

The seafood industry bets Americans will finally eat more fish if it looks more like meat

By J.M. Hirsch
The Associated Press

BOSTON — The future of fish is looking a lot like ... salami? And meatballs. And fried chicken. And breakfast sausage. And, of course, spare-ribs and burgers. This is America, after all.

Welcome to the era of surreptitious seafood, an industry gamble that overcoming Americans’ relative disinterest in the meat of the sea is all a matter of making fish look and taste less like, well, fish.

“Our Taiwanese magic is making tuna taste like fried chicken,” said Jack Chi, a spokesman for Tuna Fresh, a Taiwan-based company that sells tuna as fried “nuggets” and breaded chicken-tender-like strips. “We wanted to be able to engage in the U.S. market, and we found that fried foods are the way.”

Chi’s company was one of hundreds showcasing their products at the recent Seafood Expo North America in Boston. And among the sea of smoked salmon, scallops, and all manner of crustaceans, one trend stood out: The seafood being pitched to the American market is looking less and less like seafood.

“It’s been a big trend for the last couple of years,” said Justin Rogers, a sales manager with SK Food Brands in Los Angeles. Among his company’s recent offerings: shrimp burgers, both slider-size and Whopper-worthy. “It makes it more palatable to people who aren’t big seafood fans. Especially with things like these sliders, it gives them an entry point.”

The fish-skeptical American palate

Americans have a notoriously limited appetite for seafood, consuming just about 19 pounds a year — a number that has budged only a bit in a century — most of it as shrimp and salmon. The global average is 45 pounds, while some European countries clock in closer to 90 pounds. Iceland leads everyone with around 200 pounds per year.

Disguising seafood to appeal to Americans isn’t entirely new. After all, frozen fish sticks and the McDonald’s



Filet-O-Fish hardly scream catch of the day. But many of the newer products are an entirely different species. Or rather, are trying to be.

“It looks like a Slim Jim by design,” Harbor Bell Seafoods spokeswoman Holly Phillips said of the Seattle company’s salmon snack strips, available in smoked, lemon-pepper, mango, and — curiously — original. “It doesn’t smell fishy. It doesn’t taste fishy.”

If an “original” salmon snack stick doesn’t taste fishy, what DOES it taste like? After a couple chewy bites, let’s go with Slim Jim adjacent and move on.

Let fish be fish?

Not everyone thinks covert crustaceans are a good thing.

“Eat fish that looks like fish!” says Niaz Dorry, coordinating director of the North American Marine Alliance, an advocacy group for sustainable seafood practices. “The likelihood that that fish came from a community-based, scale-appropriate entity is much higher if that fish still looks like what it was when it was swimming in the water. Factory scale and fake are the two F-words I tell everybody to avoid.”

The pivot to stealthy seafood comes at a critical time for the industry. The only real

growth in sales has come from the sushi counter (looking at you, Gen Z) and price hikes (not exactly helping the cause). The \$24 billion market otherwise has been flat for years, with just 10% of shoppers accounting for nearly half of sales (seafood, apparently, is an all-in sort of thing).

Taking a lesson from sushi

Part of sushi’s appeal is its blend of convenience and novelty, said Steve Markenson, vice president of research and insights for consumer marketing firm FMI. Some of the newer products may offer similar appeal, but he’s not convinced it will be enough.

“The non-seafood folks — which is about 40% of the population — I don’t know that this is really going to be appealing to them,” he said. “They’re not looking to necessarily add seafood into their diet.”

Seafood lovers aren’t a sure bet, either. That 10% of dedicated seafood shoppers want it for what it is, not cleverly disguised. “They love what they love about it,” Markenson said. “They might want it seasoned up a little, but they want that full-blown salmon.”

Oddly, the most likely audience may well be the one typically most averse to seafood — the very young, said Joshua

SURREPTITIOUS SEAFOOD. Fried calamari snacks are displayed at the Seafood Expo North America in Boston on March 17, 2026. The future of fish is looking a lot like ... salami? And meatballs. And fried chicken. And breakfast sausage. And, of course, spareribs and burgers. This is America, after all. Welcome to the era of surreptitious seafood, an industry gamble that overcoming Americans’ relative disinterest in the meat of the sea is all a matter of making fish look and taste less like, well, fish. (J. M. Hirsch via AP)

Bickert, a seafood market reporter and analyst for Expana. “If you package it like hot dogs and hamburgers and chicken tenders, you maybe change that mindset at a younger age.”

