

Fish Are Food, Not Friends (Solution)

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It should be apparent at first glance that this is a puzzle using Animal Crossing: New Horizons assets (and a reverse image search can confirm this for those unfamiliar). There are ten penguins represented, who are all canonical characters that have data associated with them from the game, such as names, birthdays, catchphrases, personalities, genders, hobbies, etc.

That being said, there aren't canonical "favorite dishes" for these or any other ACNH characters, so the flavortext must be referencing something that happens in the puzzle, not the game. One potential next step is to start trying to identify what's going on in the whole scene. There are a few rabbit holes to go down: penguin ID, fish ID, or text ID.

Penguin ID is easiest and least immediately helpful, and fish ID is probably hardest but most linearly beneficial to have – notably, some input parameters can output multiple fish, which is designed to make the dish step less free. As far as the text goes, googling snippets or perusing the villager dataset will reveal that these are the penguins' catchphrases with odd variations. In each case, one word is cut out of the catchphrase, and multiple words (that don't seem to fit) have replaced it.

Here are the fish ID options:

Villager ID	Fish Size	Location	Seasons	Fish ID Options
Boomer	XXL	Pier	Spring, Summer, Fall	Tuna
Cube	M	Ocean	Spring, Summer	Blowfish
Friga	S	Pond	Winter	Frog
Gwen	L	Pond	All seasons	Carp, Koi
Iggly	S	Ocean	All seasons	Anchovy, Butterfly Fish, Horse Mackerel
Puck	XS	Pond	All seasons	Goldfish, Popeye-ed Goldfish
Roald	L	River (mouth)	Spring	Salmon
Sprinkle	M	Ocean	Summer, Fall, Winter	Squid
Tex	XXL	River (mouth)	Spring, Summer, Fall	Sturgeon
Wade	M	River (cliff)	Spring, Fall	Golden Trout

Notably, the fish IDs do not seem to do anything with the associated enumerations, suggesting that there is some transformation that needs to be applied to them.

Organizing the catchphrase data in table form can help reduce the noise from the added words, and on a second glance, these words are suggestive of cooking/preparation methods, with a bit of padded text to integrate it into the catchphrase.

Catchphrase	Words Added
Flying is believing.	Covering with cheese
Sometimes you gotta learn to chill.	slice very thin and not die
You can't learn a life lesson from a fortune cookie.	amputating twice
Mind your manners, or someone else will.	shapes you into a patty with matzah and poaches you against your
Six of one, half dozen of the other.	pie toppings for some
A bad attitude will land you in the penalty box.	going vegetarian, that's
You must learn to waddle before you can swim.	dredged in flour, pan-fried in butter
Frosting is just the icing on the cake.	deep-fried
Rules were made to be broken.	Steal its eggs, they
Which came first, the seeds or the sunflower?	to salt and ferment

Applying these cooking/preparation methods to the corresponding IDed fish will result in a dish that matches the enumeration given.

Preparation	Fish ID	Dish ID
Covering with cheese	Tuna	TUNA MELT
slice very thin and not die	Blowfish	FUGU SASHIMI
amputating twice	Frog	FROG LEGS
shapes you into a patty with matzah and poaches you	Carp , Koi	GEFILTE
pie toppings for some	Anchovy , Butterfly Fish, Horse Mackerel	ANCHOVY PIZZA
going vegetarian	Goldfish , Popeye-ed Goldfish	GOLDFISH CRACKERS
dredged in flour, pan-fried in butter	Salmon	SALMON MEUNIERE
deep-fried	Squid	FRIED CALAMARI
Steal its eggs	Sturgeon	CAVIAR
to salt and ferment	Golden Trout	RAKFISK

At this point, it's good to inventory what hasn't been used yet. The villager ID hasn't really been used, and neither has the weird numbering in the title. The title number suggests that we can extract a number from each catchphrase based on the location of the word taken out.

With that number and the IDed dishes, a natural next step would be to index. The correct order of the resulting letters is given by the last piece of unused data, the penguin names sorted alphabetically. Alternatively, one can also recognize that these are good letters and nutrimatic the ordering.

Villager ID	Dish ID	Index	Letter
Boomer	TUNA MELT	1	T
Cube	FUGU SASHIMI	6	A
Friga	FROG LEGS	8	S
Gwen	GEFILTE	6	T
Iggly	ANCHOVY PIZZA	7	Y
Puck	GOLDFISH CRACKERS	7	S
Roald	SALMON MEUNIERE	6	N
Sprinkle	FRIED CALAMARI	4	A
Tex	CAVIAR	1	C
Wade	RAKFISK	3	K

The answer is **TASTY SNACK**.

Construction notes

This was both the first puzzle to have a draft and the last puzzle to be marked post-prod ready during our writing cycle. As soon as the hunt theme was decided and feeder answers were finalized, we knew we wanted to make an ACNH puzzle involving penguin villagers eating fish. Since AC villagers are pretty anthropomorphized, we thought it would make sense for the villagers to be eating real fish-based dishes.

Admittedly, while we set the island in the southern hemisphere in terms of months that the fish were available to catch, we completely missed that southern hemisphere seasons are flipped. Unfortunately, our (very northern hemisphere) testers all also failed to catch this detail, so when the puzzle was published, we ended up needing to adjust the flavor to clue that the season icons were based on the northern hemisphere interpretation of months mapped to seasons.