



# Bottom of the River, Center of the Plate

*The enduring legacy of catfish in the South*

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When Frank Caswell and Mike Wilson decided to buy Catfish Blues in April 2017, they had every intention of giving the place a significant facelift. “We knew right off the bat we’d be changing the whole structure, everything,” Wilson said. A stage was added for live music, and the menu expanded drastically. Primarily a catfish restaurant before, it was made to serve everything from burgers to steaks to delta hot tamales. These items became popular, and common orders at the restaurant. “Our barbeque nachos are one of our top appetizers,” Caswell said. “And our Bang Bang shrimp is probably our other best seller. And we sell a lot of steak and burgers too.” Despite the popularity of these foods and the restaurant’s shift, though, there were two things about the place that Caswell and Wilson just couldn’t bring themselves to change: The place’s name, and its logo.

“Catfish blues,” Wilson said. “The logo, with that guitar in it, was just so cool.” The title, the owners decided, was a perfect representation of the area. As they were aware, catfish is a staple food of Southern culture, and a commodity for Mississippi. According to *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume II*, 550 million pounds of catfish were produced for consumption in 2006, and 60 percent of this was done in the state.

But what is it about the whiskered, mouth-gaping bottom feeder





MIKE WILSON & FRANK CASWELL, OWNERS OF CATFISH BLUES IN HERNANDO.

that endears it so much to the South? Why has a creature with such a bizarre look become so iconic, and when was the fish first consumed?

To answer that last question, you have to travel back quite a bit. Native Americans were known to hunt and eat catfish, and this is something the historian James Adair noted in the 18th century. Through a process now known as noodling (which is illegal in most states), Adair described how the natives would wrap a hand in cloth, stick it into an underwater hole where a catfish resided, and, when the creature latched on, yank it out and pull the fish ashore.

Of course, Native Americans weren't the ones to bring the bottom feeder to commercial prominence. It would be hundreds of years before the fish was found on dinner tables across the region. But fast forward to the 1960s, and catfish was becoming a hot commodity in the Southern United States. As *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* describes, the catfish industry was growing, as were the pond culture techniques.

By 1980, as the *New Encyclopedia* mentions, it was booming, and soon, hundreds of millions of pounds of catfish were being produced each year.

But how exactly does this tie into the cultural significance of the catfish? Surely its popularity and importance don't rest solely on its consumption history. What else could there be about everyone's favorite river cat that makes it so special?

Could it be its off-beat appearance, the fact its whiskers, sharp fins and sometimes gargantuan size give it a more unique look than its trout or carp counterparts? Or could the answer simply be its flavor, as it generally has what Caswell calls "a good, clean taste."

Perhaps the answer is more obvious than both of these theories. For while the catfish certainly has an interesting look, and while it does satisfy the appetite, the reason for its longterm success is likely, in fact, a familial one.

Because in Mississippi and surrounding areas, catfish often goes

hand-in-hand with fond memories.

Bill Battle is the owner of Pride of the Pond, a Mississippi catfish company that his family has run since the 1960s. He thinks the bottom feeder's significance has to do with emotions it can stir. "People in the South were raised eating catfish," he said. "When they were children, their grandfather or father would take them down to the pond or lake and catch some catfish, and then take it back home and clean it. It was a childhood experience."

Frank Caswell can back this up, as he remembers fishing for them as a kid, and caught a big one with some friends as a teenager. "We'd catch some really big flathead," he said. "A really big yellow catfish. If I'm remembering right we caught one that was 60 to 70 pounds."

So it seems memories and emotions have more to do with the bottom feeder's enduring popularity than anything. From across the region, locals can recall fishing experiences from their childhood. Of course, childhood nostalgia alone isn't enough to ensure that people continue to eat and order the famous fish.

It has to taste good too, and this is something Caswell and Wilson are keenly aware of. "We've got several different ways we cook it now," Caswell said. "If you're getting the grilled catfish, we do a blackened catfish and a lemon pepper catfish." In this instance the entire filet is cooked at once, and served that way as well. But in regards to fried catfish, it's prepared differently, as Caswell and company mix up the recipe a bit. "We use a yellow corn meal and white corn meal mix," he said. "Which is a little different than what's normally used."

Then comes the cooking, at which point they're careful not to do too much at once. "If you're frying, we take that same filet and cut into three or four strips, depending on how big the filet is," Caswell said. "It gets catfish crispier, it cooks faster, and it doesn't curl up so fast, like a whole filet would."