



FOOD



‘Fried, died, and laid to the side’: A black history lesson on catfish

By Amia D. Edwards

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August is National Catfish Month. The southern staple received its own month of recognition in the prime of catfish agronomics and rebranding in the 1980’s. Before we go any further, let’s be clear. August is set aside for U.S. farm-raised catfish. We can talk about the Asian imports in another article, by another writer.



Amia Edwards

Like most Mississippians, I am a true catfish fan. In my “Bubba” voice (Forrest Gump), you can deep fry it, pan fry it, bake it, boil it, broil it, and sauté it. Here in Mississippi, one can find fried catfish, hushpuppies, fries, and sometimes spaghetti on most soul food menus. In neighboring New Orleans, the fish has a myriad of preparations. The fish is easily obtainable, mild in flavor, and suitable for most palates.

Most of my family will agree with me, except my daddy and brother. They are like a lot of soul food eaters who don’t touch the mustached fish due to the bible verses found in Leviticus 11:9-12. The passage warns against eating fish that lack scales and fins. To get out of religious waters, let’s not forget to mention that catfish, in its natural habitat, is a bottom feeder. The fish is an aquatic buzzard, or hog, or both. That alone is enough to have some pass their plate, right to me – who won’t hesitate to eat it with hot sauce.

The debate to eat, or not to eat, it will go on. I am sure I am joined by both sides of the debate – the reader who doesn’t eat the fish and the reader who does (and a pork chop while you’re at it). But, can we put aside our differences and agree that here in Mississippi “King Cotton” no longer reigns? The crown definitely belongs on a catfish fin.

Aquaculture is booming busi-

ness in the United States. Some of our biggest exports include crawfish, salmon, and other seafood. But, catfish managed to swim to and stay at the top of the list. More than half of catfish exports come out of the Mississippi Delta. Not bad work for a bottom dweller. Catfish use to be considered a poor man’s food, due to its controversial diet found lurking at the bottom of anybody’s pond. Then, economically speaking, by the 1980’s catfish farming went from the pan to the fire. The fish brings in big dollars – HUGE. This is especially true in the Mississippi Delta. The flat acres of clay-filled land turned out to be perfect ponding ground to farm the fish. In fact, the region leads the country, if not the world, in catfish exports and creating jobs and opportunities.

I asked economist Sondra Collins, Ph.D how aquaculture changed the financial outlook in the impoverished region. “Catfish farming is an essential part of the Delta’s economy. Part of many local’s identity is attached to being a part of the ‘catfish capital of the world’ in some way.”

With so much economic growth available through fish farming in the area, I wanted to catch a Black-owned aquaculture farm on my line to interview. I was dismayed to find that I was fishing in an empty pond.

When you visit websites that unite, support, and award catfish farmers with accolades such as “farmer of the year”, there is no diversity in membership. But like a good fisher, I did not give up on my desired game. I refused to believe that there is and never was a Black catfish farmer in the Mississippi Delta. After a few calls and connections, I had a bite on my line and a farming legend on my hook: Mr. Ed Scott, Jr.

Packed with ambition as bait, Scott learned to swim and fish the dark murky waters of systematic racism. Scott opened “Scott’s Fresh Catfish” in Leflore County in 1983, the first Black-owned

catfishing farm in America. In the 1970’s, the buzz on how catfish could be the next big catch was beginning amongst farmers: better than other prominent crops such as cotton, rice, and soybeans. Scott was listening.

Farming is not a cheap entrepreneurial endeavor – catfish farming is no different. First, you have to have the land. Scott had his own 160 acres of rice fields. You will need equipment and man power to dig the ponds. Scott dug all eight of his twenty acre ponds himself. Next, you need fish, feed, and to wait about 18 months before the fish are mature for processing.



Ed Scott, Jr.
(Photo courtesy of the Scott family)

With so much up front costs, it is common practice for farmers to receive federal loans set aside for them specifically. Initially, Scott was denied federal farming loans – a kink in the line his white colleagues hardly ever faced. (In 2012, Scott and other Black farmers later sued the federal government for discrimination and won). Still refusing to take “no” for an answer, he continued and was approved for a fraction of what he should have been allotted for a farm of his size. Once he conquered the farming part, the Glendora native ran into another

snag. White-owned processing plants would not take his product. The resolution? He built his own, hired over 30 employees, and kept swimming to success until he was finally fished out by lenders and competitors who didn’t want him in the waters at all. Scott was forced to close his enterprise in 1990. He died in 2015. His wife Edna Scott died the following year.

