

# A-FISH-IONADOS

## THE GREAT CHASE

BY ALEXANDRA STAFFORD



When a San Francisco sardine cannery relocated to San Pedro in 1893, a promising future arose for Italian and Portuguese immigrants fishing off the coast of Point Loma. Encouraged by the canners, these Southern California fishermen began targeting albacore, its texture well suited for canning, its “white meat” adored by consumers.

Demand grew quickly. High-powered “clippers” replaced day-boat dories. Canneries popped up like surf shops. Vessels became long-range voyagers equipped with depth sounders, gyrocompasses and refrigeration.

And so began a great chase.

Albacore, the fishermen would learn, is a mysterious fish, its path unpredictable, its nature, like all tuna, highly migratory. Preferring waters ranging from 60° to 67°, albacore appeared off the coast of Southern California only from June through October, and the fishermen’s yields, as a result, fell well short of demand. Instructed by the canners again, the fishermen changed gears, switching their attention to yellowfin and skipjack, two types of tuna less sensitive to ocean temperatures.

Though inferior in taste, the abundant stocks of yellowfin and skipjack met the canners’ demand, keeping their businesses alive. By 1926, many of the fishermen had invested in large bait boats known as “clippers,” which they raced down to Mexico and the Galapagos Islands in pursuit of these fast, itinerant fish. By the 1930s, the San Diego tuna fleet was catching 90 percent of the total tuna harvested in the Eastern Tropical Pacific. And by 1940, the fleet’s 80,000-ton delivery of tuna yielded 187 million cans.

Rightly so, San Diego became known as the “tuna capital of the world.”

But with rapid growth came great change. After discovering the efficiency of purse seining—the use of large nylon nets to trap fish—many of the fishermen abandoned their poles. By the early ’60s, the majority of tuna boats had converted to seining, and by the end of the decade, reports of hundreds of thousands of dolphin deaths had reached the public.

Historians mark 1973 as the apex of the San Diego tuna industry. Sparked by environmental concerns, its decline can be attributed to a number of factors: the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act, which prohibited the killing and harassing of marine mammals in US waters; the 1976 Magnuson Act, which banned clippers from fishing off the shores of Mexico; an increase of imported tuna; the warm waters of El Niño (in the early ’80s and late ’90s); and the FDA’s warnings in 2004 regarding mercury levels in tuna.

By the mid ’80s, many of the San Diego canneries had closed and moved to places such as American Samoa and Puerto Rico

**Left: Captain Scott Hawkin reels in a cold-water albacore**

Photographs: Courtesy of All American Tuna



**Ron Ensley, second generation fisherman on the Betty H**

where wages were low and regulations less rigid. Today, though San Diego is still home to processing plants for both Bumble Bee and Chicken of the Sea brands, most of the tuna canned and eaten in this country has been caught and packed in foreign facilities. Thailand, home to Thai Union, owner of Chicken of the Sea, is the world's largest exporter of canned tuna.

Unfortunately for consumers, those iconic images of mermaids, buzzing bees and Charlie the tuna don't really mark an American product anymore. What most Americans don't realize, however, is that an alternative to these foreign-produced cans exists—thanks to several local families. Indeed, the San Diego tuna story continues.

In 2003, 10 families from San Diego founded the American Albacore Fishing Association (AAFA), a nonprofit organization representing commercial pole-and-troll vessels. These families represented the few fishermen who, during the great expansion of the San Diego tuna fleet, resisted the urge to build bigger boats and surrender their poles. Retaining the skills passed on from their fathers, these men stuck to the “one-pole, one-fish” method and resolved to educate the public on their sustainable fishing practices. They formed AAFA “to literally save the pole-and-troll fishery,” which was in grave danger of extinction, says Natalie Webster, AAFA's director of operations.

After five years of hard work—of third-party assessments, of monetary investments and above all, of patience—AAFA obtained the certification needed to officially prove its distinction and ultimately shape its future. Last year, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), a global


nonprofit organization reputedly holding the world's most rigorous sustainability standard, named AAFA as a well-managed and sustainable fishery. One of only 31 fisheries to bear this blue-and-white eco-label, AAFA moreover is the only MSC-certified tuna fishery in the world.

Upon securing this coveted stamp of distinction, new markets opened for the AAFA fishermen, and the prospect of keeping their pole-and-troll fishery alive became more tangible. Before receiving the certification, “the fishermen had no power,” said Webster. “They sold their tuna as a commodity to anyone who would buy it.” Pole-and-troll fishing, however, “is an art,” she said, and the tuna caught by AAFA boats “belongs in a specialty market.”

