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Despite the fishing derby being canceled, lionfish were still removed from the Gulf as a result of the weekend's lionfish tasting.

by: [Nat Kaemmerer](#) | Staff Writer

Though they weren't fishing them out of the Gulf of Mexico this weekend, people got together and helped cut down the population of invasive lionfish at Mote Marine Lab and Aquarium on July 14 in a different, delicious way — by eating a lot of them.

The tasting event would have been the culmination of a weekend of lionfish hunting in the waters off the coast of Sarasota, complete with a competition based on which team could spear the most. Rough seas, though, prompted organizers from REEF (Reef Environmental Education Foundation), the organization behind the event, to call that portion off.

“It’s a bummer the tournament got canceled,” said Chef Steve Phelps of Indigenous. “It’s just a different vibe. Usually the fishermen are still here running around.”

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scoring, dissection, net and other tents set up to educate the public about lionfish and their negative impacts on the Gulf ecosystem.



turn back.”

Even without the fishing derby, 850 previously caught fish went towards the tasting event, Candelmo said. At REEF’s table, Candelmo educated visitors on lionfish, backed by a banner that read “Take a bite out of lionfish,” and offered a Cajun-style lionfish dip for people to try.

The chefs of the event wowed with creative, artistic and delicious takes on lionfish, from a pan-seared piece on a sweet corn bisque courtesy of Jamil Pineda of Michael’s on East to a “texture explosion” (Phelps’ words) lionfish crudo. Some, like Phelps, served a similar dish to what they serve in their restaurant, but others such as Alex Vasquez of Mattison’s cooked up something new.

“It’s (lionfish) not something you get on a daily basis, so you try to make something special when you do,” Vasquez said.

Guests could mingle at the chef’s tables or see what organizations such Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission or Kids Saving Oceans brought to the event as they tasted and mulled over their votes for the top dish.

“They were all just superb,” said Katherine Kelly. “But Indigenous was my favorite.”

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sauce won third place, Mike Yoder and Victor Gaviria’s Hawaiian Lionfish took second and Chef Steve Phelps’ lionfish crudo nabbed first place in the competition.