



Dredge and Fry

The Joys of the Fish Shack

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PAUL KNIPPLE

As autumn days begin to cool, it's time for things to heat up. Specifically oil. It's time for some fried fish.

Since it's fall, we want to get out and look for some color, too. Color in the leaves and color in the places we eat. There are few places more colorful than a good fish shack out in the middle of nowhere.

There are good fish places close by, like **Miss Sipp's Catfish Saloon** in Millington. You know it's a good place because the list of sides includes peach and blackberry cobbler. Still, it's in a strip mall in the center of town. The **Olive Branch Catfish Company** is another good place. Their catfish and hush puppies draw folks from all over, some coming from as far as Collierville to have lunch. However, it too, is gradually being lost in urban sprawl.

If we really want to talk about a fish shack, we should start with the king of all fish shacks, **Taylor Grocery** in Taylor, Mississippi. The village of Taylor is a crossroads south of Oxford. In fact, Taylor is probably the hottest crossroads in Mississippi since Tommy Johnson sold his soul in Clarksdale.

Taylor is a tiny but vibrant community with art galleries, Big Truck Theater, and a growing farmers' market. Plein Air, a planned community in Taylor, is designed to expand upon the unique charm of the village.

At the heart of it all, though, is a fish shack with walls covered with years of graffiti from young lovers and ole folks. Ole Miss folks, that is. On a stage in the back, bands play everything from Hank Williams to Lucinda Williams. The Taylor Grocery Band formed here.

And on the plate? The stage that matters most of all? Taylor serves up perfectly fried golden catfish and hush puppies. Have the typical sides of slaw and fries or be grown up and have a salad and baked potato. Or be decadent and have the Rotel fries, French fries smothered in Rotel cheese dip. Any way you go, it's great.

Clockwise from top left: smoked catfish at Pickwick; catfish plate at the Cotton Gin Restaurant; County Line Catfish; Monroe's giant 3-D catfish

Catfish shacks are made great by passionate people. Tony and Stephanie Tompkins have owned **County Line Catfish** in Gallaway, Tennessee, for ten years.

"A restaurant was always something I had in mind to do," Tony says. "The closest catfish place was Olive Branch, and anyplace that you have to wait an hour and a half to eat? There need to be more of those."

A dream alone does not keep a restaurant in business for ten years. Not even a keen insight into market niches will do that. Tompkins' philosophy shows what it takes, "Put the best product you can get on the table."

The Tompkinses do it too. For dinner, County Line offers excellent catfish, frog legs and white beans. Stephanie makes beautiful desserts, including a killer pecan cobbler. Saturday and Sunday mornings, the stoves are fired up to make hearty breakfasts.

County Line is the focal point of a local catfish convergence. Just off Highway 70 in Arlington, Tennessee, **Vinegar Jim's** is more restaurant than fish shack, but they do offer catfish along with excellent chocolate, apple, and peach fried pies. Back on 70 in Arlington, the **Cotton Gin Restaurant** is in a modern strip mall, but it pleases with its green tomato relish and gift shop featuring woodworking pieces. Further east, on Highway 59 just off Highway 70, **Braden Station** is in a beautifully restored 19th-century mercantile building. It's a buffet, but they also offer dinners to order.

Perryville, Tennessee offers a similar catfish row. Step off the front porch of the **River Shack** and stroll across the street and you can dangle your toes in the Tennessee River.

Geographically, the River Shack does not stand out. The key to finding it is knowing that you are looking for Old Perryville Road instead of just Perryville Road.

"A new road comes through and it kills a small town. That's what happened here," says owner Tommy Lee.

Culinarily, the River Shack does stand out because, unlike most catfish places, all the fish served is river-caught not pond-raised. Owner

If you want to go...

