



A FISH ON YOUR DISH: HOW TO MAKE AN ETHICAL PICK

BY RICK MOONEN & CLARE LESCHIN-HOAR

Photo by Carole Topalian

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By all accounts, it was a disaster. In early May, when commercial salmon fishing should have begun along the California and Oregon coast, the season was canceled for the first time in its history. There simply were not enough wild king salmon left to push and grapple their way upstream. But it didn’t come as a complete surprise. There were gloomy signs of this in the fall, when counts of young adult fish were low. Very low. These young fish, called jacks, usually number near 157,000 along the Sacramento River. This time officials had counted only 6,000. The stocks had collapsed.

But would the crash be loud enough to provide the wake-up call most Americans needed to start thinking more about that tasty pink fillet sitting proudly in the middle of their dinner plate?

Salmon is ranked third in popularity of seafood, right behind shrimp and tuna. We love it for its satisfying flaky pink flesh, its healthy omega-3 fatty acids and its versatile ease to prepare.

While nearly 90 percent of the salmon we consume is actually farm raised (which has its own troubling problems, such as sea lice infestations or pollution caused by open-net caging practices), the close of salmon fishing in part of what’s affectionately known as “Salmon Nation” was loud and clear to anyone who stopped to listen to the alarm bells.

But this isn’t a story about doom and gloom, though we freely admit we could easily slip into that. This is a story about what you can do. That’s right. We want you to take action—whether that’s in the form of Michael Pollan’s mantra of “vote with your fork” or of Mark Powell’s drumbeat of activism.

Go Ahead and Grill ‘em—How To Ask Those Burning Questions

There’s no argument that fish is complex and confusing. Before taking the first bite, we encourage you—the consumer—to ask questions.

To help you make the best decision on what to purchase, here are some of the best questions you can pose. Don’t be shy! Your questions go a long way toward getting fish buyers to understand that these issues are critically important to all of us. So before you order, here’s exactly what you should be asking:

- What type of fish is it? Is that tuna over-fished bluefin or the better choice of albacore?
- Where it was caught? Was the halibut caught in the Pacific, where it’s still well managed, or was it an Atlantic halibut, which is in dire need of relief?
- How it was caught? Was it caught using a hookline, which is a good choice? Or a longline, which sounds similar, but it’s not. Longlines can run 60 miles in length and can carry literally tens of thousands of hooks.
- Or was the fish actually farmed? And if so, how? In open-net ocean pens, which carry the risk of sea lice infestation, pollution and escape? Or was it farmed in a closed circulating system?
- And is the fish vegetarian or carnivorous? Does it take four pounds of ground fish meal to produce one pound of farm-raised fish for our consumption? If so, that’s a good one to avoid.

While the questions can seem straightforward, there are plenty of opportunities for confusion. One type of fish can go by many different names, and—worse—either by accident or through unscrupulous practices, fish are frequently mislabeled. And let’s face it: Too often, the person manning the fish counter or the wait staff at your nearby restaurant may be stumped by your questions. Don’t let that dis-

So, just how do you get involved?

There are plenty of groups eager for your help.
Here's a short list:

Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch Program
seafoodwatch.org

Ocean Conservancy
oceanconservancy.org

SeaWeb
seaweb.org

Seafood Choice Alliance
seafoodchoices.com

Marine Stewardship Council
msc.org

Blue Ocean Institute
blueocean.org

Environmental Defense Fund
<http://edf.org/page.cfm?tagID=1521>

courage you. The more customers ask, the more fish purveyors and chefs are taking note.

There are plenty of handy pocket guides to help assist you with your decision-making, too. Our favorite? The list put out by the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program, which is updated twice a year. Fish are listed regionally and are divided into three columns: Best Choices, Good Alternatives or red-labeled Avoid.

We also like Blue Ocean Institute's Guide to Ocean Friendly Seafood, the pocket Seafood Selector by the Environmental Defense Fund and the Seafood Choices Alliance guides, but each can give slightly different advice, so the more you educate yourself on the issues, the more confident you'll be at the fish counter.

Diversify Your Eating

One of the best ways to eat fish that's healthy for you and more environmentally sound is to diversify your eating habits. We all like tuna, shrimp and salmon, but think about these items as a special occasion meal instead of everyday nourishment. After all, there are other tasty fish in the sea.

