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Maryland ramps up push to put invasive blue catfish onto more plates

Effort to popularize the flaky white fish includes new collaborations with food buyers and initiatives such as a cookbook and fishing trip giveaway



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PUBLISHED: August 12, 2026 at 5:00 AM EDT | UPDATED: August 12, 2026 at 5:02 AM EDT

The blue catfish is wreaking havoc on the Chesapeake Bay's food chain, devouring native species — including the beloved blue crab — as it spreads through Maryland waterways.

“We really need to eat our way out of that problem,” said Matthew Scales, seafood marketing director for the Maryland Department of Agriculture.

Inside a downtown Annapolis restaurant, chef Matthew Lego is trying to do just that. The head chef and co-owner of Leo Annapolis is filleting and frying **blue catfish** for foodies and environmentalists alike. The new menu choice aligns with a statewide effort to get the **invasive species** onto the plates of Marylanders.

“Blue catfish belongs right in the conversation, along with blue crabs and rockfish, as a Marylander's staple dish,” Lego said. “It is delicious. It is a clean, tasty, flaky white fish. It's abundant everywhere, and you're doing your part to help clean up the waterways every time you eat a blue catfish.”

The blue catfish can be seen in grocery stores, restaurants, school lunches and food banks as people across Maryland try to help control the spread of the fish across the state's waterways.

State officials have encouraged the consumption of the catfish for more than five years, but they've increased efforts this year through new collaborations with food buyers and initiatives, including a cookbook and fishing trip giveaway. The efforts come as blue catfish commercial harvesting in Maryland has doubled since 2018.

Blue catfish spread

The blue catfish was stocked in rivers flowing to the Chesapeake Bay in 1974 by the **Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources**, with the understanding that the fish would remain in the freshwater rivers.

However, the species is able to handle brackish water, the mix of saltwater and freshwater found in the bay. The fish swam through the Chesapeake and into tributaries in Maryland. Since their

introduction, blue catfish have spread into nearly all of the major tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay.

In 2025, about 2.5 million pounds of blue catfish were harvested from the Chesapeake Bay, according to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. About 2.61 million pounds were harvested from the Potomac River main stem in 2025, according to the Potomac River Fisheries Commission.

“The concern is how quickly they’ve expanded in abundance,” said Branson Williams, the invasive fishes program manager at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. “In some places, it certainly seems like they’re the dominant fish species.”

Blue catfish are “generalist omnivores,” according to Williams. The fish consume 30 to 40 different types of prey, including sea grasses, crabs, eels and other fish.

One blue catfish was recently found with 2 bushels of crabs in its stomach, according to Scales.

Pounds of blue catfish harvested from Chesapeake Bay per year have grown significantly over last decade

* Excludes Potomac River. Only includes data from licensed harvesters.

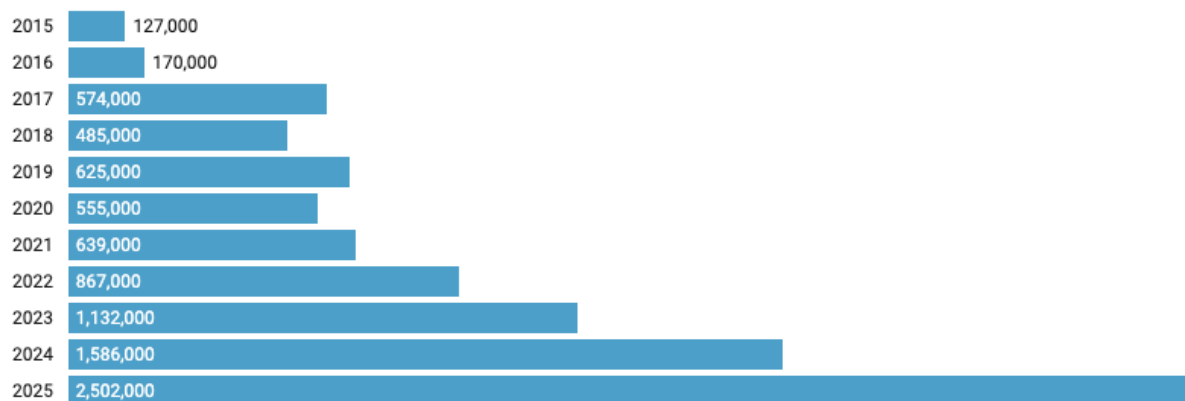


Chart: Katharine Wilson • Source: [Maryland Department of Natural Resources](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Getting the word out

