
RARE ARTIFED

AN INTRODUCTION TO EATING WELL IN ARIZONA

By JOHNATHAN O'DELL



THE DOLDRUMS OF SUMMER WERE JUST BEGINNING, AND I WAS FEELING A BIT RUN DOWN. Work had kept me busier than usual over the past few weeks. Even my off time was filled with a never-ending list of chores. To be honest, I was in need of a mental-health vacation day.

Quite by chance, I received an email alerting me to a coupon offer for a tour of the Arizona Distilling Company. It seemed

like something fun to do with a day off, so I purchased the coupon and arranged a 2 p.m. tour. Now, I just needed to figure out what to do with the rest of my free day.

When I was growing up in Montana, I always looked forward to the start of summer. I couldn't wait to spend most days outdoors after school let out. The last of the high-country snowmelt kept the streams swollen, and the fishing was easy. There was plenty

“Nothing would be more tiresome than eating and drinking if God had not made them a pleasure as well as a necessity.”

—Voltaire



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of time to throw a hook into a deep pool while soaking in some sun and lounging on the grass.

I thought I might like to relive that experience as a plan for my morning off, but the next question was, where? I knew catfish were being stocked at the Community Fishing Program waters. As I needed to be in Tempe, Ariz., for my afternoon tour anyway, Kiwanis Park Lake just south of U.S. Highway 60 in eastern Tempe was my first choice.

That morning, I slept in until 6 a.m. I know this does not sound like sleeping in, to most people, but it is a couple hours later than my norm. After a quick breakfast, I hopped in the truck and headed for the lake.

It was a beautiful Arizona morning, so I picked a fishing spot

where I could bask in the warm sunshine. Of course, the catfish didn't seem to care about my day of relaxation, since they kept stealing my bait. It wasn't too long before I had landed three good-sized fish. I had soaked up enough vitamin D to call it a day. Besides — I needed to clean up a little before my tour.

A TASTE OF THE PAST

I've been following the Arizona Distilling Company since shortly after it released its first spirit: Copper City Bourbon. The name is an homage to the Copper City Brewery, which operated in Douglas, Ariz., for a few short years at the start of the 20th century. When Copper City Brewery opened its doors, it served alcohol to the burgeoning population flooding the area to work at the mines around Bisbee. It grew to such capacity that it was seen as a threat and direct competitor to Anheuser-Busch Brewing Association.

In 1915, five years before the rest of the country, Arizona went dry when it enacted Prohibition. Copper City was shut down after the owner refused to obey the law and served one final beer.

Since opening its doors, Arizona Distilling Company has added a gin and three whiskeys to its product line, and hints that a tequila or two are coming in the future. What makes this distillery different is that it is local to Arizona, and the owners are keen to use locally grown grains in their spirits. Jason Grossmiller, one of the company's co-owners and my tour guide for the day, told me their philosophy when making all their alcohols is, “We wanted to write a love letter to Arizona.”

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I can appreciate that sentiment, mostly because I wanted to wrap my freshly caught fish in the paper that love letter was written on. So after the tour and tasting, I grabbed a bottle of their bourbon and made my way back home to start work on dinner.

FLAVORS OF THE SOUTH

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Bourbon has the distinction of being the American whiskey, much like tequila is Mexico's or Scotch is Scotland's. To be a bourbon, the liquid must be made from at least 51 percent corn, but it's the ingredients in the other 49 percent that give bourbon its unique flavors, as well as the specific type or types of yeasts used in the distillation process. Every maker has its own proprietary formula, which results in a wide variety of tastes.

Like catfish, bourbon is also a favorite of the South. It originated in Kentucky, to be exact. So it's no surprise that bourbon is traditionally used as an ingredient to adorn everything from barbecued ribs, chicken and turkey to pork chops and fish. The first time I ate bourbon-glazed catfish was at a little hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon in Louisiana about 16 years ago. The meal was simple, but the taste was sweet and sublime. Bourbon glazing is a great way to prepare catfish.

After my catfish dinner, I sat in my favorite spot on the couch. Even though I'd done an awful lot of running around that day, I felt pretty relaxed. To cap off the evening, I thought I might read a little more of that love letter. Here's to mental-health days! 🍷

▪ Johnathan O'Dell, the department's small game biologist, is in search of Arizona's best wild game and fish meals.

Bourbon-Glazed Catfish

Serves 4

Prep Time: 5 minutes

Cook Time: 10 minutes

Four 6-ounce catfish fillets

¼ cup cornmeal

2 tablespoons Cajun seasoning

½ cup vegetable oil

4 tablespoons butter

⅓ cup bourbon whiskey

½ cup dark brown sugar



Directions:

- Place oil in a large skillet or sauté pan on medium heat. In a shallow dish, combine cornmeal and Cajun seasoning and mix well. Coat catfish fillets in seasoned cornmeal, shake off any excess and set aside.
- In a small saucepan, melt butter over medium heat. Add bourbon and brown sugar and stir until sugar has dissolved. Cook over medium heat for 5 minutes.
- When the oil is hot, carefully add fillets and cook for 3 to 4 minutes or until done. Remove fillets to individual serving dishes, then spoon the bourbon glaze onto each fillet.