Currently, that market lies in Spain and Japan, where the demand for tuna loins and sushi is high. AAFA hopes that with continued work a domestic market will open. Consumers must understand that while AAFA tuna might be pricier than commodity tuna, the harvesting of AAFA tuna has not contributed to the social and environmental problems of overfishing. The MSC label, moreover, ensures that the fishermen receive a fair price for their catch, one that will support the economic viability of their fishery.

As more fishermen—both commercial and sport—see they can make a living from pole-and-troll fishing, more will join AAFA, increasing the chances the fishery will be saved. Many AAFA members are third-generation fishermen and will rest easier passing on their trade knowing their fishery is financially viable. Since its inception, AAFA has grown to include over 40 families with representation from San Diego

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to Washington State.

Six of these San Diego families make up American Tuna, a five-boat fleet currently deployed on its annual expedition to the Pacific Northwest. Every year, from June until November, this fleet scours the cold ocean water for albacore, fishing for 17 hours a day, delivering its catch to canneries located along the coast of Washington and Oregon.

The tuna comes off the boat as whole, round fish, and at the canneries, the fish are hand-filletted, hand-packed, canned and sealed. Unlike most canned tuna, which has been cooked as a whole fish (often two or three times) and mixed with soy products, vegetable broth, pyrophosphate, salt, water and oil before being canned, American Tuna is cooked in the can in nothing more than its own juices.

The American Tuna fishermen only harvest small, mercury-safe albacore, those weighing approximately 17 to 20 pounds each. The fishermen throw back both larger fish — which are older and have had more time to accumulate mercury—and smaller fish—which should be allowed to reproduce for a few more years. In 2006, the Oregon State University Seafood Laboratory found the levels of mercury in Pacific albacore tuna to be well below FDA-mandated action levels.

These cold-water albacore are replete with omega-3 fatty acids. Young albacore living in cold waters have more body fat and therefore more beneficial fatty acids. When they migrate to warmer waters, they lose this fat along with many nutrients. All of the American Tuna boats, furthermore, are brine boats, equipped with pumps that circulate seawater rapidly in a storage chamber. Within an hour of being caught, the tuna is engulfed in swirling brine (sea water with the addition of salt), preserving it in its natural environment, a technique that Captain Scott Hawkins believes attributes to the high content of omega-3s in his canned tuna: A 2-ounce serving of American Tuna contains 2.6 grams



Photograph: Alexandra Stafford

of omega-3 fatty acids, seven times the amount found in the same sized serving of Starkist.

Americans can purchase American Tuna from Whole Foods Markets nationwide, and locally at Jimbo's and Point Loma Seafoods. Bearing the MSC label, every can of American Tuna can be traced back to the boat from which the tuna was caught, ensuring the tuna originated in a sustainable fishery. Pirating of fish is big business, and Greenpeace estimates that 300,000 tons of tuna are caught illegally in the Pacific every year. "Without traceability," said Webster, "there will continue to be illegal harvesting of fish." This practice severely harms marine ecosystems as well as the economies of small states such as the Cook Islands and French Polynesia that don't have the resources to monitor their territorial waters.

Today, dwindling stocks of tuna worldwide is an increasing concern. As consumers, we can help reverse the decline simply by making smarter choices at the market. When cooking with American Tuna, "think outside the tuna sandwich," urged Webster, who recommended sautéing the tuna with tomatoes and olive oil and tossing it with pasta. With a two-ounce serving of tuna providing 14 grams of protein, a six-ounce can of American Tuna can easily feed four people.

According to the MSC, one quarter of the world's fisheries are overfished or depleted, and unless action is taken, some of our favorite species of fish may disappear forever. If you, like many Americans, adore your chicken of the sea, you can help ensure future generations similarly enjoy this delicacy: Keep the San Diego tuna story alive: Buy American Tuna. ☪

*Alexandra Stafford is a freelance journalist, amateur photographer and novice gardener living in San Clemente with her husband. As an avid supporter of the local-food movement, she strives to learn where and how her food is produced. She particularly enjoys posting her findings on her blog alexandracoooks.com*

## HELPFUL SOURCES:



[www.americantuna.com](http://www.americantuna.com)  
[www.americanalbacore.com](http://www.americanalbacore.com)  
[www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org)

The crew aboard the St. George practices the skills of "pole fishing" for tuna. Circa 1950.

(Photograph courtesy of Josephine "Jody" Dalestrieri from *San Diego's Little Italy*, by Kimber M. Quinney and Thomas J. Cesarini, Published by Arcadia Publishing; 888 312-2665)

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