Williams said the state’s main goal is “biomass removal” — fishing the species from Maryland’s waterways. To do this, the state is working to market the fish to restaurants, stores and other food buyers to increase demand for the state’s watermen to look for the invasive species.

Part of this job is to teach people how to cook blue catfish, including uploading a video on the Department of Natural Resources [website](#) about how to fillet a blue catfish. Another is to show off the opportunity this fish can have as a dish.

Maryland hosted a “blue catfish chowdown” at the state fair last year and has set up tables at events teaching people about how to cook the fish. The state isn’t the only one hosting catfish cooking events. The Annapolis Maritime Museum hosted a Chesapeake Catfish **Cook Off** in May.

While some in the mid-Atlantic have a bad taste for catfish based on other species of the fish, Scales said the blue catfish is similar to the smell and taste of a striped bass and doesn’t have a “fishy” smell.

The state agriculture department also keeps a **running list** of restaurants and grocery stores selling the fish.

The state permits harvesting blue catfish year-round and without catch limits, unlike other species that face stricter regulations. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources hosted a **giveaway** this summer, awarding free chartered fishing trips to teach residents how to catch the fish.

Where to find blue catfish

As the state expands the blue catfish response, the invasive fish can be found on fine dining menus and in school lunches.

Lego, from Leo Annapolis, said that blue catfish ended up on the menu when he was looking for a fish to replace rockfish between seasons. On the menu, Lego now cooks up the “Napville” Hot Catfish Sandwich and the Crispy Catfish Toast, with catfish also offered as add-ons to salads.

“We try as much as we can to be good stewards of our community,” Lego said, adding that he tries to support local suppliers. “Getting catfish on our menu was kind of a no-brainer, and that also has been incredibly well received.”



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Leo Annapolis chef Matthew Lego prepares a "Napville" Hot Catfish Sandwich and Crispy Catfish Toast, both dishes using blue catfish, an invasive species in Maryland. (Paul W. Gillespie/Staff)

Lego said he thinks the fish is becoming a trend, in Annapolis and the region, as more catfish dishes pop up on menus in pasta, sandwiches, entrees and appetizers.

His recipes are featured in a new blue catfish cookbook produced by the Maryland Department of Agriculture.

The cookbook, funded by a \$20,000 grant by the USDA, will be available at food banks across the state. Maryland food banks have also received grants from the federal government to fund the purchases of blue catfish.

Anne Wallerstedt, vice president of government relations at the Maryland Food Bank, said this is the fourth year that the food bank has distributed blue catfish. So far, the bank has distributed more than 1.5 million pounds of blue catfish and has received about \$3.6 million in grants from the federal government and administered by the state to purchase the fish.

"It flies off the shelf," Wallerstedt said. "This really is a source of pride that not only are we giving our families a healthy protein that might be cost-prohibitive otherwise, but also that we're helping the state and helping our waterways and the environment."

The state has partnered with Real Good Fish, through another USDA grant, to get school districts to serve blue catfish in lunches.

In Caroline County, blue catfish have become a staple item on school lunch menus. The Maryland Department of Agriculture approached the schools before the COVID-19 pandemic to present catfish as a possibility for the district's lunches, according to Beth Brewster, supervisor of food services for Caroline County Public Schools.

The school district has served catfish cake and this fall will serve catfish tacos. The fish, she said, is nutritious and allows students to learn about local sources of food.

"Let's figure out how to get it into the market, into our schools, and getting kids excited about eating fish, and the why behind this particular fish," Brewster said.

Have a news tip? Contact Katharine Wilson at kwilson@baltsun.com.