Rhode Island Names Calamari as Official State Appetizer

JENNIFER McDERMOTT, Associated Press

NARRAGANSETT, R.I. (AP) — Calamari became the official state appetizer of Rhode Island on Friday when Gov. Lincoln Chafee signed legislation at the town dock here where millions of pounds of squid arrive for processing each year.

About 125 fishing boats in Rhode Island catch half of all the squid brought in on the East Coast annually, Chafee said.

Rep. Joseph McNamara and Sen. Susan Sosnowski both sponsored bills to give the squid dish an official status this year, to recognize the importance of the squid fishing industry and promote the state's food and tourism industries. An effort to do so last year stalled in the Senate.

The bill's naysayers questioned why the legislature was not working on something more meaningful. Richard Fuka, president of the Rhode Island Fishermen's Alliance, said the bill is an extremely important "selling tool" for the fishing industry, and it will help encourage people to visit Rhode Island.

"Squid is to Rhode Island what the potato is to Idaho," he said before the ceremony.

Chafee said the bill is lighthearted and fun, but it also highlights an important part of the state's economy. Squid is the state's most valuable commercial fishery, with Rhode Island vessels landing about 23.5 million pounds of squid valued at about $18.6 million in 2012, according to the General Assembly.

"Get out there and catch some squid, and let's have some calamari," Chafee said.

Rhode Island chefs saute lightly breaded squid with thin slices of pickled hot peppers to make calamari and sometimes serve it with marinara sauce on the side. It is a lighter dish than the calamari found elsewhere, which often is deep-fried.

Many other states have state foods. Rhode Island is the first to have a state appetizer, McNamara said.

Friday's ceremony ended, naturally, with calamari being served. Kim Korb, who prepared it, said she ate pounds of squid while testing recipes, batters and the fryers before the ceremony. But she wasn't sick of it.

"I'm ready to have some more," she said. "Are you kidding me? I love it."

Some people returned for seconds, even thirds. The daughter of Rep. Teresa Tanzi, 8-year-old Delia Tanzi Buchbaum, helped herself to three servings.

McNamara and Korb swapped preparation techniques. "Excellent," McNamara said as he tried it. "I can practically taste the ocean."

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