

Consumer Watchdog Finds “Wild” Salmon Scam Remains Routine

Fraud was first exposed by Vital Choice in 2004; new probe confirms earlier NY Times report and continuation of profitable con game

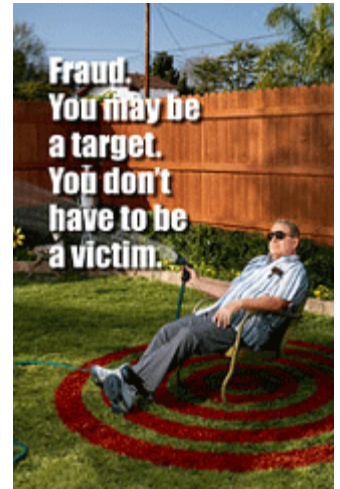
By Craig Weatherby, Vital Choices Newsletter, July 3, 2006

The Web site of America’s leading consumer-protection and product-rating magazine features an expose slated for its August, 2006 print edition, concerning a wild salmon bait-and-switch con game. The report echoes the point of a story first broken by the New York Times (thanks to a tip provided by Vital Choice).

We were there to be interviewed, with Andrew Weil, M.D., for a syndicated television news story about the health benefits of omega-3s, salmon as the premier healthy source, and the distinction between wild and farmed salmon.

Here’s what we reported at the time:

- “As we roamed among the fish mongers we came upon stacks of boxes labeled “Wild King Salmon,” in an area used by a major regional distributor.
- “We knew fresh wild King salmon was out of season, so asked the product’s owner where he was getting it. To our amazement, he admitted, with no apparent shame or embarrassment, that the salmon in the boxes were actually “farmed” wild king salmon.
- “He went on to explain that the regional supermarket and restaurants he supplies are price sensitive so he seldom pays more than \$2.75 per pound for salmon (well below the cost of actual wild king salmon). ... Apparently the mislabeling is good for business—at least the farmed salmon business.”



Just a few months after we told *New York Times* food-beat reporter Marion Burros about our dismaying discovery, her newspaper published the findings of its own investigation, which revealed that the scam was widespread and commonplace.

The *New York Times* purchased eight salmon labeled “wild” in area stores and sent them to a laboratory, whose tests showed that six of the eight fish were really farmed-raised.

Apparently the profit incentive is just too powerful for many sellers to resist, since the latest investigation indicates that the practice remains common, if slightly less so.

Neither sample size was large enough to offer a high degree of statistical reliability. But the evidence is adequate to demonstrate that this con is not a rare occurrence: at least in the off-season for wild salmon, which runs from October to May.

The 5 Top Reasons to Favor Wild Salmon

1. Wild salmon offers far superior flavor and texture. It is preferred by leading chefs and restaurant chains, such as Legal Seafoods, P.F. Chang’s and many others.
2. Wild salmon is healthier. Only wild salmon offers the ideal ratio of omega-3s to omega-6s: the exact balance that health experts recommend. Farmed salmon is high in omega-3s, but it is also high in omega-6 fatty acids Americans eat about 30 times too much of. The results of the sole clinical trial in which scientists tested the effects of eating farmed salmon indicated that it raises inflammation levels in the body. This is a pro-aging, pro-cancer, disease-promoting effect opposite from the anti-inflammatory, anti-cancer, artery-protecting influences that make omega-3s so healthful. Wild salmon has much less artery-clogging saturated fat than farmed salmon does.
3. Wild sockeye salmon is the richest food source, by far, of vitamin D: an essential nutrient whose anti-cancer and bone-building powers continue to be confirmed and expanded by researchers.
4. Only wild salmon is rich in natural astaxanthin: a uniquely potent antioxidant, anti-inflammatory nutrient. Farmed salmon are fed synthetic, petroleum-derived astaxanthin with a different chemical structure that may impair fish growth.
5. Alaska’s salmon fishery is certified as safe and sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council and nearly all other environmental organizations, while most advise us to AVOID farmed salmon. (Salmon farms pose real environmental risks.)

Salmon scam found more frequent when wild fish go out of season

The consumer magazine bought 23 supposedly “wild” salmon fillets in November, December, and March of 2005: three months that fall in the off-season for wild-caught salmon.

Their lab tests revealed that only 10 of the 23 fillets were salmon caught in the wild, and that the rest were from farm-raised salmon.

Fraud was not encountered when they purchased salmon labeled “wild” during the height of the salmon-harvest season in the summer of 2005, when tests showed that all 27 salmon purchased really were wild-harvested.

Interestingly, they bought two unlabeled salmon that salespeople said were “organic”, even though there’s no federal rule allowing the use of that label on fish. Lab tests showed that both fish were farm-raised.

Avoiding the salmon scam: tips for the consumer

The consumer watchdogs included some advice on how to increase the odds that you'll actually get wild salmon, some of which made sense, but others of which were problematic. Here's our take on their tips:

- They advised buying wild salmon in the summer, since almost all wild fresh salmon comes from Alaska, where the harvest starts in May and ends in September. (Some King salmon is caught and sold from late fall to early spring, but only in small amounts.) OUR COMMENT: The problem with this advice is obvious: it limits you to getting wild salmon in only four to five months of the year.
- They advised picking canned Alaska salmon, which as they noted, is "wild by definition", because the state does not permit salmon farming. OUR COMMENT: That's sound advice, but ignores the fact that Canada also produces very high quality canned wild salmon.
- They advised going by taste, since their taste panel found—as does virtually everyone who's tried both—that wild salmon features a deeper flavor and firmer flesh.

We offered our own scam-avoidance tip when we broke the sad story in December of 2004:

"Know your source. Unless you are very familiar with salmon, it is hard to know whether salmon sold in supermarket cases is wild Alaskan or farmed Atlantic. Those who are experienced with both may detect visual differences, and will almost certainly taste the difference. ... But, by the time your senses indicate a possible salmon scam, it is too late."

"The surest way to know you are getting authentic wild salmon is to buy it from a knowledgeable vendor ... if you can find one. At Vital Choice you have our word that you'll always get what you pay for."

We also noted that while retailers and restaurants have a significant economic incentive to "look the other way," some may be unwitting victims of this con game.

How the consumer cops determined salmon's origin

The new investigation relied on lab tests that can determine the source of the pink-orange hue in a salmon fillet. Wild salmon get their coloration from eating zooplankton rich in the powerful carotenoid (*cuh-rah-ten-oyd*) type antioxidant called astaxanthin (*ass-tuh-zan-thin*).

In contrast, most salmon farms use commercial feeds containing a synthetic version of astaxanthin, which differs from naturally occurring astaxanthin in its "optical isomeric distribution". Studies show that fish fed synthetic astaxanthin grow more slowly than fish that take in the same amount of astaxanthin from calorie-identical natural feed.

The negative impact of synthetic astaxanthin on fish growth rates indicates that it is not as beneficial to them as natural astaxanthin: a finding that suggests synthetic astaxanthin may function deficiently in people's bodies, too.

And there is concern about the safety of canthaxanthin, another carotenoid pigment additive used in salmon feed. As Marion Burros wrote in the May 28, 2003 edition of the New York Times, "European Union officials are reducing the permissible levels of canthaxanthin in fish and poultry from 80 parts per million per kilogram of feed—the levels permitted in this country—to 25 parts per million because there is some concern that high levels may cause retinal damage. In Canada the permissible level is 30 parts per million."

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