

Salmon Gone Wild, or Is It Just Sold That Way?

By Marian Burros, New York Times, April 10, 2005

Fresh wild salmon from West Coast waters used to have a low profile in New York: it generally migrated eastward in cans. But a growing concern about the safety of farm-raised fish has given fresh wild salmon cachet. It has become the darling of chefs, who praise its texture and flavor as superior to the fatty, neutral-tasting farmed variety, and many shoppers are willing to pay far more for it than for farmed salmon.

Today, "fresh wild salmon" is abundant, even in the winter when little of it is caught. In fact, it seems a little too abundant to be true.

Tests performed for The New York Times in March on salmon sold as wild by eight New York City stores, at an average price of \$19 a pound, showed that the fish at six of the eight were farm raised. Farmed salmon, available year round, sells for \$5 to \$12 a pound in the city.

For shoppers, said David Pasternack, the chef at Esca, a theater district fish restaurant, buying authentic wild salmon "is like a crapshoot."

The findings mirror suspicions of many in the seafood business that wild salmon could not be so available from November to March, the off-season. Wild and farmed salmon steaks and fillets look similar because farmed fish are fed artificial coloring that makes them pink, but that coloring can be measured in laboratory testing.

With East Coast wild salmon all but extinct and West Coast wild catches restricted by quotas, farmed fish constitute 90 percent of this country's salmon sales.

Yet last month, when fresh wild salmon should have been scarce, 23 of 25 stores checked by The Times said they had it in stock.

The Times sent random samples of salmon bought on March 9 to Craft Technologies in Wilson, N.C., for testing and comparison of levels of natural and artificial pigments, a method that scientists at the Food and Drug Administration have used to identify wild and farmed salmon. The technicians analyzed pigments known as carotenoids.

Only the sample bought at Eli's Manhattan on the Upper East Side (\$22.99 a pound) tested wild. Salmon tested farmed at six stores: Dean & DeLuca in SoHo (\$16.95); Grace's Marketplace (\$28.99) and Leonard's (\$19.95) on the Upper East Side; M. Slavov & Sons wholesale market at the Fulton Fish Market (\$4.50 a pound for whole fish) and its Brooklyn retail store (\$5.99); and Wild Edibles at the Grand Central Market (\$20.99).

Officials at Craft Technologies said that a sample from Whole Foods Market in Chelsea (\$14.99) seemed to show that the fish had been farmed at one time and had escaped into the wild, not an uncommon occurrence. Holes in the netting or storms are some of the opportunities that fish can exploit to make a break for it. Figures for the number that flee their pens are hard to come by, but it may be in the millions yearly.

A researcher at the F.D.A., who reviewed the results only on the condition of anonymity, said that Craft Technologies "had used a method that is accepted," and that he agreed with its findings.

In the last two years two scientific studies have reported that farmed fish contain more PCB's and other contaminants than wild fish, and numerous studies have called farming practices an environmental hazard.

When told of the results of the fresh salmon tests, Gretchen Dykstra, New York City's commissioner of consumer affairs, said, "Labeling any item to be something it's not is a classic deceptive practice." She added that her agency would "be investigating whether these stores are in fact improperly baiting their customers." Mislabeling food is against federal law.

Officials at the stores had a variety of explanations.

Peter Leonard, an owner of Leonard's, said that his records did not go back as far as March 9, but that his sales clerks "must have gotten the salmon from the wrong pile in the back."

William Lettier, the vice president for retail operations at Dean & DeLuca, said that four of his vendors could not provide him with their paper trail. He said he now wanted proof of the source of the fish from his vendors and would have his salmon spot-tested.

Jonathan Meyer, a partner in Wild Edibles, said he had narrowed the source of his fish to two Northwest vendors and had suspended business connections with both.

At M. Slavin & Sons in Brooklyn, the store manager, Phil Cohen, said: "Our salmon is from Canada. All wild salmon in Canada is farm raised."

But it can't be both.

A whole salmon sold to this reporter as wild from Slavin's in the Fulton Fish Market was pulled from a box marked "farmed Canada."

"I know you are looking at the label, but believe me," the clerk at Fulton said. "Don't pay any attention to the label."

When his remarks were repeated to Herbert Slavin, an owner of M. Slavin, he said: "How do you know he is an expert? We do not misrepresent."

The Times tested two salmon fillets sold as wild by Grace's Marketplace, one labeled "Rainforest," indicating it came from Washington State, the other "Columbia River." Joe Doria Jr., an owner of Grace's, said that one of his suppliers, Alaskan Feast, had sold wild Alaskan troll king salmon to the store.

But Daniel Kim, an owner of Alaskan Feast, said he had not sold the store Rainforest or Columbia River wild salmon, adding that it would have been almost impossible to buy any fresh wild salmon from either source in March.

Mr. Doria offered another explanation, "Sometimes when these fish come off the boat they get separated, and I got sent the wrong salmon from my supplier."

In addition, Mr. Kim called to say that a whole salmon one of his salesman at the Fulton Fish Market sold to this reporter as wild was actually farmed. He said his salesman had "made a mistake." The fish was not analyzed. Margaret Wittenberg, the vice president for marketing and public affairs at Whole Foods, said its wild salmon was properly labeled and came from the trolling of California's wild king salmon.

The Times's findings were confirmed by two Norwegian researchers, Dr. Bjorn Bjerkeng, a leading researcher in the analysis of salmon carotenoids at the Institute Aquaculture Research in Sunndalsora, Norway, and Dr. Harald Lura, a fish biologist and expert in salmon reproduction, who said of the study, "The methodology and results are convincing."

Wild salmon become pink by eating sea creatures like krill, which contain a carotenoid called astaxanthin. Farmed salmon are naturally grayish but turn pink when they are fed various sources of astaxanthin, including one that is chemically synthesized and others that originate from yeast or microalgae.

During Craft's two-week testing, it determined that the controlled sample and the one from Eli's had more than 60 percent of the form of astaxanthin that occurs naturally, within the range of 50 to 80 percent typical for wild salmon. All the other samples except the one from Whole Foods had 30 percent or less of the form dominant in wild salmon. The sample from Whole Foods had 37.9 percent. The farmed samples tested high in either the synthetic or the yeast forms of astaxanthin.

Laura Fleming, a spokeswoman for the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute, a state agency that promotes wild seafood, said, "The symptom is not confined to Manhattan."

She added, "We've had calls from various places around the country over the last several years from indignant fans telling us that stores are promoting product as wild Alaskan salmon when in fact it is not wild salmon at all."

Federal regulations governing country-of-origin labeling took effect on Monday. They require fish to carry a paper trail back to the source, but they apply to full-service markets like grocery stores, not to fish markets.

Joseph Catalano, a partner at Eli's and the Vinegar Factory who is responsible for the fish those markets sell, said he was not surprised by the test results.

"The bottom line on all this is money," he said.

Faced with fillets of wild and farmed salmon, even renowned chefs like Eric Ripert of Le Bernardin and Mr. Pasternack of Esca, who pay top dollar for the choicest seafood, could not visually distinguish one from the other. After the fillets were cooked, however, they could taste the difference.

"The most obvious clue is flavor," Ms. Fleming of the Alaskan agency said, "but by that time it's too late."