

Farming for fine fish

Wild king prices send chefs searching for alternative sources of salmon

By BRET THORN

June 30, 2008) It has been a challenging season for wild king salmon, but early shortages of these seasonal fish have brought attention to other salmon options, including different species of wild fish, boutique varieties of farm-raised Atlantic salmon and even farm-raised kings.

Some chefs started to worry about wild king salmon prices as long ago as February, when officials raised concerns about the state of the fishery of the Sacramento River.

The salmon that return to that river cover a wide area of the Pacific Ocean, so to ensure their safe return home to breed, the catching of those fish off the entire coast of California and most of Oregon was banned for the season.

That's not as bad as it sounds for the global salmon supply: The Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute reports that over the past 20 years between 90 percent and 95 percent of wild salmon harvested in North America has come from Alaskan waters, not from Canada or the lower United States.

Still, the Sacramento River has had a good couple of years of salmon fishing, says ASMI spokeswoman Laura Fleming. Suppliers point out that public demand for wild salmon rather than farmed has increased in recent years. Add to those factors general commodity inflation and a weak dollar making the euro more attractive to North American fish suppliers, and it was clear that king salmon prices were already ready to rise when bad news came from Alaska's Copper River.

Fans of wild kings wait all year for those from the Copper River, because they are usually the first ones to return in significant numbers to their spawning grounds to breed, which is also when they are harvested.

This year that fishery opened in mid-May, "and the first few openings were not very productive," says Steve Lahaie, a partner in [Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises](#) concept Shaw's Crab House.

"**Spring** got off to a slow start here," Fleming says, adding that the fish now are returning in the numbers expected—about the same as last year, which means about half a million king salmon will be harvested in Alaska this season.

But king are just one of the five species of salmon in the Pacific. They are the largest, the most expensive and the first ones to return home in the spring, but not everyone thinks they're the best.

Fish City Grill, a 22-unit chain based in Dallas with a per-person check average of \$16, reflecting a blended lunch and dinner check including beverage, charges \$24.99 for Copper River sockeyes, "which we happen to prefer over kings," says president and co-founder Bill Bayne. He says he prefers the deeper red color and also likes the flavor better.

Sockeye is offered as a special on units' hand-written chalkboards, and can account for between 25 percent and 30 percent of sales.

"It's a great-selling item," he adds, even though he sold it for just \$20.99 last year, because sockeye prices are also "much higher" than last year.

Various national parks and other on-site operations have started selling the more reasonably priced coho salmon in recent years, and Fleming predicts that people will also turn to the keta species, better known by the less marketable name of chum.

The fifth species, pink salmon, is still canned in large numbers, although value-added products made from that species—such as fully cooked, grill-marked fillet portions—are coming on-stream.

"In the past 10 years we've seen a lot of growth in the diversity of products that are offered," Fleming adds, noting that such treatment of pinks is helpful because they don't hold well when simply frozen.

Back at Fish City Grill, when wild sockeyes aren't in season, they offer farm-raised Atlantic salmon from Chile whose "green-friendly" practices have been approved by Bayne. Those prices are up just slightly this year, he says.

That salmon is offered in an \$8.99 salad at lunch. At dinner it's presented on the chalkboard in a variety of ways. It might be offered crusted in panko breadcrumbs with a Thai-chile glaze, or perhaps crusted in horseradish and barbecued

and served with fruit relishes and compound butter. Those items typically are offered for \$12.99-\$13.99.

Scott Szekretar, chef of **H2O** Seafood Grill in Smithtown, N.Y., uses farm-raised salmon from New Zealand, where kings are raised, rather than the Atlantic variety raised on most farms. Suppliers say king salmon also is being farm-raised in British Columbia.

"I love it," Szekretar says of the New Zealand king salmon. "It's leaner than normal [farm-raised] salmon, with darker flesh that tastes great."

He notes that it's more consistent than wild salmon, which also is "probably three times the price of farm-raised king salmon."

He offers them to guests for \$19 grilled, blackened or as what he calls "Nobu's misoglazed salmon," for which the fillets are marinated in a blend of miso, sake, mirin and sugar, a combination that he says the kings stand up to better than Atlantic salmon.

"I like to eat it raw, too," he adds. "As soon as I cut it I like to take a slice for myself and eat it with some soy sauce."

He also mixes the cheeks with soy sauce, sesame oil and sriracha sauce for a tartare.

Chef-owner Anita Lo uses farmed New Zealand kings at her new Bar Q in New York City.

"I think it's great for sashimi, because it's so fatty, and it's a real consistent product," she says. She slices the bellies for the raw bar and tea-smokes other cuts as an appetizer. She sells two slices of the sashimi for between \$2 and \$2.50.

Chris Lim, chef de cuisine of **BLT Steak**, also in New York, praises New Zealand kings for their size. He gets them at 10 to 12 pounds.

"It's a much easier fish than a big [wild] king salmon, just space-wise," he says. "I don't personally like them that skinny to sear, but for curing, it's actually better," he says, noting that he also likes farmraised Scottish Atlantic salmon of about the same size.

He cures it in a hotel pan with salt, dill, cilantro, brandy, brown sugar and orange zest, pressing it down with another hotel pan, flipping it twice a day for

two days and then rinsing it off. He often serves that as an amuse-bouche for VIPs during lunch.

At Shaw's Crab House, Lahaie says he gets wild salmon for most of the year—buying from up and down the Pacific coast as needed, and getting farm-raised kings from British Columbia for the rest of the year.

"The wild is better—I think better-tasting," he says. "But of the farmed salmon we've tried, we like these kings the best."

It's also more expensive than other farmed salmon, he adds, "but we think it's a better flavor."

Other chefs prefer some of the farm-raised salmon coming out of Ireland and Scotland, which had been sold as "organic," even though the United States has no standards for organic fish yet. At any rate, their prices are far more stable than wild stocks, chefs say.

Antonio Mora, chef of Avenue in Long Branch, N.J., pan-roasts the Scottish fillets with Dijon mustard and serves them over Dupuy lentils with a pork reduction for \$26.

Oregon native Brian Malarkey, executive chef of **Oceanaire** Seafood Room's San Diego unit, loves to use wild Alaska salmon when he can.

"It's fun to open the box and smell the air and the ocean," he says. "It's really great."

He uses both kings and sockeyes, buying them whole except for the head. He buys one king with the head on for display at the raw bar.

He serves a 10-ounce portion of the fish, grilled or broiled, depending on the customer's choice, cooked with olive oil and sea salt, and charges \$50.

"It's roughly \$20 I'm paying per portion," he says. "It's not something I make money on."

Malarkey also buys cohos when they're available.

When they're not, he gets farm-raised Nova Scotia char—a cousin of salmon—that is raised in Washington, as well as Scottish salmon raised without antibiotics.

"But when the salmon season is hitting, I'm going to pay what I have to," he says.