I had the esteemed privilege to virtually meet some of the Scott’s six living children via Zoom. They took me back to the fishing hole as the memories began to flood in. The oldest, Rose Scott-Pegues, watched her mother cook up opportunity right along with her husband. “When he began the task of digging, stocking, feeding, and growing the catfish, my mother was his moral support. He was raising catfish and she was cooking meals to feed the employees. She cooked and served breakfast and lunch to the employees. During this period of getting the processing plant operational, she was gifted from God to develop a recipe for a seasoned meal that the catfish could be breaded in before frying. She also made a hushpuppies mix that was also served with the fried catfish. Whenever my father was asked to do a fish fry as another source of income, he had to have the meal my mother made and the hushpuppy mix to go along with the fish.”

I asked them all if they thought it would be impossible for a Black farmer (or any minority) to get back in the shark-filled waters of catfish farming. They all agreed that it’s not impossible if you have the resources. Another daughter, Willena Scott-Smith, says a young farmer needs money: “You will not only have to have plenty of land, but you will need access to at least five to 10 million dollars just to start.”

But is there another Black farmer ready and willing to pick up the fishing pole Scott left behind? Higher Purpose Co., a non-

profit organization in the Delta, is certainly encouraging Blacks interested in entrepreneurial endeavors such as agriculture. CEO Tim Lampkin says, “Several Black farmers have benefited from HPC business workshops, community wealth chats, business fellowship program, and funding network. For example, HPC recently disbursed \$50,000 in grants to Black farmers across the state of Mississippi for our Black Business Relief Fund in response to COVID-19.”

Economist Sondra Collins, Ph.D, agrees that the catfish business is not immune to the virus. Restaurants aren’t ordering from suppliers because most consumers are cooking at home. “When the pandemic hit, home demand went up and commercial demand almost disappeared. This caused some financial distress for many farmers and changing the supply chain is both extremely expensive and logistically challenging. Some progress has been made and some commercial spaces are reopening.”

I was curious on where folks in the Jackson Metro area go when they want some good fried fish. According to my survey on social media, participants voted Eddie & Ruby’s Snack Bar, Jerry’s Fish House, and Valley Street Fish House as the best local restaurants for fried catfish.

Like many, I am guilty of cooking at home during these unprecedented times. I asked the Scott siblings if they ever grew tired of eating catfish growing up on the farm. It was a unanimous no. The oldest son, Isaac Scott, who worked the farm with his father, says he will never tire of it, but there is a difference in the taste these days. “They just trying to meet the demand now, they not worried about the flavor now days.”

The siblings graciously shared their mother’s recipe for fried catfish that they grew up on. According to their mother’s recipe, the key to a perfect fish is the

temperature of the cooking oil. I prepared and share this recipe with pride, knowing that the Scott family stayed the course. I leave you with this quote from Mr. Ed Scott, Jr.:

“It ain’t no such thing as you can’t do what you wanna do. So, if anyone want to read what I’ve said. Everything that I’ve said I’ve had to do it with the courage that I believe that God would bless me in doing it.”



EDNA SCOTT’S
FRIED CATFISH

- vegetable oil
- 1 cup yellow cornmeal
- ½ cups flour
- 3 tbsp seasoned salt
- 1 tbsp garlic salt
- ½ tsp lemon pepper
- 1/3 tsp cayenne pepper
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 8 catfish filets
- Salt

Instructions

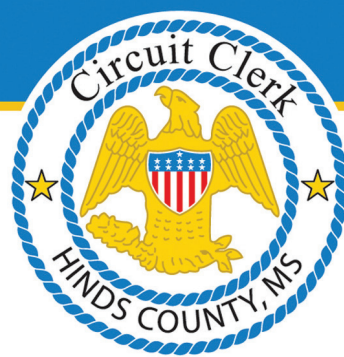
Pour oil into a large deep cast-iron or heavy-bottomed skillet to a depth of 3” and heat over medium-high heat until hot but not smoking, 350°-360° on a candy thermometer.

