

# Fast-growing cobia coming soon

## ► COBIA, FROM 1D

"The cobia outperforms all others in terms of aquaculture," Benetti declared. "The profitability of the business is higher than others."

Cobia grow much faster than salmon, according to Benetti — up to 16 pounds in one year, or one pound for every pound of enriched pellets they consume. Salmon take up to three years to reach similar size.

"[Cobia] have incredible capability to transform what they eat to flesh," Benetti said.

But the biggest breakthrough, according to Benetti, is that cobia are raised from four-inch fingerlings to dinner-table entrees in offshore cages which don't harm the environment. In previous efforts by other countries, the fish were crowded into ponds and cages in coastal areas where they polluted the inshore waters and soil.

The cobia coming to Miami have spent the past seven months in two 3,000-cubic-meter galvanized steel-and-net holding pens 90-feet deep off Puerto Rico's Culebra Island.

"You don't need pumps and filters because the ocean does everything for you," Benetti said. "In deep water, with the current ripping through the cages, parasites pass through the mesh. The offshore environment is pristine."

Benetti started growing his cobias in 2001 — literally from scratch. First, he obtained brood stock from nine to 25 pounds from fishermen at Marathon. He quarantined the fish in a hatchery he built on Grassy Key, carefully controlling light and water temperature to make them think it was spring and time to spawn. They did this with a vengeance — producing millions of eggs



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**SURVEYING THE SCENE:** Brian O'Hanlon checks the offshore cages containing cobia near Puerto Rico.

which were placed in an incubator and hatched in one day.

Benetti fed the tiny fish zooplankton for a few weeks until they were ready to eat pellets. At that point, they also began to eat one another, causing about 90 percent mortality. But the

scientist still had thousands of fingerlings, which he shipped in huge styrofoam boxes to Snapfarm in Puerto Rico. O'Hanlon and Ayvazian loaded the fish into a boat and took them to the offshore cages about two miles off Culebra, where they have

flourished.

"We feed them every day, twice a day and clean the nets. There's no impact by what we're doing," O'Hanlon said.

The partners were assisted by the Culebra Association of Fishermen and the Puerto Rico

## COOKING COBIA

Cobia is a mild, firm, white fish that can be eaten raw as sushi or sashimi or broiled, baked, sauteed or fried. Here is a favorite recipe from Captain Harry Spear of Islamorada in "Redbone Recipes:"

### BAKED FISH

► **Ingredients:** Cobia fillets (6-8-ounce portion per person); olive oil; key limes or lemon juice; salt, pepper, minced garlic, bread crumbs, Romano cheese.

► **Directions:** In glass baking dish large enough to hold fillets side by side, cover bottom with olive oil. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Rinse and towel-dry fillets, lay in baking dish. Squeeze key lime or lemon juice over fillets. Sprinkle with salt, pepper, and minced garlic, then generously cover with bread crumbs and top-grade Romano cheese. Bake till fork drops through the fillet with little pressure.

Industrial Development Corp. Soon, they will harvest some of the choicest fish and ship them to JC Seafood.

"The more people who find out about it and taste it, it will be distributed all over the world," Ayvazian said.

Jimmy O'Hanlon, Brian's uncle and operator of JC Seafood, can't wait for the fish to arrive. He's going to hand out samples to top customers, such as Miami Beach's Nobu restaurant. He expects to sell the fish wholesale for \$4 to \$5 per pound.

"It's not just sushi. We're going to give it to other restaurants where it can be grilled or broiled," Jimmy O'Hanlon said. "I think it's going to do well."