

# GYOTAKU

## *The Art of Fish Printing*

BY ABBY WEINGARTEN • PHOTOS BY JENNY ACHESON

**E**arly mornings in Linda Heath's Manatee River neighborhood are met with meditations by the backyard bayou.

Eagles and ospreys soar, roseate spoonbills wade, and mullet jump while Heath anticipates the day's potential catches and creations. An angler and self-taught artist, Heath tailors her lifestyle around the water, working from a 1,200-square-foot home studio that overlooks Observation Point. Some of the most delectable fish in Bradenton swim just feet from her easels, providing constant, fluid inspiration.

Heath is a master of gyotaku, the Japanese art of making fish prints on delicate rice paper with water-soluble sumi ink. Gyo translates to "fish" and taku means "impression." The craft dates back to the 1800s, when fishermen rubbed fish to document their daily catches and tell the stories behind the creatures. Heath's Western take on the ancient Eastern style is true to tradition and charged with spiritual energy.

"I love being out in nature and always have. It is definitely a spiritual experience for me. I catch the fish myself, clean them on my deck, and take a million pictures of them," she says. "I pin the fish down on a cold slab, put the ink directly on the fish and peel off the paper. Then, I put about 10 to 15 hours into the detail of the print. It is physically exhausting, so it's not for the faint of heart. You truly have to love what you're doing, and I do."

Heath discovered gyotaku while traveling in China and Taiwan, and she has since done impressions of cubera snapper, black grouper, blacktip shark, tarpon, mahi mahi, permit, and kingfish. She has also depicted vermilion snapper in seaweed and multihued triggerfish on banana paper. Her signature is the white



**"I always tell people to open their eyes and look at what Mother Nature created"**



dot she paints in every fish eye, which she believes “gives the fish back its soul,” she says.

In a way, Heath replenishes her own soul with each print. She was a commercial real estate broker for 23 years before switching career paths three years ago. Working in a high-pressure corporate environment was the antithesis of her current livelihood. Her studio space is sacred, as it was once the residence of her late mother, Dorothy Odom. Linda and her husband, Read Heath, added on to the home vertically, with bedrooms and a kitchen on the upper level.

“In my studio, I’ll put some Sarah Vaughan or Ella Fitzgerald on the stereo and paint, and it makes me happy,” she says. “It is very calming for me.”

When Linda is not wielding rods and paint-brushes, she is cooking with filet knives and spatulas. The Heaths adore entertaining, and once Linda’s fish rubs are complete, the couple seasons and eats the seafood. The process of making the art and consuming the fish happens within the course of 24 hours, which requires serious planning. For example, to prepare her signature hogfish dish with Key lime aioli, Linda must first spear the hogfish in the water, rub it, and gut it. Depending on the size of the catch, the Heaths can feed anywhere from two to 10 people. It is a natural, sustainable undertaking, as each fish only travels a few feet from its

habitat to the dinner plate.

“It is incredible what is right in our backyard, and we try to take advantage of it as much as we can in an eco-friendly way,” Heath says. “It’s a pretty spectacular way to live.”

The public response to Linda’s work has been spectacular, too. This season she will be exhibiting at 12 shows, lugging her dry-mounted impressions and giclée prints all over Florida.

Linda has donated art to and otherwise participated in various fundraisers benefiting such causes as the Boys and Girls Clubs of Manatee County, the 2011 De Soto Offshore Fishing Tournament, the Bradenton Yacht Club, and Mote Marine Laboratory. Her pieces can be found at such locales as 530 Burns Gallery in Sarasota, World Wide Sportsman (Bass Pro Shops) in Islamorada, the Riverhouse Reef and Grill in Palmetto, the BeachHouse Restaurant on Bradenton Beach, Star Fish Company Market and Restaurant in Cortez, and the Sandbar Waterfront Restaurant on Anna Maria Island.

Upcoming shows include the 13th Annual Downtown Delray Beach Thanksgiving Weekend Art Festival November 24 and 25 and the Estero Fine Art Show at Miromar Outlets in Estero on January 5 and 6.

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## Hogfish with Key Lime Aioli

SERVES 4

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 egg
- 4 tablespoons honey mustard dressing
- ½ cup Panko breadcrumbs
- 4 fresh hogfish filets
- 4 tablespoons flour
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

*For key lime aioli sauce*

- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons Mirin rice wine
- 1 key lime, juiced
- Dash of Sriracha sauce

### PREPARATION

*Place egg and honey-mustard dressing in a shallow bowl and beat together lightly with a fork. Place the breadcrumbs in another shallow dish.*

*Dust hogfish filets in flour, then dip in the egg mixture and immediately press into breadcrumbs.*

*Heat olive oil in a sauté pan and brown filets lightly on each side, and then remove to a paper-towel-lined plate.*

*Combine ingredients for key lime aioli sauce. Plate filets and drizzle each with aioli sauce.*

Courtesy of Linda Heath  
Lindaheathfishrubs.com