

Alligator Gar is a Rio Grande Valley delicacy

By Jason Buch

The fight is quick as the Harlingen-based fishing guide sets the hook hard, turning the long, silver fish toward the boat. Once he hauls it aboard, Garcia carefully runs a stringer through the reptilian-looking creature's mouth. Holdovers from the early Cretaceous period, alligator gar regularly surpass 6 feet in length and 100 pounds in weight, and this one is no different. As Garcia circles the behemoth's thrashing 5-foot frame, he has to dodge its sharp overlapping scales and needle-like teeth.

After subduing his prey, Garcia posts a photo on his Facebook page, and almost immediately, celebratory comments start rolling in from hungry friends. Considering alligator gar's less-than-stellar reputation in much of the state—with many dismissing it as a "trash fish"—this kind of reception might seem unusual or even sardonic. But not in the Rio Grande Valley, where the creature is highly sought after. That's because underneath those hard scales is dense, snowy white meat that can be broken down, dipped into an egg wash, and deep-fried into the Valley favorite, chicharrones de catán.

"Down here in the Valley, it's like a delicacy," Garcia says. "Everybody wants it."

While trophy anglers often target alligator gar, it is rarely eaten outside the Valley. Once an integral food source for Indigenous people in the Americas, it remains a culturally important comestible in parts of Mexico and the southernmost slice of Texas. Near the border, alligator gar's popularity goes back generations, with locals like Garcia still frequenting fishing holes discovered by his forebears.

In communities where fresh fish wasn't available commercially, Lenten meals were limited to canned seafood and fish from the Valley's many waterways. The massive catán was a logical source of protein. Today, alligator gar can be found on menus as far away as Laredo and Houston, but its nexus remains the RGV and restaurants like McAllen's Villa del Mar, which started serving chicharrones de catán at its original location in Reynosa, Mexico, in the 1980s.

Today, humans remain the greatest threat to alligator gar. Because flood control dams on U.S. waterways have reduced how often rivers spill over their banks, gar have less opportunity to reproduce in the inundated floodplains they prefer during spring and summer rains. To help protect them, the TPWD began an initiative in 2009 limiting anglers to keeping one gar per day in much of the state. Since then, evidence shows the population is stable. A 2016 study of the middle Trinity River estimated a 2008 population of 8,413 alligator gar measuring 3.5 feet long or

larger. Two years later, the population remained much the same: 8,365.

Fortunately for Texans, gar seem to thrive in human-made lakes with fluctuating water levels that provide them a habitat to spawn. After getting feedback from anglers and conducting a 2014 survey on Falcon Lake—a dammed portion of the Rio Grande—TPWD raised the limit there to five gar a day in 2015.

"The reservoirs have created an interesting opportunity for alligator gar," says Mitch Nisbet, a fisheries biologist for TPWD. "At a spot like Falcon, where there's a lot of flooded terrestrial vegetation, they're able to do really well."

For thousands of years before the arrival of European settlers, Indigenous people across the fish's range—in what is now the Southern and Midwestern U.S.—ate alligator gar and used their teeth for ceremonial purposes and scales for ornaments and arrowheads. The Caddo Nation, whose lands included parts of Texas, also celebrated gar fish through a dance. Every summer, members of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma still perform the nani' kallo' hilha', which translates to Hard Fish Dance. In the song, lyrics reference eating gar and using its teeth in a purification ritual.

Like other culturally significant animals, such as crawfish and white-tailed deer, alligator gar are "really treated more like people," says Lokosh (Joshua D. Hinson), a Chickasaw linguist, artist, and cultural historian. "They're kind of like relatives."

