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Winner of Nine Pulitzer Prizes

Food & Drink

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In taste test, farmed salmon beat wild salmon, hands down

In a surprise turn, a tasting panel found farmed salmon tastier than fresh, wild-caught fish.

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Read a story about salmon, and the odds are good that, somewhere, it'll tell you that wild salmon tastes better than farmed. But does it? We decided to find out in a blind tasting, and assembled a panel that included noted seafood chefs and a seafood wholesaler.

The fish swam the gamut. We had wild king from Washington state, frozen farmed from Costco, and eight in between, including Verlasso farmed salmon from Chile, which is the first open-pen farmed salmon to get a Seafood Watch “buy” recommendation. The tasters came from The Washington Post Food section and the D.C. area seafood scene.

Scott Drewno, executive chef of the Source by Wolfgang Puck, was gracious enough to prepare the fish. Drewno steamed portioned fillets simply, with a little salt.

The judgments were definitive, and surprising. Farmed salmon beat wild salmon, hands down. The overall winner was the Costco frozen Atlantic salmon (Norwegian) — added to the tasting late in the game to provide a counterpoint to all that lovely fresh fish, we thought.

There is an important caveat about the winning salmon: It was packed in a 4 percent salt solution. Many of the tasters noted, and liked, the saltiness. Chef-restaurateur Kaz Okochi mentioned that salt doesn't only affect flavor but also helps make the texture of the fish firmer. Salting is “a typical Japanese technique for fish” and one he uses on salmon sushi.

The next three top-rated fish, with closely grouped scores, also were farmed: Trader Joe's, from Norway; Loch Duart, from Scotland; and Verlasso.

Ancora chef-restaurateur Bob Kinkead, who estimates that he personally has garnished upward of 350,000 servings of Pepita Salmon, a signature dish at the now-closed Kinkead's, seemed disheartened that there was so little difference among the fish. “None stood out and said, ‘Buy me,’ ” he said.

When standout flavors were detected, it wasn't in a good way. A couple of samples had off-flavors that were picked up by some tasters but not by all. And, although some samples had either the large flake and high fat content that gave them away as farmed, or the finer grain and meaty texture that identified them as wild, we could not consistently tell which was which.

One thing, though, is certain. You'll never catch any of us saying wild salmon tastes better than farmed.

The fish, in order of panel preference (overall ratings 1-10, with 10 being the highest score):

1. Costco farmed Atlantic, frozen in 4 percent salt solution, from Norway; \$6 per pound (7.6 out of 10)
2. Trader Joe's farmed Atlantic, from Norway; \$10.99 per pound (6.4)
3. Loch Duart farmed Atlantic, from Scotland; \$15 to \$18 per pound (6.1)
4. Verlasso farmed Atlantic, from Chile; \$12 to \$15 per pound (6)
5. Whole Foods farmed Atlantic salmon, from Scotland; \$14.99 per pound (5.6)
6. ProFish wild king (netted), from Willapa Bay, Wash.; \$16 to \$20 per pound (5.3)
7. AquaChile farmed Atlantic, from Chile; \$12 to \$15 per pound (4.9)
8. ProFish wild coho (trolled), from Alaska; \$16 to \$20 per pound (4.4)
9. ProFish wild king (trolled), from Willapa Bay; \$16 to \$20 per pound (4)
10. Costco wild coho, from Alaska; \$10.99 per pound (3.9)