

HOOOOK COOK

Words & Photos Udo Edlinger

BARRAMUNDI

This iconic Aussie sportfish is also a versatile treat on the plate!

Not much beats the sight of a table-sized barra rising to the surface.



Chef Pete Evans with a perfect specimen.

UP UNTIL recently, 'bar-ramundi' didn't really mean much to me – I only ate local fish I caught or witnessed being caught. That was until I met Steve Travia, aka 'The Fish Whisperer', from Darwin. He is one of the most passionate anglers I have ever met and has the best fishing holiday house in the world. I always feel like a member of *The Castle* when I'm lucky enough to stay up there – "Uds, will you get the John Deere out so you can get to the tractor to toe the Stabicraft out of the way?". Most mornings we rise early and by the time the sandflies and mozzies are full with my blood we have launched the boat in front of his house on the beach. It's a bit scary when you're jumping into the boat in chest-deep water with no protection from the stingrays or the crocs that are attracted to the sound of any machine... it's amazing how fast you can move!

Anyway, I'm not here to talk about Steve or his awesome home... but he is the person who introduced me to the Northern Territory and to its most famous fish, the barramundi! Barramundi are the most sought-after fish in the Territory, where the species is famous not only for its acrobatic fighting ability but also for its sweet-tasting flesh. The Territory's a whole different kettle of fish for those southern anglers – there's the everlasting heat and the dangers lurking in the water for starters... and all these challenges and challengers make the capture of a barra even more pleasurable! Everything up there is bigger, stronger, faster, more dangerous and generally tastes better. The barramundi is certainly no exception.

These famous fish are found across the Top End in salt, estuarine and fresh water. They have been introduced to many inland impoundments where they can grow to record sizes – dams like Peter Faust and Lake Awoonga in Queensland are known across the country and the world for their massive 1m-plus barra. Outside of impoundments, barramundi are an incredible hunting fish that migrate from the sea to the wetland during the huge wet season. During the wet the heavy-flow-

Barra are traditionally targeted in creeks, but can be found on open flats, too!



Above: Barra put up a good account of themselves, especially in the initial stages. Right: Author and barra – soon-to-be burger!



ing river systems overflow and they create vast flood plains full of food. The barra venture out of the rivers to feed in these rich wetlands. As the wet season comes to an end, the water soon

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disappears and most fish head back to the rivers and sea. The leftover fish end up stuck in billabongs that may or may not dry up depending on the size, depth and season.

We never miss out on catching these majestic fish with Steve as our guide. He is a master in this domain; he knows his tides and he has his own reasons why or why not to fish certain areas at certain times. We always fish in the tidal ends of rivers and at the

mouths, where he will take us to his favourite spots and put us onto great fish. The tide moves so fast up there that you must continuously move to adjust to the ever-changing conditions. The best-eating barra are saltwater fish – the freshwater ones tend to taste muddy. The salties are really silver compared to the darker and sometimes yellow-ish freshwater fish.

How anglers target barra varies from place to place and from person to person. Most use shallow- or deep-diving hard-bodied lures, or live poddy mullet caught in cast nets. With the introduction of soft plastics, many are changing their habits. I like using plastics, as the direct contact gives a better chance of nabbing a barra – and being treated to an aerial display! Whether you're a lure lover or a bait bouncer, barramundi are a great species to hunt and there's a reason why they feature on the menus of the best restaurants around the world!

Barramundi

THE LOWDOWN



Species profile

Barramundi: *Lates calcarifer*

Growth potential: A metre-plus barra is an angling milestone, but barra have been caught to 180cm and 60kg!

Battle kit

Big powerful slabs with huge tails and aerobic aerial tactics that will see many thrown hooks and lures buried in timber.

Counter tactic

Keep your rod tip down if you want to keep the barra from jumping; though you'd be mad to miss this great display! Upgrade your tackle components, like split rings and hooks, and use your thumb to control the barra's initial run for the timber.

Hook choice

Treble 14 3X Strong (T14)

Sizes: 4, 2, 1, 1/0, 2/0, 3/0

Features: This treble is perfect for targeting big barra in impoundments or creeks and rivers.

It has sticky-sharp points but is also extremely thick and strong, blurring the boundaries between smaller, sharper trebles and those with thicker but duller points.

Gamakatsu proclaims this its benchmark barramundi hook, and it's easy to see why.

Available in pre-packs.



Gamakatsu

Udo's barra burgers

Up in the Top End, everybody has their own version of a barra burger – it's a favourite recipe for locals.

Here's my version – it's easy and can be knocked up in no time at all. The burger tastes amazing, so try it and see what all the fuss is about.

Ingredients

- 1kg boneless and skinless barra fillets
- 8 fresh rolls or crispy sourdough bread
- 1 iceberg lettuce
- 2 tomatoes
- 1 cucumber
- Mayonnaise and chilli jam, to serve
- 1 lemon
- Kellogg's corn crumbs
- 2 eggs
- Flour
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Method

1. I find fillets of a decent-sized wild barra are rather thick, so I slice them in half so they cook evenly and are of perfect thickness for a burger.

2. Cut fillets into appropriate sizes, sprinkle some salt on them and crumb by dipping in flour. Dust some flour off and dip into a beaten egg mix, then coat in crumbs.

3. Shallow-fry fish pieces until golden brown on each side and place on absorbent paper.

4. Mix some mayonnaise with the chilli jam to taste and spread on the rolls or bread like butter, then fill with lettuce, tomato, cucumber and finally the fish fillet. Squeeze some lemon on the fish and add another dab of the mayo and chilli jam mix.

5. Job done! Enjoy with a cold beer.

