

Online Extra: Barramundi: The Next Big Fin?

An Australian cousin of the overfished Chilean sea bass is swimming to the rescue of diners and perhaps U.S. fish farmers

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With Chilean sea bass nearly fished out and chefs across the country looking for the next hot catch, the answer may have arrived from Australia. Barramundi, another kind of sea bass with white flakey meat, recently graced White House tables at a dinner for Australian Prime Minister John Howard. This summer the fish also turned up on menus at such fancy Manhattan venues as the Sea Grill at Rockefeller Center and Alain Ducasse.

It might surprise diners to learn the barramundi on their plates weren't hauled in by any fishermen. They're actually raised in huge tanks on a fish farm in Turner Falls, Mass.—about 100 miles west of Boston—owned by a publicly traded Australian company called Australis Aquaculture. And because they're grown indoors without antibiotics or hormones and fed mainly with soy meal, barramundi may avoid some of the tricky environmental and health worries that have held back previous U.S. aquaculture efforts.

NICE TASTE.

"Farmed fish is necessary, and it takes the pressure off of wild," says Roger Berkowitz, CEO of Legal Sea Foods, which has served barramundi. "I think of farmed like the jug wines of the 1970s, while wild fish is the boutique bottle."

The Turner Falls farm resulted from a collaboration between Australian entrepreneur Stewart Graham and U.S. fish-farming expert Josh Goldman. Graham first tasted barramundi at a restaurant in Perth and was amazed to discover he was eating a farm-raised product. He spent more than a year plotting how to break into the business, eventually coming across Goldman, who had been raising striped bass at Turner Falls.

At the farm, the barramundi live indoors in huge pools of salty water designed to match the local Australian waters off the Great Barrier Reef, where they live naturally. As the fish grow, they're moved into ever larger tanks by a huge tube system Australis calls the pescalator.

DEPRESSED PRICES.

The plant delivers about 700 metric tons, or 1.4 million pounds, of fish a year. Upgrades costing \$2 million will add 300 tons of capacity by 2007, and the company has purchased enough land to expand to 5,000 tons a year eventually.

"Demand has been outstripping supply," says Carol Devine, Australis vice-president of marketing.

Fish farming has distinguished itself as the fastest-growing segment of the fishing industry worldwide, but in the U.S., fishermen have resisted, and aquaculture has yet to take hold. U.S. farms produce less than \$1 billion worth of fish annually, primarily catfish and trout, vs. worldwide aquaculture valued at as much as \$50 billion.

Norway, Chile, and Canada, the top sellers of farmed salmon, have overtaken the U.S. market and depressed prices for most wild salmon. Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand produce billions of dollars' worth of farmed shellfish, likewise decimating the U.S. industry. And in Honduras, Ecuador, and China, tilapia has quickly turned into one of the most popular species for fish farmers to cultivate, because it can live on a mainly vegetarian diet.

UNIFORM PRODUCT

. Environmentalists have complained about poor conditions at fish farms, but that's already changing as big retailers like Wal-Mart (WMT) embrace the sustainable fisheries movement.

"Fish farming is a crop just like growing corn out of the ground," says Peter Redmond, vice-president for deli and seafood at Wal-Mart. "You can literally change the course of it in one year." For next year's shrimp crop, Wal-Mart found 50 suppliers that could meet its standards, five times more than a year ago. The company says that within the next five years, it won't sell fish that isn't certified as sustainable.

Years of overfishing have left the U.S. industry vulnerable to the growing wave of imports from abroad. And now many in the seafood business say they actually prefer imported farmed shellfish.

Farmed shrimp, for example, are of a more uniform size and quality, and prices don't vary much from week to week. Plus the product is available year-round regardless of weather in the Gulf of Mexico or rough seas off the New England coast.

Now the barramundi fish from Turner Falls may be able to bring those same advantages back to the domestic market.

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