

A commercial fishing boat is shown on the water, with two people on deck. The boat is white with a dark hull and has a large mast and rigging. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains under a cloudy sky. The water is calm with some ripples.

Net gains: dwarfed by the chill grandeur of Taku inlet, commercial fishermen, inured to the harsh elements, routinely brave Alaska's pristine icy waters in search of salmon. Photo by Mark Kelley/AlaskaStock.com.

# WILD ALASKA

## a fish story

**TASTING NOTES** ASTUTE MANAGEMENT OF THE FINITE SEA-RUN SPECIES—MOST NOTABLY SALMON—COURSING THROUGH ITS COLD OFFSHORE WATERS HAS PLACED THE 49TH STATE ON THE CULINARY MAP. CHRIS STYER REPORTS.

The story of Alaska's fisheries—from trawlers prowling the open ocean, to small boats, to processors, to shippers, and finally to markets, restaurants, and dinner plates—weaves together elements as mundane as licensing fees and as weighty as sustainable food sources. On a trip to Alaska sponsored by the Alaskan Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI), a group of us soared over the lacework of islands that make up southeastern Alaska, landed in a helicopter on a glacier, and watched humpback whales breach the pale jade waters of Glacier Bay. We also ate a lot

of fish—mostly king, pink, coho, and sockeye salmon—either planked, smoked, grilled, or roasted.

Alaska's fisheries, which land spot shrimp, crab, clams, scallops, halibut, and, of course, salmon, are in enviable shape when compared with many others. That includes the rest of North America's, which were being severely overfished prior to a measure adopted in the 1970s that banned commercial fishing by other nations within 200 miles of the American coastline. Most fisheries have never recovered; many have gotten worse.

Alaska's Constitution, adopted in 1959, clearly spells out that renewable resources "shall be utilized, developed, and maintained on the sustained yield principle." Pretty farsighted stuff, that. The data accumulated by the ongoing efforts to preserve and even increase the amount of salmon in the state's rivers and oceans is growing. What will be interesting is to see whether that data will help to relieve the dearth of fish in other blighted areas.

And while Alaska's fisheries are holding their own in terms of yield (with some exceptions), the industry has an even tougher challenge to face in the predominance of farm-raised salmon. The consistency of farmed salmon in both availability and price—which is invitingly low—has made it the salmon of choice for an overwhelming majority of foodservice operations. Fresh wild-caught Alaskan salmon, on the other hand, is available for only a portion of the year, in amounts that vary from season to season and at prices driven by market forces. If price, consistency of flavor, and steady supply are the most important considerations to a foodservice operation, chances are it will be dealing exclusively with some type of farm-raised salmon. Those that highlight seasonality and can support the higher price of wild-caught salmon would be well advised to turn to fresh or frozen Alaskan salmon.

At the heart of the Alaskan salmon story are the life cycles and spawning habits of the various types of salmon. All Alaskan salmon are born in fresh water, travel to the ocean, where they spend most of their lives, and return to the freshwater source of their birth to spawn. How long a salmon smolt takes to reach the open sea and how long it stays there before returning to spawn depends on the type of salmon. It's this staggered return to spawning grounds that provides a relatively steady supply of freshly caught Alaskan salmon, albeit of different species, through the warmer months.

Alaskan salmon start their journey from ocean to walk-in by one of three methods. "Although the method of fishing varies tremendously by species and greatly around the state, there are a few rules of thumb," states Andy McGregor, the Alaska Department of Fish

and Game's (DFG) southeast regional supervisor. "Pink salmon are taken mostly with purse seine gear; chum salmon mostly with purse seine and gill net; sockeye with gill nets mostly, but also a little with purse seines. Kings are taken primarily by trolling waters off southeastern Alaska. That's your best salmon right there. Coho are taken with troll gear, mostly in the southeast."