For Mike Simon, owner of Hialeah, Florida-based Surfsnax, it’s a matter of making the foreign feel familiar. “We want to put it in a format that people are used to eating,” he said as he sliced off a round of his company’s salmon salami. “But it’s not hiding that it’s salmon.”

Not so sure about that. After being cured, shaped, and served like a traditional salami, his product hardly looked seaworthy. But it was tasty.

Meaty spareribs, only made of fish

The most audacious offering was fish spareribs from the Amazon. Brazilian tambaqui is a beefy freshwater fish that just happens to have a physique perfect for slicing into meaty, pork-like ribs. Friocenter Pescados spokesman Danillo Souza Alves was quick to point out that tambaqui sports a far higher meat-to-bone ratio on its ribs than pork. And truthfully, they do taste pretty meaty.

“It’s a finger food. You can easily eat it in stadiums for football, baseball, and hockey,” he said.

Well, let’s not go crazy.

Americans do love a chip, however. And all manner of seafood are being turned into crackers, chips, and crunchy sticks. Ina Park, a spokeswoman for the expo’s Korean pavilion, was eager to introduce Balance Grow’s Fried Calamari Snack, which looked like slightly malformed Utz Potato Stix. Park had other ideas.

“They taste like Cheetos,” she said.

J.M. Hirsch is a food and travel journalist, and the former food editor for The Associated Press.

Citing First Amendment, federal judge blocks Trump order to end funding for NPR and PBS

By Michael Kunzelman
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Citing the First Amendment, a federal judge agreed to permanently block the Trump administration from implementing a presidential directive to end federal funding for National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), two media entities that the White House has said are counterproductive to American priorities.

The operational impact of U.S. District Judge Randolph Moss’ decision was not immediately clear — both because it will likely be appealed and because too much damage to the public-broadcasting system has already been done, both by the president and congress.

Moss ruled that President Donald Trump’s executive order to cease funding for NPR and PBS is unlawful and unenforceable. The judge said the First Amendment right to free speech “does not tolerate viewpoint discrimination and retaliation of this type.”

“It is difficult to conceive of clearer evidence that a government action is targeted at viewpoints that the President does not like and seeks to squelch,” wrote Moss.

White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson said Moss’ decision is “a ridiculous ruling by an activist judge attempting to undermine the law.”

“NPR and PBS have no right to receive taxpayer funds, and congress already voted to defund them. The Trump Administration looks forward to ultimate victory on the issue,” Jackson said in a statement.

PBS, with programming ranging from “Sesame Street” and “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” to Ken Burns’ documentaries, has been operating for more than half a century. NPR has news programming from “All Things Considered” and cultural shows like the “Tiny Desk” concerts. For decades, the fates of both systems have been part of a philosophical debate over whether government

should help fund their operations.

Punishment for “past speech” cited in decision

The judge noted that Trump’s executive order simply directs that all federal agencies “cut off any and all funding” to NPR, which is based in Washington, and PBS, based in Arlington, Virginia.

“The Federal Defendants fail to cite a single case in which a court has ever upheld a statute or executive action that bars a particular person or entity from participating in any federally funded activity based on that person or entity’s past speech,” the judge wrote.

Last year, Trump, a Republican, said at a news conference he would “love to” defund NPR and PBS because he believes they’re biased in favor of Democrats.

“The message is clear: NPR and PBS need not apply for any federal benefit because the President disapproves of their ‘left wing’ coverage of the news,” Moss wrote.

NPR accused the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) of violating its First Amendment free speech rights when it moved to cut off its access to grant money appropriated by congress. NPR also claims Trump wants to punish it for the content of its journalism.

“Public media exists to serve the public interest — that of Americans — not that of any political agenda or elected official,” said Katherine Maher, NPR’s president and CEO. She called the decision a decisive affirmation of the rights of a free and independent press.

PBS chief Paula Kerger said she was thrilled with the decision. The executive order, she said, is “textbook” unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination and retaliation. “At PBS, we will continue to do what we’ve always done: serve our mission to educate and inspire all Americans as the nation’s most trusted media institution.”

Last August, CPB announced it would take steps toward closing itself down after being defunded by congress.

A victory, though incremental, for press freedom

Plaintiffs’ attorney Theodore Boutrous said the ruling is “a victory for the First Amendment and for freedom of the press.”

“As the court expressly recognized, the First Amendment draws a line, which the government may not cross, at efforts to use government power — including the power of the purse — ‘to punish or suppress disfavored expression’ by others,” Boutrous said in a statement. “The Executive Order crossed that line.”

The judge agreed with government attorneys that some

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