculate on how much more energy I'm using to chew the jellyfish than it is supplying to my body. But I'm secure in the knowledge that if it comes down to it, we will be able to nourish our bodies on these primitive sea creatures. I just hope chef Pabst is around to make them taste good.

Jeff Nield lives and eats in Vancouver. He likes to eat things that would make his mother cringe.



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