

Livestock with Fins

What's on your plate.

High cholesterol, hormones and mental images of fattening pens and slaughterhouses make the prospect of eating meat a bit unappealing for many of us. Perhaps fresh salmon is a healthier alternative. And look, here it is on sale at Neighborhood Grocer for just \$3.99 per pound. That price does seem awfully low, seeing as how salmon runs in the Northwest have decreased dramatically over the years and some species are endangered.

It's highly likely that's not wild, Pacific salmon you're buying, but rather farmed Atlantic salmon, the most popular fish variety in the world today. An invention of the past 15 years, farmed Atlantic salmon are bred and raised in open net cages in controlled offshore sites in northern Europe, South America and especially British Columbia, where Atlantic salmon account for 80 percent of all farmed fish. These cages are crowded to restrict and control movement. The fish are fattened and given antibiotics until ripe for sale.

Not only is the Atlantic farmed salmon a steal, this fish comes with a little something extra for the money. Coloring agents are added to the fish's food to color the flesh pink in order to appear more like its wild Pacific cousin. Without it, Atlantic salmon are an unappetizing brownish-gray. Pigments used are astaxanthin and its synthetic, cheaper counterpart, canthaxanthin, a dye so caustic that the European Commission reduced the maximum amount allowed after studies indicated over-consumption caused eye damage in humans. Also added to the fish food are various antibiotics to fight off the rampant diseases caused by open net cages.

A B.C. industry association website says the pigments used today are actually beneficial to consumers, and antibiotic use has been cut 90 percent in the past decade to the point where it is only administered when fish are sick, and not as a preventative measure.

Atlantic salmon are fed steadily larger food pellets consisting of processed fish-meat, grains, minerals, vitamins and fish oil until they reach their market weight of 8 to 10 pounds, which takes about 30 months. The combination of movement-restricting quarters and a high-fat diet quickly grows meaty, marketable, cheap salmon — albeit with dioxins, saturated fat and PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), which only occur in minimal levels in wild salmon.

Vancouver geneticist Michael Easton published a study last year that found eating farmed Atlantic salmon even once a week is hazardous because of high amounts of PCBs, which have been linked to immune system suppression and slowed childhood mental development.

Similar efficiency increasing methods employed by livestock growers have been applied to fish. Much like chickens crammed into tiny spaces, farmed Atlantic salmon live in crowded net enclosures. Similar to beef cattle, farmed salmon are fed a diet that creates a fatty, juicy meat product.

Like livestock farming, Atlantic salmon



Erin Dent at Newman's shows an Atlantic salmon in this EW file photo. The store no longer sells the farmed fish.

farming has environmental consequences. Farmed Atlantic salmon have escaped net cages to compete with wild salmon for food and habitat. Farmed Atlantic fish have been found in 78 rivers and streams in B.C. Ironically, nine million wild Atlantic salmon eggs and smolts were planted in these same rivers but didn't survive. Efforts to control escaping fish have seen results. Some 9,200 fish were reported escaped in B.C. in 2002, down from hundreds of thousands in years past.

Sea lice remain a problem, a pest that thrives in the close quarter net cages. But perhaps the worse problem is salmon feces, which build up under the nets along with uneaten food. In response to this concern, many salmon farms have been moved from calm, shallow inlets to deeper areas with stronger currents to spread the feces over a wider area, eliminating buildup and subsequent damage to any one specific seabed.

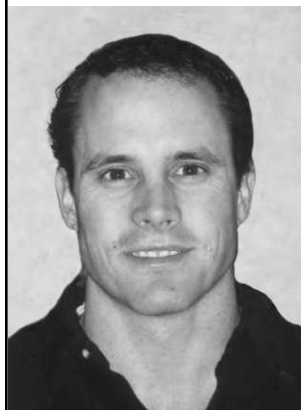
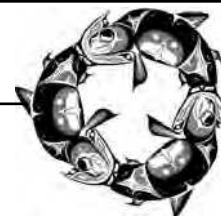
The fish farming industry is lucrative and creates jobs. In B.C., 85 percent of the 60,000 metric tons of farmed Atlantic salmon in 2002 were exported, resulting in \$391 million in sales and 4,700 jobs. Wild salmon exports brought in a mere \$129 million.

Most Eugene-area grocery stores carry farmed Atlantic salmon but many specialty meat and fish sellers do not. Fisherman's Market on 7th Avenue does carry it. The two local Wild Oats stores do not, as they follow organic-oriented policies set forth by their corporate office in Bolder, Colo. Newman's Fish Company on Willamette also does not stock the fish, but instead offer a wild Chinook that costs a bit more.

"The people who shop with us and appreciate the wild salmon make an effort to not only afford it but seek it out," said Newman's Courtney Dones. **EW**

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