Miss Sipp's Catfish Saloon

7838 Church St, Millington, TN
901-873-4746

Olive Branch Catfish Company

9659 Highway 178
Olive Branch, MS
662-895-9494

Taylor Grocery

4 County Road 338 # A
Taylor, MS
662-236-1716

County Line Catfish

2285 Highway 70, Gallaway, TN
901-867-2222

Vinegar Jim's

12062 Forrest St, Arlington, TN
901-867-7568

Cotton Gin Restaurant

12013 Highway 70
Arlington, TN
901-465-0888

Braden Station

189 Highway 59, Mason, TN
901-594-5959

River Shack

1002 Perryville Rd, Parsons, TN
731-847-6610

Fish House Diner

820 Pentecostal Campground Rd
Parsons, TN
731-847-3261

Little Josh's Family Restaurant

4238 Highway 412 E
Parsons, TN
731-847-3636

Hagy's Catfish Hotel

1140 Hagy Ln, Shiloh, TN
731-689-3327

Pickwick Catfish Farm

4155 Hwy. 57, Counce, TN
731-689-3805
www.pickwickcatfishfarm.com

Tommy Lee uses trotlines and sometimes nets to catch all his fish.

Honestly, it's hard to say if there is a definite taste difference between river and pond catfish. The catfish is excellent though. Their hush puppies are made with a mix of flour and corn meal, so they are lighter than normal. Add a side of white beans and a slice of onion and you have the epitome of the fish dinner.

Although the new road has diverted traffic, Perryville is also home to the **Fish House Diner** and **Little Josh's Family Restaurant**—both featuring river-caught catfish. Little Josh's biggest draw is its screened-in dining area. Decorated with fishing nets and other accoutrements, the area makes dining a blast. Finally, Monroe's serves pond-raised catfish as part of a large menu that is more restaurant than shack, but they make up for it with their huge 3-D catfish sign.

Going a bit down south and upriver, **Hagy's Catfish Hotel** awaits just outside the boundaries of Shiloh National Military Park. Henry and Polly Hagy arrived at this spot in 1825 and began to homestead. In the early 1930s, Norvin Hagy began to serve catfish and hush puppies to friends, some of whom spent the night rather than risk traveling on the river after dark. Thus was born the name, Catfish Hotel. The Catfish Hotel became an official restaurant in 1938 at the urging of then Tennessee governor Gordon Browning.

Seventy years later, Hagy's Catfish Hotel is hugely successful. The road to Hagy's makes the roads to all the other shacks look like superhighways, but given the view down the sweeping lawn and across the river to the forest on the other side, Hagy's is worth the trip.

A bit further upstream, in Counce, Tennessee, near Pickwick Dam, **Pickwick Catfish Farm** is more restaurant than farm now, but it is an excellent...well...shack. Just off the highway, but tucked behind and shaded by huge trees, it's easy to miss, even with GPS guidance.

This is not an elegant place. The main dining room is a cinder block addition. You have to go outside and around the back to get to the restrooms. But, if anywhere we visited could give

Taylor Grocery a run for the title of king, it would be Pickwick Catfish Farm.

A steak cut is the primary way catfish is served at Pickwick. Whole fish are cut into inch-thick cross sections giving two meaty chunks with more breading than normal. Of course, filets are popular because they are easy eating. Whole fish seem annoying because of the bones, but there's a secret—the dorsal fin. When the dorsal fin is pulled away from the back of the fish, there is a small amount of fatty flesh that is superb. The tiny bones of the fin make it a pain to get to, but it is worth it. Think O-toro in catfish form.

At Pickwick, catfish can also go from superb to sublime without ever touching a drop of oil. Whole fish are rubbed with black pepper and cold smoked. This is honestly a delicacy that has become the star of the menu. Smoked catfish may go against your definition of catfish, but you would be missing out on a treat if you don't give it a try.

Many folks define their memories through food and the places where they enjoy something special with their families. Some have barbecue joints. Others have diners. My family has catfish places.

My childhood place was Catfish Cabin near the airport. It is the first restaurant I remember, and its huge glasses of sweet tea and hush puppies with corn kernels and pepper bits still bring a smile to my face. My mother craves trips to Ingram's Mill, Mississippi, to the Chatterbox Restaurant where the homemade desserts are just as good as the fish. My dad loved Ron's Catfish Buffet in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Buffet or not, they still do a decent job with catfish. I never got to eat there with him, but the place still brings my family together from time to time.

And that brings us to my point. Get out there. Get off the beaten path. Call first. Bring cash. And make those memories. *eM*

Once upon a time, Paul Knipple caught a fish THIS big! You can read more his (tall) tales at Squirrel Squad Squeeks, squirrel-squad.blogspot.com.