

Which tastes better: farmed or wild?



We found out

Last summer, Pacific Fishing and Wild Catch magazines teamed up to sponsor a taste test in New York City.

Because Wild Catch reaches primarily chefs and seafood department managers, the message from our taste test is for them. But we thought you might like to know what your subscription price helps pay for: Bragging rights.

The question was elementary: Which tastes better — farm product or wild salmon from the Pacific?

We decided to find out.

Last August, in the middle of the wild salmon season, eight willing tasters gathered at West Bank Cafe, on West 42nd Street in New York, to help us answer the question.

We weren't interested in chefs, seafood merchants, or professional foodies. Rather, we wanted knowledgeable restaurant patrons to represent the folks who eventually pick up the tab: the consumers.

Chef Joe Marcus poached the five samples — four wild (fresh king, frozen king, fresh sockeye, and frozen sockeye) and one farmed (Atlantic) — in the same mild court bouillon (in five different pots) to see what participants thought in a tasting.

The diners scored the fish on color, mouth-feel, scent, and taste, and the fish roused different preferences in each taster.

The wild samples were purchased sight unseen in Bellingham, Wash., and shipped by the retailer by air to New York.

We were tempted to purchase the wild

fish in New York, but after investigative stories in *The New York Times* and *Consumer Reports*, we were afraid farmed product might be substituted for wild. (This, of course, raises the obvious question: Why would dealers in farmed product go out of their way to camouflage it as wild?)

The farmed product was purchased in New York, however.

The results: All wild samples — including frozen — scored much higher than the fresh farmed product.

Farm pen product

"While this piece was beautifully translucent, it was really tasteless, though its mouth-feel lived up to the translucency," said Joanne and Daniel Smith, vice president at Zurich Capital Markets and controller of Playwrights Horizons, respectively, who were tasting together.

Others were even more scathing. "Pallid, chalky, and unattractive, trumped by its lack of flavor," said Ben Schmerler, president of First Press consulting company.

Schmerler's comments were second by Arthur Yann, vice president and director of CKPR, who said, "Bland. This fish could have been raised in a New York City public pool."

And Michael J. Fox, director of restaurants for Bergdorf Goodman, felt it was "a little mushy in texture and seemed higher in fat."

Farmed total points:

36 (out of a possible 84)

Fresh troll-caught Washington king salmon

The fresh king salmon was described as "cloying" by Steve Barnfield, an IBM engineer, and Schmerler felt it was "bland, if slightly buttery and metallic."

Fox again summed it up: "A nice feel mouth-wise, with a slightly fishy scent in a less appealing way than some of the others. Middle of the road, which is the salmon expectation, all too often."

Fresh troll-caught king salmon:

Total points: 47

Frozen troll-caught Washington king salmon

The frozen king salmon was described as "gamey," "steaky," and "mineraly," with "an intense salmon flavor," by some participants, but Yann felt it was "flaccid, with no texture."

Fox, however, saw it in a better light: "This piece of fish seemed freshest, with firm flesh, a nice fresh smell, and appealing color," he said.

Frozen king salmon:

Total points: 57

Frozen Fraser River sockeye salmon

This sample came from an unusual form of commercial fishing: the reef net.

Fishermen build artificial reefs with nets near salmon migrating sites in the salt water. Observers mount towers on each "reef" and watch until a school of salmon enters the reef channel.



The tasters prepare to feast at West Bank Café in New York City's Theater District.

Then, alerted by a cry from the watchman, other fishermen rapidly raise the net, harvesting the salmon.

Visually, the reef net salmon was a favorite, although feelings about its flavor varied.

Why do our tasters not agree?

Because everyone has different tastes and different standards of reference.

When one taster might dislike a subtle mineral aftertaste, others will delight in the authentic taste of the sea.

Or, some tasters, acclimated to the sight of dyed farm product, might see the flesh of king salmon as being too pale.

Plus, troll-caught, wild Chinook salmon, while better than the farmed, might have suffered in comparison to the sockeye samples, which had only miles to go to the processor.

What's important is the total score, an indication of overall preference.

"Lovely, perfect color, but didn't seem to match up on taste," said the Smith couple, and Schmerler felt it was "smooth, yet meaty." Rob Seixas, a senior editor with Zagat, felt it had "great colors and is the most appealing."

Total points, a tie with the frozen king salmon: 57

Fresh Fraser River sockeye salmon

The sockeye was the clear winner, although it wasn't perfect.

Schmerler described its "rich, deep flavor," and "sweet scent," while Seixas said it had a "nice, intense, salmon flavor," but "the texture was slightly chewy."

Yann felt it was the "best overall. It had a rich color, firm feel, and it stands up to the fork."

Fox felt it stood up a little too much: "It had a fresh smell, and the flesh was almost too firm, not as flaky as I would expect."

The Smiths said it "had a fishier note than the others."

Total points: 59

Color-wise, the five fish fell into two groups: pink and a deep orange. The latter two were the sockeye and the fresh king salmon.

"The color on the sockeye was almost tuna-ish," says Chef Joe. It was clear that the sockeye was the best quality, he said, adding that the reef net sockeye and the fresh king salmon both looked really good. "The frozen king looked even worse than the Atlantic — it was very pale and fish isn't supposed to look like that," he said.

One taster, Michael Salmon, host of New York's Wild Salmon radio show, summed up his evening's experience: "The greatest shock I had was how bad farmed [salmon] is. It was shallow in every way, including the color and the flavor. I was shocked at how weak of a product we've all come to expect."

Wild salmon is generally considered the fish to pick if you have a choice between farmed and wild. It's also said to be much healthier than its farmed counterpart.

According to the FDA, wild salmon has 20 percent more protein and 20 percent less fat than farm-raised salmon. It also has more omega-3 fatty acids — the heart's favorite nutrient — than farmed versions.

Farmed fish have far higher levels of chemical contaminants, including PCBs — known carcinogens — that can cause cancer and neurobehavioral problems. They are also fed a dye, canthaxanthin, which gives their flesh its pleasing pink color. Without it, they would be an unappealing gray. Wild fish's color is natural, from the shells and flesh of the seafood they eat.

But the proof is in the eating, and that's exactly what our tasting panel did. ■



Cassandra Wright of Vis Seafoods in Bellingham supplied the fish, sight unseen by editors, and shipped it directly to New York.