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## Redland Rambles: Chronicles of Local Food, Farms, and Culinary Traditions in South Florida

Robert Barnum

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# Cantankerous gets crabby

 [redlandrambles.com/2010/05/05/cantankerous-gets-crabby/](http://redlandrambles.com/2010/05/05/cantankerous-gets-crabby/)

May 5, 2010

Still at the Fairchild Farm & Garden Festival... Ducked out of the lecture on preserving the harvest (sorry, Margie!) to catch Robert Barnum's cooking demo under the big tent. Robert, as you might recall, is also known as the Cantankerous Chef. And Saturday he was downright crabby, showing his recipe for fried piper betel leaves with coconut crab sauce.



Robert Barnum with Fairchild volunteers Mary Hughes and Terry Shaw assisting. Mary Neustein is in the background, plating piper leaves.

When I got there, tempura batter had been prepared, and Fairchild volunteers Mary Hughes and Terry Shaw were dipping piper betel leaves (remember those from your CSA shares earlier this season?) into the batter, frying, and cutting them into pieces. Robert was finishing up making the coconut crab sauce. Saw a whole can of coconut milk going in. Mmmm, everything's better with coconut milk!

The finished sauce was spooned out over plated betel leaves by volunteer Mary Neustein. Terry and Candy Sacher were handing out plates to the eager audience. As quickly as people got the food, it vanished. You'd think they don't get fed at home, but yes, it was that good.

I grabbed a plate before it was all gone, and sat down to savor the flavor. The sauce had chunks of sweet (fake) genuine lump crabmeat provided by Whole Foods, and celery, bell pepper and onion, tasted gentle, slightly tangy and was creamy from the coconut milk. It could have used some kind of hotness. The recipe below calls for Tabasco, but there just wasn't enough for my liking. The fried piper betel leaf was crispy in a light, egg-flavored tempura batter, and its sausage-y flavor contrasted nicely with the milder crab sauce. Actually, I liked the fried leaves just as they were, without the crab. They would be an interesting snack to munch on with a cold light beer, maybe while lounging in a hammock on the beach. Instead, there were white plastic chairs under a tent, and Robert had brought a bottle of his own wine made from the bignay or antidesma berry. Hard to describe, especially since I don't have the vocabulary of a wine and food writer, so you'll just have to try it for yourself!



Amaury and Tanya liked the crab dish.



Piper betel leaf garnishing the finished serving of crab and fried betel.

I had heard Robert talk a lot about this particular recipe, when he entered it into the Gordon Ramsay competition a few months ago, but this was my first time trying it. Robert said he had first tasted a similar dish in Sydney in a 12 course prix fixe dinner of Asian food, and

liked the dish so much that he recreated it with a few tweaks over the years. The original crab sauce he ate had been “fire hot,” he explained, but his version was mild and mellow.

*If you want to get a piper betel plant to grow in your garden, contact Robert Barnum at 305-235-1768 or [possumplentious\(at\)yahoo.com](mailto:possumplentious@yahoo.com).*

*If you want to buy a package of leaves for your own culinary experiments, contact Margie Pikarsky at 305-894-6657 or [office\(at\)beeheavenfarm.com](mailto:office@beeheavenfarm.com).*

## **Tempura Fried Betel Leaf with Coconut Crab Sauce**

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**Ingredients:**

8 betel leaves, fresh and washed  
1/4 cup corn starch  
1/4 cup rice or wheat flour  
1 tsp. baking soda  
2 egg whites  
1/4 tsp. salt  
1 1/2 cup corn oil  
1/3 cup cold water

1 medium onion, diced  
1 rib celery, diced  
1 green bell pepper, cleaned, diced  
1 8 oz. can crab meat  
1 tbsp. butter  
1 12 oz. can coconut milk  
1 tsp. garlic  
1/2 tsp. salt  
1/2 tsp. black pepper  
4-6 juga-juga of Tabasco sauce  
1 tbsp. brandy  
1 1/2 tsp corn starch  
optional hot pepper flakes

**Method:**

Heat oil in heavy pot with tall sides to 350 degrees F. Mix flour, corn starch, baking soda, egg whites salt and water in a bowl. Dip leaves one at a time in batter and place into hot oil. They cook very fast, 1-2 minutes, then flip. 1-2 minutes more then drain on paper towels and keep hot while you fry the rest.

Lightly brown the onions, celery and green pepper in the butter in a skillet. Add the seasonings and brandy and simmer for 5-8 minutes, and add coconut milk. Heat and add cornstarch in 2 tbsp. cold water or reserved coconut milk and stir till thickened. Add the drained crab meat and stir until heated through. Serve over the fried betel pepper leaves on a salad plate.

*Recipe courtesy of Robert Barnum*