SWEET & SOUR DRAGON FISH

Fish are called “yu” in China, which sounds like the word “abundance and prosperity” in Chinese. That’s why it is a traditional symbol to end a multicourse Chinese banquet or Chinese New Year feast. The color of the red sweet and sour sauce is symbolic of love, passion and good luck in China. Our sweet and sour fish has an interesting presentation where the boneless filet is scored on the inside, making it flower out like a pine cone when cooked. The many opened-up surfaces receive the sauce well and makes the fish easy to serve.

Makes: 8 to 10 servings
Cooking Time: 15 minutes

1 whole red snapper or rock cod (4 to 5 lbs.), cleaned and scaled
Dash salt and white pepper
2 tablespoons Shao Hsing wine
Cornstarch for dusting

**BATTER**
1 cup flour
1 cup cornstarch
1 1/2 cups water
1 tablespoon vegetable oil

1 quart vegetable oil

2 cups Sweet and Sour Sauce (page 213)
3 tablespoons cornstarch paste

1/4 cup diced onion
1/4 cup diced bell pepper
1/4 cup diced pineapple

Toasted sesame seeds
1 pimento stuffed olive or marachino cherry, halved
1 or 2 lemons or limes (optional)

**To filet fish**, remove fish head at gill section and reserve. Leave the skin on. Starting on one side of the fish at the upper dorsal fin, make a shallow cut alongside the length of the dorsal fin. Cut the meat (filet) away from the upper backbone, scraping your knife as close to the bone as possible to remove the meat in one single filet. Continue cutting around the belly bones to remove as much meat as possible around the stomach area,
leaving the tail end of the filet attached at the backbone 1 1/2 to 2-inches from the tail section. Remove pectoral fins from the filet. You should have 1 filet from half the fish. Turn fish over and repeat filleting the other side.

You should have 2 filets attached at the tail. Spread filets apart to expose the backbone on the cutting board. With a heavy cleaver or knife, cut crosswise to remove the exposed backbone where the filets are attached at the tail section. Discard backbone and fins.

To score the fish filet, if you are right-handed, place one side of the filet skin side down, with the tail to your right. (Reverse tail position if you are left-handed.) To score the flesh, aim your slant-cuts toward the head end of the fish. Slant-cut the meaty side of the filet with parallel diagonal cuts every 3/4-4 inches, stopping just short of the skin. Do not cut through skin. (The skin will hold the filets intact.) Turning your knife 90°, make the same spaced parallel slant-cuts again end creating an even crisscross or diamond pattern. Turn the fish over and repeat scoring pattern on the other side of the filet (with the fish tail on the right).

After scoring, hold fish up by the tail and immerse the filets in a large bowl of lukewarm water, dipping it up-and-down a few times until the scored pattern is accentuated and scored cuts point outwardly. Pat filets dry and sprinkle meaty side with salt, white pepper and wine. Dust fish filets and head, inside and outside, with cornstarch.

Beat BATTER ingredients together in a large bowl until it has the consistency of smooth heavy cream.

To Deep Fry, heat 1 quart oil in a wok to 350°. Coat fish head with batter and deep-fry until golden brown. Remove, drain, and place on oval serving platter. Return oil temperature to 350°. Turn fish filets inside out with the scored side outside. Holding it by its tail, dip fish into the batter, making sure all scored surfaces and crevices are covered with batter. Let excess batter drip off. Using both hands, with the filets meaty side out, grasp each end of the fish and slowly immerse it into the oil, skin side down. Do not disturb the fish while it deep-fries. Baste fish frequently with oil, so the oil can reach all surfaces. This will allow the pattern to set on the upper side. Fry fish for about 8 minutes, or until golden brown. With a wide spatula or strainer, carefully remove fish, drain, and set aside. (This may be done up to 3 to 4 hours ahead. Cool the fish and head, cover, and refrigerate.)

Prepare Sweet & Sour Sauce. Reheat 2 cups for this recipe to a simmer, but do not thicken.

To deep-fry again, reheat oil in wok to 350°. Add fish filets and fry for about 3 minutes, basting occasionally. Carefully remove with spatula or strainer, drain, and place on
serving platter with the scored side showing outwardly. Arrange fish head angled upward to recreate original shape of fish.

**To stir-fry**, remove all oil and residue from wok. Clean wok if necessary. Reheat wok and add 2 tablespoons oil, heating until hot. Add onion, bell pepper, and stir for 30 seconds. Add pineapple and sweet and sour sauce and bring to boil. Thicken sauce with enough cornstarch paste to make a medium-light sauce. Ladle sauce over fish filets, but not over the head or tail sections.

**To serve**, sprinkle sesame seeds over the filets. Garnish fish head with a halved pimiento-stuffed olive or maraschino cherry pushed into the eye sockets for decorative eyes. Garnish edge of platter with thinly sliced lemon or lime (optional, see Tip).

**Tip**: Garnish the platter with thin-sliced lemon or lime a few hours ahead. Spread overlapping half slices decoratively around edge. Cover with plastic and set aside.

**Notes**

1. If one large fish is not available, substitute two 2 1/2 to 3 pound fishes. Smaller fish may be easier to handle. They should be large enough to have meaty filets for scoring. Two fish can be very spectacular when presented on an extra long platter arranged like jumping or swimming fish.

2. Toasted pine nuts or slivered almonds can be substituted for the sesame seeds. To toast pine nuts or slivered almonds, place nuts in a single layer in a small ovenproof pan. Toast in a preheated 350° oven for 8 to 10 minutes until lightly golden. Check the nuts frequently near end of the baking time to prevent burning. Remove nuts from pan to cool. Cooled toasted nuts can be stored in an airtight jar until needed.