For example, substitute farmed-raised Arctic char for Atlantic salmon, or check out wild-caught sockeye salmon from Alaska, which is plentiful and well managed. Oysters are a terrific option too. Not only are they farmed sustainably, but they also help keep our coastal waters clean as they grow. Seek out and purchase US-farmed shrimp over less sustainably raised alternatives. Sardines, anchovies, mackerel and most smaller fish, both fresh and canned, are abundant and are low on the food chain, which means unlike tuna or swordfish, they carry less risk of containing mercury while still providing you with plenty of omega-3s. Even better, you're consuming fish that can reproduce at a younger age. Another step is to choose vegetarian farmed seafood such as tilapia, catfish, abalone and sturgeon.

Making good choices about seafood means you'll need some understanding of how the fish is raised or caught and how it is handled afterwards. It's also about keeping abreast of current news. For example, imported farm-raised shrimp from Asia has played a large role in destroying millions of acres of important mangroves which protect shoreline and habitat, and trawling methods used to catch shrimp kill more than 1.8 million tons of marine life each year, including sharks and turtles. Last year, restrictions were imposed by FDA officials on Chinese-raised shrimp, catfish, eel, basa and dace, which had traces of carcinogenic chemicals. Currently the FDA is considering loosening those restrictions, which means that your role in asking questions about where your seafood is from and how it is raised is still crucial.

Pathways to Activism

We agree that voting with your fork is a powerful way to reach the ears of the restaurateur or fishmonger who is making the initial fish purchase and helps create awareness with the public, but Mark Powell, vice president of fish conservation at the Ocean Conservancy, argues that in the end it's not all that effective:

Naturally...

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The advertisement features four photographs: a bride in a white veil, a young child, a young girl with blonde hair, and a couple in wedding attire. The text 'Naturally...' is written in a cursive font at the top. At the bottom, the website 'www.lifeexposedphoto.com' and phone number '303.664.0609' are displayed in a stylized font.

“People who are willing to self-sacrifice say, ‘I’m going to deny myself the pleasure of eating this fish because I’m ethically sound.’ It’s something they can do, but the real question is, does it help?”

What needs to change, says Powell, is the real issue of bottom trawling, which is done by large industrial fishing operations and is a method used to drag heavy nets across the sea floor. Bottom trawling destroys hundreds of square miles of important habitat and deep-sea coral and fish every day. The result is devastating to the sea environment and results in high levels of by-catch and waste.

“Put it this way,” says Powell, “if you choose not to eat a contaminated food product, you’re exerting your values and you feel good about reducing contamination. It’s meaningful on an individual scale, and that makes sense. I’m not going to eat farmed salmon because I don’t think there should be fish farms in the ocean. But if you’re trying to send a signal to the world that results in less harm from salmon farms, that tactic may not work. It’s not as simple as taking it down to a species level. If we’re going to get bottom trawling stopped, it’s through political action.”

He has a point.

Brad Ack, regional director for the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), disagrees slightly with Powell’s point that denying yourself a plate of Atlantic salmon won’t go far. Instead, he says expressing your political views through your pocketbook is activism of a different form.

“What’s important is being aware that there is great disparity in the worldwide fisheries. Being an informed consumer about the fish you buy, and asking for and demanding sustainability is very important for the longer-term health of our oceans and fisheries. Don’t just assume that because it’s being sold that it’s good to buy,” said Ack.

For those who want to make a statement with their purchasing power, groups like the MSC make it easy by putting their stamp of approval on sustainable fisheries. MSC certifies things like Oregon pink shrimp, all five species of Alaskan salmon or Pacific Cod.

But MSC-certified seafood isn’t always easy to find, which means that for many of us, time actually spent contemplating the fish for sale at the local market may just have gotten longer as we try and work out which fish is not only best for dinner, but the best choice all around.

A nationally recognized champion of the sustainable seafood movement, **Rick Moonen** is chef and co-owner of RM Seafood at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada and author of *Fish Without a Doubt*. He lectures frequently on the topic of fish and ocean conservation.

Freelance writer **Clare Leschin-Hoar** frequently covers issues surrounding sustainable seafood. Her work has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Boston Globe* and many more. Read more at leschin-hoar.com.

Recommended Reading List:

Bottom Feeder, How to Eat Ethically in a World of Vanishing Seafood by Taras Grescoe

End of the Line: How Overfishing Is Changing the World and What We Eat by Charles Clover

Tuna, A Love Story by Richard Ellis

Fish Without a Doubt by Rick Moonen

Fish Forever by Paul Johnson

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