Today, alligator gar has fallen out of favor as a food source in all but a few pockets of the country. Even beyond the Texas coast, most of the state approaches gar as a nuisance because the fish is so difficult to clean. Additionally, their meat is best eaten soon after they're caught as the consistency tends to deteriorate and turn mushy. Chemicals like mercury can also accumulate in the flesh of older gar. Perhaps the most impactful factors are ingrained cultural biases, says Solomon David, an aquatic ecologist and assistant professor at the University of Minnesota. Considered a preeminent authority on gar, David says arriving European colonists in the 16th century were more likely to eat fish they recognized, such as perch and trout.

"These fish are what we're used to eating in Europe and we see equivalents over here in the United States, so that's what we're going to assign value to," David says. "Whereas these other [fish] are going to get pushed by the wayside. It depends on where you're starting your historical perspective."

Considering northeastern Mexico prizes chicharrones de catán as a delicacy, it's no wonder the Valley is a domestic



Young Entrepreneur! Haven Williams of Robert Lee recently spent a morning at Coke County Feed and Ranch Supply operating her lemonade stand. She was raising funds to support her livestock showing endeavors.

outlier when it comes to the perception around gar. In Tamaulipas, a state in Mexico that borders much of South Texas, there are even some efforts at alligator gar aquaculture. Livingston fishing guide Kirk Kirkland, who lived in San Benito as a teenager, learned to catch the fish and sold it to seafood wholesalers in the area. He says its popularity as a food fish amounts to a regional preference, much like catfish in the American South.

"I have clients who will take a small one home with them up to Wisconsin or wherever, and they'll call me and say, 'My goodness, these are so good to eat,'" he says. "I think gar has just gotten a bad name."

The atmosphere at landlocked Rocha's Bar and Grill in Laredo feels worlds away from the casual, saltwater-tinged scene at Chili Willie's. Co-owner Rey Rocha Jr. circulates the dining room, where Spanish pop music trumpets over loudspeakers, and red mood lighting illuminates a well-stocked bar. On the tea light-lit patio, a pink neon sign set in a wall of climbing greenery spells out "Laretiando"—local slang for enjoying Laredo's famed nightlife. On this evening in December, a dinner crowd mingles over guava margaritas while they peruse a menu that includes grilled rib-eyes, seafood pastas, and Tex-Mex. Even among that kind of gastronomic diversity, el catán remains the main catch for guests who have been frequenting Rocha's for over 20 years.

"I know it's an ugly-looking fish, but it's excellent," Rocha Jr. says. "Even if you don't like fish, you'll love this. When people were first hesitant to try it, we would give out samples. Now, people come in just for the catán."

After launching his culinary

career with a menudo restaurant, Rey's father, Rey Rocha Sr., pivoted to a more traditional restaurant in 2005. To help his business stand out from the rest of the Laredo dining scene, Rocha Sr. delved into his past. Harkening back to his childhood in Harlingen, he remembered a bar that would cook catán in a wok-like discada over a wood fire every Friday. The smell of the frying fish would drift through their windows during Lent, tempting him to scurry down the street and bring back a brown paper bag full of the sizzling gar.

"I wanted to serve something different," Rocha Sr. says. "And the catán just came back to me."

...Texas State Parks

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Texas State Parks benefits extend beyond the front gate, with a half-price discount for the second night of camping when visitors stay two or more consecutive nights in the same campsite or screened shelter. Passholders also get 10 percent off most retail and rental items

and park stores, special discounts for activities and events and a subscription to the State Parks Getaways e-newsletter with seasonal activity ideas and highlights. Additionally, the shipping and handling fee previously in place for online and phone pass orders will no longer apply.

Current Texas State Parks Pass holders who have a pass expiring after September 1 can renew early (up to 150 days prior to expiration) to get another 12 months of pass benefits at the \$70 price.

The Youth Group Annual Pass (YGA), which allows free entry to state parks for nonprofit youth group members and a number of adult sponsors, will rise from \$100 to \$150. YGA applications received in August but paid on Sept. 1 or after will pay the new fee price. Email Youth Group Annual Pass with questions about application status.

Texas State Parks Passes can be purchased on our reservation website, in person at most state parks, or by phone at (512) 389-8900.

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