Meanwhile, combine cornmeal, flour, seasoned salt, garlic salt, lemon pepper, cayenne, and black pepper to taste in a large shallow dish, then thoroughly dredge catfish filets, gently shaking off excess.

Working in 2 batches to avoid crowding, fry catfish in the hot oil, without turning, until golden and crisp, 5-6 minutes. Transfer filets with a slotted spatula to paper towels to drain. Season to taste with salt.



ZACK WALLACE
Hinds County Circuit Clerk



**2020
GENERAL ELECTION
CALENDAR**

* Open Saturday Oct. 3rd
from 8:00 a.m. –12:00 p.m.
for Voter Registration

**Voter Registration
Deadline**
Monday, Oct. 5th

Absentee Ballots Available
September 21

Saturdays Open for Absentee Voting
October 24 8:00 a.m. –12 noon
Last Day to Absentee Vote Oct. 31
from 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

FIRST JUDICIAL DISTRICT

Circuit Clerk’s Office
P.O. BOX 327
Jackson, MS 39205
Phone: (601) 968-6628
Fax: (601) 973-5547

Jury Duty Recording:

First Judicial District
(601) 969-0052

SECOND JUDICIAL DISTRICT

Circuit Clerk’s Office
P.O. Box 999
Raymond, MS 39154
Phone: (601) 857-8038
Fax: (601) 857-0535

Jury Duty Recording:

Second Judicial District
(601) 857-8869

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8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Monday - Friday
(Except on legal holiday)

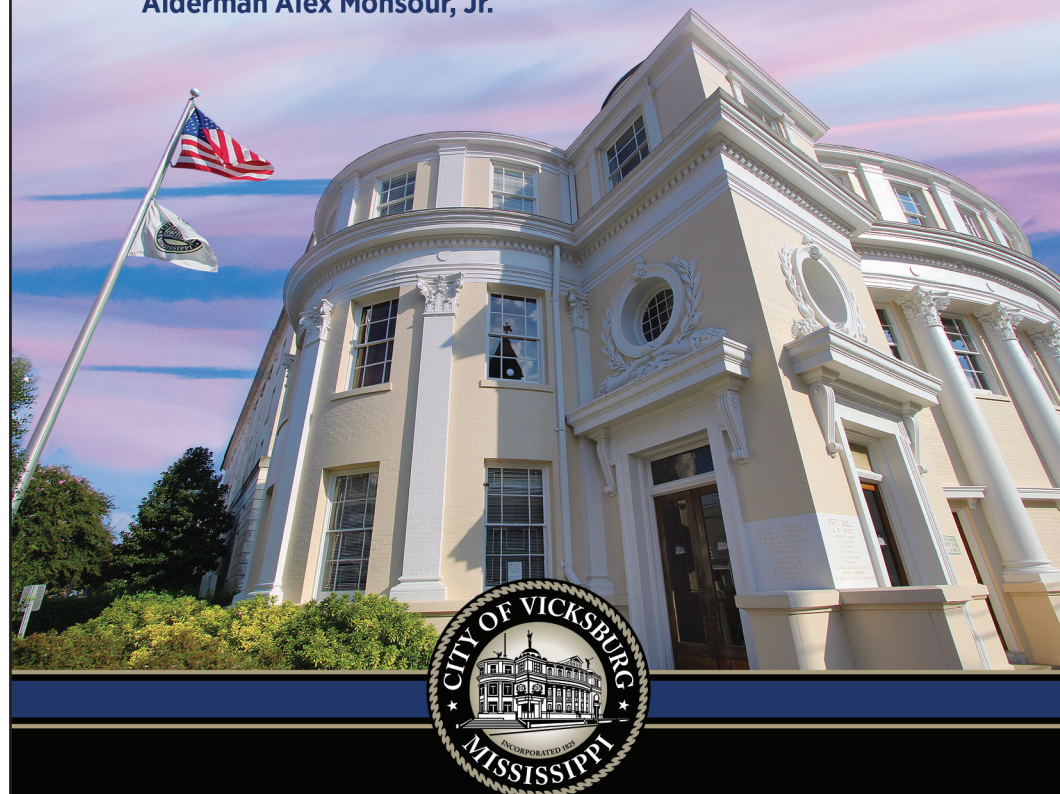
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**General
Election Day
November 3**

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