



Fish, the way you like it, at two markets

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As the Triangle has morphed from Old South into New South, food lovers have reaped the savory windfall. But part of the price of our growing culinary sophistication is the alarming attrition of the rustic eateries that once defined our region. For each new tapas bar and sushi bar, it seems, another barbecue joint or seafood shack went belly up.

Happily, the trend appears to be reversing. A handful of barbecue joints have opened in the past couple of years. And now, two newcomers are promising to save the seafood shack/fish market genre from extinction.

On paper, Jezebel's Salty Fare and Skipper's Fish Fry & Market are as different as night crawlers and day boat scallops. Jezebel's touts its Outer Banks heritage and the fact that its fish and shellfish are harvested from Carolina waters. Skipper's bills itself as a "New England style fish fry." Jezebel's started out primarily as a fresh seafood market when it opened two years ago and has expanded the restaurant side in response to customer demand. Skipper's, which opened last November, has so far concentrated its efforts on getting the restaurant up to speed. Its market won't become a reality until around midsummer.

For all their differences, it's their commonalities - irreproachably fresh seafood, simply prepared and served counter style by a friendly, knowledgeable staff - that make them special. It's no coincidence, either, that these are the very traits that describe the ideal seafood shack.



Jezebel's Salty Fare

Before taste ever gets involved, sight and smell tell you Jezebel's is a good choice. The refrigerated display case filled with neat rows of glistening raw fish and ready-to-cook preparations fills your eyes. Meanwhile, your nose detects no fishy smell. No doubt about it, the seafood here is fresh.

It should be. Owner Jennifer Dixon comes to the Triangle from the Outer Banks, where she maintains a strong network of seafood suppliers. Their catch provides Jezebel's with the makings of an unusually varied menu, from platters (at least nine or 10 fish and shellfish options, available grilled or fried) to sandwiches to daily specials. If soft shell crabs are available, get them. They are supplied, as are the oysters, by a Wanchese fisherman who was once a student in Dixon's English class.

With few exceptions, the cooking lives up to the quality of the seafood. Grilled mahi mahi, which can be tough if overcooked, is so tender you'll have no trouble negotiating it with a plastic fork. And it's so juicy, you'll be tempted to lick the paper plate.

Steamed shrimp, moderately spiced with Old Bay, are likewise rewarding. So is most everything that comes out of the deep fryer. Oysters are plump and properly cooked. Scallops are addictively sweet under a translucent crust. Even flounder, notoriously dry when fried, is succulent. Crab cakes, bound with crushed potato chips, are fine-textured but flavorful.

Jezebel's weakness - and it is a minor one - is inconsistency. Occasionally, deep-fried foods are overcooked. And side dishes, two of which are included in the price of entrees, can be hit or miss. Hushpuppies, usually light and golden brown, are sometimes dense and a shade too dark. French fries, cucumber salad and thin, crisp-crusteds coins of fried squash are all better options than potato salad and slaw, both of which are bland.

If you read the menu carefully, you'll discover a bonus: Any of those temptations in the display case can be prepared and served in the restaurant for a \$2 surcharge over the take-it-home-and-cook-it-yourself price. The selection, which ranges from bacon-wrapped scallops to crab cake-stuffed portobellos, is admittedly fancier than you'd expect at a seafood shack. But the bargain price isn't.

Skipper's Fish Fry & Market

North Carolinians are justifiably proud of their fried seafood tradition - so proud, in fact, that "Calabash style," named for a coastal town near Sunset Beach, is synonymous with platters piled high with cornmeal-crusteds fish and shellfish. It takes an open-minded Carolinian to acknowledge that our state doesn't hold the patent on fried seafood excellence. Luckily for us, Burlington native A.J. Dalola is a progressive thinker.

Granted, an eye-opening experience contributed to Dalola's open-mindedness. When he was a teenager, he moved with his family to upstate New York, where he became a devoted fan of the New England-style fish fry. In this style, cracker meal replaces cornmeal as the breading of choice. Haddock, cod and clams are as popular as shrimp, oysters and flounder are in the South. Onion rings, not hushpuppies, are the distinguishing accompaniment.

When Dalola returned to North Carolina as an adult, he decided to preach the New England gospel. He hired Walter Bench, who had worked in the kitchen of one of his favorite fish fries, as chef, and he opened Skipper's Fish Fry & Market in Apex last November. Judging by the crowds that have filled the rustic nautical-themed dining room almost since Day One, he has made a lot of converts.

Carolina boy that I am, you can count me among their number. Skipper's had me the first time I dined there and enjoyed the best fish sandwich I've ever had. The fish (cod or haddock,

depending on the market) is moist and flaky under a light, crackly crust, and it's so big that it could easily fill two buns. It doesn't even need any tartar sauce, which, like pretty much everything at Skipper's, is homemade.

On subsequent visits - after I was able to break myself from the habit of ordering the fish sandwich, that is - I've sampled much of the menu, with impressive results nearly across the board. Indeed, the only disappointment was a ho-hum clam chowder. Chef Bench's specialty lobster bisque is a winner, though.

Steamed seafood is offered only on Tuesdays, and it's worth marking your calendar. Peel 'n' eat shrimp, clams and oysters (which Dalola or Bench will shuck for you at the table) are superb. Even snow crab legs are fine, though they seem out of place here.

You can't go wrong with fried seafood, whether your taste runs to oysters, shrimp (jumbo or "baby," which we Southerners call "popcorn"), flounder or catfish. Not surprisingly, clams are first-rate, as are scallops. Fried platters are offered in three versions: Portion (without accompaniment), Platter (with fresh cut fries, creamy, fine-textured coleslaw and hushpuppies) and Onion Platter (same as the Platter, but with excellent onion rings instead of the fries).

No, hushpuppies are not traditionally offered at a New England style fish fry. But these are as good as you'll find in Calabash. Guess you can take the boy out of Carolina, but you can't take Carolina out of the boy.

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JEZEBEL'S SALTY FARE

10630-104 Durant Road, Raleigh, 676-3437, www.raleighseafood.com

Cuisine: Seafood

Rating: 2 1/2 Stars

Prices: \$\$

Atmosphere: casual and cheerfully colorful

Service: knowledgeable and enthusiastic

Recommended: steamed spiced shrimp, grilled mahi mahi, fried seafood plates, soft shell crabs (in season)

Open: Lunch and dinner daily.

Reservations: not needed

Other: Visa, MasterCard, American Express, Discover; beer and wine; smoke-free; child-friendly; patio

Skipper's Fish Fry & Market

1001 E. Williams St., Apex

303-2400, www.skippersfish.com

Cuisine: Seafood

Rating: 3 stars

Prices: \$

Atmosphere: casual with a rustic nautical theme

Service: enthusiastic and friendly

Recommended: lobster bisque, fish sandwich, fried seafood platters, steamed seafood (available Tuesdays only)

Open: Lunch and dinner daily.

Reservations: not needed

Other: Visa, MasterCard; beer only; smoke-free; child-friendly; patio