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Calamari -- you don't have to be Italian

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco, For The Star-Ledger

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Ever since Raffaele Vanacore and his brother Giacomo opened their 90-seat Italian restaurant, Trattoria La Sorrentina, in North Bergen five years ago, the fried calamari appetizer has been a perennial customer favorite. So much so that they now go through about two hundred pounds of squid a week. At the Harvest Restaurant Group, calamari in various guises appears on the menus of four of its five restaurants: Trap Rock Brewery in Berkeley Heights, which features New American cooking; Ciao and 3West, an Italian restaurant and a French-American bistro, respectively, both in Basking Ridge; and the Huntley Tavern in Summit. Calamari will probably be on the menu of two more restaurants the group expects to open in Parsippany as well, said Bella Kapanadzi, a manager at Trap Rock. "It's just in high demand with our customers. It's a very popular food to eat at the bar because it's easy to share. They're looking for something a little more exciting to eat, and they're willing to try it, even not fried." she said. "I don't eat fish at all. But I love calamari."



TIM FARRELL/THE STAR-LEDGER

"Squid is one of the major harvests in New Jersey," said Linda O'Dierno, coordinator of fish and seafood development for the NJ Department of Agriculture in Trenton.

While worldwide demand for squid has always been strong, "domestic sales

have more than quadrupled in the last five years," said Ruben Sosa, New Jersey area sales representative for Ruggiero Seafood, Inc., of Newark, one of the largest processors of cleaned calamari in the nation, which sells its products under the Fisherman's Pride label.

"Squid is one of the major harvests in New Jersey," said Linda O'Dierno, coordinator of fish and seafood development for the NJ Department of Agriculture in Trenton. "A lot of it used to be shipped overseas. There is more of a domestic market for it now, especially around the holidays."

Partly because of fishing quotas established by the National Marine Fisheries Service, "there's more demand for the east coast species of calamari in the United States than there is supply generally," said Jeff Reichle, president of Lund's Fisheries in Cape May, which catches one to four tons of squid a year. About 70 percent of its squid is sold as cleaned frozen calamari under the Sea Legend label and for Sysco, a foodservice company. Most of the remainder is sold whole for export and to wholesale markets in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Jessup, Maryland, from where it travels to retail outlets.

Restaurants are driving the demand for the mollusk, for the average consumer remains squeamish about handling it, said Reichle. "It's one of the highest profit-grossing items on their menu. It's cheap to cook it up," said Sosa.

Although squid can be caught year-round, the main season for local fisheries is September through March, with Cape May/Wildwood being the principal landing port in the state. According to Reichle, New Jersey lands about 20 to 25 percent of the east coast quota for squid, which totals about 18,000 tons a year.

While there are more than 280 species of squid, because of its taste and texture *Loligo pealei*, a long-fin squid prevalent in the waters between Massachusetts and Virginia, is probably one of the top three most desired varieties, said Reichle. "They don't shrink as much as other squid do. Any squid, if you overcook it, you're going to make rubbery and tough. Some have a higher water content so when they cook they dry out more quickly. *Loligo pealei* is more resistant to that."

To meet the seemingly insatiable appetite for squid, large processors turn to other long-finned species from China (*Loligo chinensis*), Peru (*Loligo gahi*), India (*Loligo vulgaris*) and other countries, such as Thailand. Short-finned types belonging to the *Illex* family of squid also are harvested, but they're not as sought-after as the *Loligos*. Though country of origin is not always indicated at fish markets, it should be listed on packages of frozen squid products.

Frozen squid are available whole and in a variety of cuts, both with and without tentacles. "Americans are afraid of the tentacles, but that's where most of the flavor is," said Sosa. Like octopus and cuttlefish, the squid, which has eight "arms" and two longer tentacles, is a cephalopod--a marine mollusk that uses its tubular body to expel water as it navigates the ocean currents. Its "shell" is an internal one composed of a "beak" at the center of its tentacles and a "pen" inside its tube. The squid's ink sac holds a cloudy substance that it uses to hide itself when in danger.

The pen and ink connection wasn't lost on the ancient Greeks, who celebrated

Susanna Hoffman, author of "The Olive and the Caper" (Workman, 2004; \$19.95). They called the squid kalamos, meaning "reed," a term that came to mean "writing pen." In modern Greece, explained Hoffman, scholarly individuals are called kalamari. Calamaio is Italian for "inkwell," and the Italian term for the delicacy, calamari, is now popularly used in the United States on menus of all sorts of restaurants.

In seaside towns throughout the Mediterranean, the fresh squid practically jumps from the sea and into the frying pan. But, according to Vanacore, a native of Massaquano, in the province of Naples, "If you go to Italy, you're never going to find fried calamari on a menu. You'll find fritto misto"--that is, a mixture of fried seafood including, but not limited to, calamari. "Here you can't get that quality of fresh seafood that's over there," he added.

In the head notes to her recipe for squid salad in "My Love for Naples" (Hippocrene, 2008; \$35), Anna Teresa Callen wrote, "Squid should be fresh. A Neapolitan will not eat them if they are one day old." To give squid back their sea flavor, she recommended brining them for 10 to 15 minutes in a bowl of water and a tablespoon of salt before cooking.

"Fresh calamari don't stay fresh very long and have a very short shelf life," said Reichle. "You're better off buying a good frozen calamari than what you think might be a fresh calamari. Squid is one of the seafood items that freezes extremely well. The flesh doesn't break down easily in the freezing."

For deep-frying, frozen calamari work well, said Vanacore. Patrick Aste, executive chef at Trap Rock Brewery, agrees. "It's easier to slice them thinner and into consistently sized pieces," he explained.

Proper thawing is essential, however. "It should be done under cold running water. Squid is more than 90 percent water and it shrinks and gets tough if you let it thaw out on its own," said Sosa. "And it should be used immediately after thawing."

Properly cooking calamari calls for quick cooking at high heat or slow cooking at low heat. When making fried calamari, speed is essential, but "at home it's hard to get that crispiness because home fryers never get that hot," said Vanacore. For best results, he suggested frying small batches of squid at a time in oil heated to 375 degrees F., and bringing the oil back up to temperature for each subsequent batch.

Vanacore coats his calamari in just a dusting of flour and seasons them with salt after they're done. Aste prefers a combination of equal parts cornstarch and semolina and heats his oil to 400 degrees F. Cooking time is between 30 and 90 seconds. "In that window we find you get the best results," he said. It's important not to overcoat the calamari, he added, for a thick coating will keep the squid from cooking through and render them soggy. Instead of draining on paper towels, he suggested hanging the fried squid over the pan--perhaps in a spider or other mesh implement--to remove excess oil. "If you fry anything quick enough and let it hang for a second or two, it's not going to be oily," he said. Leaving it out to drain can be counterproductive, for "it loses crispiness the longer you wait between taking it out of the fryer and putting it in your mouth."

Vanacore agrees, even though heaping trays of fried calamari are a popular

texture, he covers them only lightly, if at all, and advises customers to eat them at room temperature. "If you reheat it, that's the end of it," he said. "Some things are meant to be eaten at the moment."

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