

# Meet the Dangerously Beautiful Fish That Some Say Is Better Off Dead

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It's not very often that your supper is just too pretty to eat but when it comes to dining on lionfish, it's almost a shame to kill it. The zebra-hued, monotone and curious-looking fish has large radial spikes that stretch beyond its body, protecting it from all around. Go too close and you'll certainly know about it.

Those 18 venomous spines along its back can deliver a painful punch. Although not deadly to a healthy adult human, the long sharp spikes offer an excruciating sting that can last for days. In extreme cases, the after-effects can lead to respiratory problems and even paralysis.

John Mirabella owns a restaurant in Marathon, Florida and is a keen, experienced diver. He has first-hand experience of being on the sharp end of a lionfish. "If one is up under a rock, and they see your hand coming they just point their spines toward you. They don't swim away. I've been stung that way," he says.

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If lionfish are so dangerously beautiful why would anyone mess with them? Well for one they are delicious, but secondly, and more importantly to the ecosystem, lionfish are an invasive species which threaten other marine life and even the coral reef.

Originally from the Indo-Pacific region, they were likely introduced to the western Atlantic shores by aquarium hobbyists in the 1980s. The National Ocean Service warns that: "This invasive species has the potential to harm reef ecosystems because it is a top predator that competes for food and space with overfished native stocks."

Their expansion has been so rapid because they have no known predators and reproduce quicker and for longer than native species, spawning all year long at a rate of 2 million eggs per year. In the last 30 years, their population has grown by a whopping 700 percent.

You can get an up-close look at this prolific creature at the Florida Key Aquarium Encounters in Marathon. Their fan-like pectoral fins in shades of brownish maroon are almost hypnotic as they float lazily around their tank. Check the informative identification sign and you'll see how the local community is working to remove them from the water systems, primarily by advertising nearby restaurants where you can eat them.

John Mirabella's restaurant Castaways, in Marathon, Florida, was the first restaurant in the United States to sell lionfish, roughly a decade ago. A decision, that Mirabella says was actually a complete fluke. "I spearfish for the restaurant with a group of friends. We dive as much as we can because it's fun. Then lionfish started to show up and we started killing them because that seemed like the right thing to do!" he says with a chortle. They quickly realized the meat was delicious and a new menu item was born.

Mirabella, a former US Navy nuclear plant operator, and diver on board a fast attack submarine, is originally from Central Florida and came to the Keys almost 20 years ago looking for a business to buy and any reason to stay. Although the restaurant business was new to him back then, fresh seafood had always been part of his life. "My parents were both foodies. I grew up on a sailboat and my dad is Italian. Food was our life. We sailed, we fished, we killed stuff, we ate it," he says simply.

At Castaways they serve lionfish in several ways including sushi rolls, which are dubbed "the king of the jungle," as a tartare in a martini glass, and cooked wreck diver style with lemon, wine, butter, capers, and tomatoes. They are an incredibly popular menu item, regularly selling out as they have on our visit.

"If I had an unlimited supply. I could sell this fish all day long, for \$50 a plate as an entree but I can't get it. If I have two fish, that's only four dinners, so it'd be gone instantly," he says.

The reduced numbers available are at least, in part, due to his crews diving efforts, as Mirabella explains, "At one point there were so many around here, we were diving and getting 90 pounds a day by hand and just having fun. Now the numbers have been seriously lowered."

Although he would like to take all the credit, he admits that Hurricane Irma was the real equalizer. When deep diving wrecks in 200 feet of water he has experienced large surges in current and believes they washed away the schools of lionfish. "I've been diving for them for at least 10 years, and now we get just five or six fish a day. There's still plenty out there. But there's not nearly as many as there were. That's the reason that I am out of lionfish today," he says loudly to the restaurant, before offering a wink and a sly smile, two fish have been saved for our party to sample.

With the current reduced catching conditions, it makes more sense to sell the fish mostly as sushi, simply because it goes further and it has become a trendy delicacy.

Mirabella says that lionfish is a little sweeter than their other popular catch, hogfish.

"I'm a sushi snob. The best sushi fish is fatty fish. Lionfish is a lean fish so it doesn't give you that dynamite dissolve on your tongue experience that you would get from Toro, however, it is tasty and it's firm so eating it raw is totally acceptable," he says.

The mild, buttery and flaky white fish is almost impossible to dislike, no matter the presentation. However, when it is brought out, served whole with the head, and the fins splayed out, with a row of sushi rolls along its back, it is elevated to the most magnificent table centerpiece.

There are some common sense precautions both divers and chefs need to take to avoid those venomous spines. Although Mirabella says that none of his current staff have experienced a lionfish sting, everyone he dives with has.

“The riskiest part is underwater when they’re still alive, or if you drop it on your foot in the boat because they are wiggling around. The best way to handle these fish is to make sure that they are dead,” he says.

As far as the local marine ecosystem—and diners’ plates—are concerned, lionfish are always best when they’re dead.