

On the road again: Halibut trucked south from Alaska

With fresh halibut soon to leave the market, what about frozen?

Most of the halibut eaten in the United States comes from Alaska. That's a given. But what isn't so assured is the method it gets from the 49th state to your loading dock.

Halibut, which typically grow to 25 or 30 pounds but occasionally are caught weighing more than 200 pounds, may be sent fresh on an airplane and, of course, frozen, but it's become increasingly common that halibut comes to the Lower 48 by regular over-the-road semi-trucks.

Figure 3,500 road miles from Homer, Alaska, to Chicago.

So, we wanted to know how halibut stood up to all that time on the road, as compared to fresh halibut that flew south. We threw in a sample of frozen halibut to make things interesting. The results may surprise you.

Wild Catch gathered a group at the Waterfront Seafood Grill on Seattle's Pier 70 to taste halibut transported by both routes — plus frozen product — to rate them on visual appeal, scent, texture, “chalkiness,” and taste.

Executive chef Steve Cain steamed all three samples separately for four minutes. “I didn't pan fry or grill it because I wanted to leave it in its most natural way,” he said.

The surprising winner was frozen halibut. Our sample was purchased at University Seafood & Poultry in Seattle for \$11.98 per pound, retail.

The fish came from Southeast Alaska and was frozen a month and a half before the test, according to Dale Erickson, owner of University Seafood & Poultry. (Charles Ramseyer, former executive chef at the iconic Ray's Boathouse in Seattle, says frozen halibut is generally good if it's eaten within three or four months, but after that the quality drops.)

The fish itself was very white with a uniform texture. One participant, Bryan Key, a captain at the Waterfront, described it as “silky, smooth; with a consistent pearl color.” Peter Hurme, publisher of *Wild Catch*, found it had an “almost buttery flavor; a hint of the sea.”

Food writer Zachary Lyons pronounced the sample “bright, yellow-white, like it's supposed to be; firm and holding together; clean with a slight brininess like the sea.” However, he found it lacking some of the



Wild Catch tasters gather at the Waterfront Seafood Grill on Pier 70 in Seattle to sample halibut. Seattle photos by Alan Cai



Halibut begin their long journey to your establishment in the cold waters off Alaska. Because the Alaskan fishery has been “rationalized,” fishermen now fish on a continuing basis from spring into autumn. Before, there were a few mad dashes — “derby” fishing — in which fishermen caught as many fish as possible, creating a glut for the processors and the market.

sweetness that's typically found in halibut.

College student and commercial fisherman Mark Gleason had mixed feelings: “This fish would probably lend itself well to sauces, marinades, or rubs, [but I'm] not impressed as a stand-alone piece of fish.”

The highest accolade came from Eric Baltazar, a commercial pilot, who found the flesh to be “moist yet firm.” He declared this sample to be the “best tasting of the bunch; I imagine most halibut aspire to taste this good.”

At the end of the day, the total points awarded to this fish were 285 (out of a possible total of 390).

Coming in second was fresh flown halibut, purchased at Mutual Fish Co. in Seattle for \$16.75 per pound/retail. This albino-looking fish had



First stop on the way to the freezer: Processor workers wrestle halibut onto scales for the initial weighing. Alaska photos by Klas Stolpe



- ^ Samples are steamed by the kitchen staff. Each sample was marked with a different colored toothpick.
- < Samples were delivered unmarked other than with a color code. Even the chef — Steve Cain — didn't know which sample was which. Earlier, he had thought the frozen sample would be obvious, because of weeping, but not the sample we selected.

a slightly slimy appearance when cooked, which some tasters felt was a little off-putting.

Sales rep Diane Sandvik, the daughter of a commercial halibut fisherman in Alaska, found this fish heavy and too chewy, as well as drier than the other samples. Both she and Lyons found it a little chalky and too white, but Gleason said it had a “nice, creamy color” and that it “flakes nicely, and almost has a marbled texture.”

Chef Cain was underawed: “I would never serve this to guests or my family,” he said. “Perhaps if you were making a halibut spread for crackers?”

Total points: 215

The unfortunate loser may be a warning to all of us: Don't drive if you can fly. The fresh, trucked halibut came from Alaska and was purchased at a Seattle grocery retail outlet for a surprising \$19.95 a pound/retail — the highest price paid, yet for the least-favorite sample.

The trucked halibut had a slightly yellow-brown hue, darker than the other two specimens. Despite this, taster Tracey Huddleson felt that this halibut looked “moist, glistening, more opalescent than the others, which I like.” But her estimation soon dropped: “The taste did not live up to the appearance,” she said. “It was exceedingly bland.”

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Taste Test: Halibut cont.



Our panel is made up of folks ranging from professional chefs to halibut fishermen.

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This sample was considered slimy and fishy-smelling. Hurme felt it didn't taste fresh, and Gleason said he found the fish's texture lacking: "When I pushed down on the fish with my fork, it didn't spring back into shape."

'Some of the best halibut I've tasted has been frozen.' – Peggy Parker, president of the Halibut Association of North America

Despite the negatives, the fish's texture was uniform and the regularity of the flakes made it look like a healthy fish. PR rep Stephanie Lin felt that the layers came apart easily and that the fish was "moist, soft, and smooth."

The smoothness may have come from the oiliness, which many


tasters detected.

Total points: 184

If you're surprised at these results, you're not alone. We were too, so we called Peggy Parker, president of the Halibut Association of North America.

"Conventional wisdom would say the fresh flown [would be best] because it's closest to the capture time," she said. "But some of the best halibut I've tasted has been frozen."

It all depends on how — and how long — the fish has been handled before freezing, how it was frozen, and how well it's been cared for in the freezer.

Bruce Leaman, executive director of the International Pacific Halibut Commission, agreed: "Frozen fish has been overlooked but if it's [frozen] early, it can be a good product." 

Does this taste test reflect reality?

In a word, no.

Testing three samples from three different supply chains gathered from three different outlets in a short window of time won't predict every shipment to every place. However, it simply shows — pretty convincingly — that in tasting our samples, participants reached a consensus that may seem counterintuitive.

A taste test of different samples gathered from different outlets might produce different results.

The value in a taste test like this is to challenge orthodoxy and to raise questions. For example, do you still believe:

- Frozen is always inferior to fresh?
- Halibut, being firm and low in fat, stands up well to extra hours in the fish case — or on the road?
- Higher prices — even extravagantly higher prices — will guarantee quality?

We suggest restaurateurs and retailers might benefit from staging similar taste tests with their employees or their customers. In the shop, it can be a great team-building exercise, plus offer insights into the product you're all trying to sell.

As for customers, there is no better way to build loyalty than to offer your patrons the opportunity to build emotional equity in your establishment and its goods.

Finally, you can produce promotional material (posters and slicks, for example) featuring your tasters and tastings to build a "we-listen-to-you" campaign.

If you want to hold similar tastings, drop us a line at editor@wildcatchmagazine.com. We'll be happy to give you some advice.