Trolling, done by trailing long lines of baited hooks from a slowly moving boat, produces the *crème de la crème* of wild-caught Alaskan salmon, as McGregor points out. It's also the most time-consuming and the costliest, accounting for a mere 2 percent of the fish that reach the market. Purse seining, which traps fish by spreading a circular net below the water, then pulling the edges together to entrap the fish, accounts for the bulk of salmon caught in the wild, approximately 71 percent.

By far the most controversial method for harvesting salmon in Alaskan waters is gillnetting. A typical gillnetter will trail about 1,200 feet of netting. The width of the net's holes determines which species of fish make it through and which don't. Conservationists and animal rights advocates have long argued that gill nets trap and kill species of fish, as well as marine birds and mammals, other than those intended. McGregor begs to differ, stating that such by-catch is the exception to the rule. Moreover, to give the salmon what he calls "a sporting chance," the size, length, and diameter of the holes in a gill net are strictly regulated to prevent overfishing and the capture of species other than the salmon being targeted.

Alaska's DFG takes a multipronged approach to sustaining its salmon stocks. In 1973, the state's Constitution was amended to provide for "limited entry"; in other words, a restricted number of licenses was issued for each type of gear used to catch a specific type of fish in a specific region. In the southeast region, about 480 gillnetting, 420 purse seining, and several thousand trolling licenses are in use. No additional licenses are being issued at this time.

Because of the DFG's vast and constant monitoring system, stretches of water can be opened or closed to fishing. If the department finds that the numbers of fish are low in a specific region, subsections of that region will be closed to meet "escapement goals," the DFG's term for the number of fish needed to spawn in stream in order to sustain healthy wild runs. On the other hand, when salmon runs are over the norm, regulations are relaxed somewhat and the number of fish that are harvested increases. In addition to the salmon naturally spawning in Alaska's streams, young smolts are released by state-licensed hatcheries to rear in the ocean and return as adult salmon to

the sites where they were released. "Most fish from hatcheries are marked," explains McGregor. "We'll sample the catch when the fish come back, to estimate the proportion of hatchery fish in the catch."

"It seems that they're trying to do the right thing," says Ann Cooper, the chef at Ross School in East Hampton, New York, and author of *Bitter Harvest: A Chef's Perspective on the Hidden Dangers in the Foods We Eat, and What You Can Do About It*, who participated in the trip. "More than most fisheries, they do really care. It seems that these are healthy fisheries. The most interesting thing to me was the gillnetting. That's always been a dirty word when you talk about sustainable fishing. But as so often happens, you meet the guy who's fishing and see what goes on. I know they handpicked the guys we were with, but they weren't picking up dead fish. I came away with a different feeling than I had going in."

Another factor that helps Alaskans manage their fisheries is the fishermen themselves. Licenses are issued only to individuals, never to corporations, and the management of the state's marine resources is vital to their survival. "They are, in a way, the small farmers of the sea," says Cooper. "I ran some numbers based on the info we heard on board. If you add up the cost of repairing the nets, the time it takes to set the nets and bring them in, fuel, and amortizing the license, these guys are probably clearing about 10 percent for their 17 hour days. As in all fisheries, there are two sides to the story."

All of this management has paid off. Salmon harvests between

1971 and 1974 averaged 144,854,000 pounds; between 1999 and 2002, that number averaged 749,475,000 pounds—a jump of about 520 percent. Alaska's program has also netted the state a Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification as a "sustainable fishery." That designation could, in these ecologically aware times, yield a marketing payoff.

Every species of salmon harvested in Alaska's water is available frozen year-round as frozen at sea (FAS) or as frozen on shore. When handled correctly by distributors and by a kitchen staff, FAS salmon can, quite often, be the best way to utilize Alaskan salmon. "We did a blind tasting with several types of salmon, including the frozen sockeye," relates Cooper. "The FAS sockeyes were excellent."

The system for delivering fresh fish from Alaska to the rest of the country has benefited from some improvements in the past dozen or so years as well. According to Joe Zalke, who deals with corporate accounts for ASMI, "The airline industry has created an infrastructure over the past 15 years to accommodate the Alaska fishing seasons. Regulations on handling and packaging the fish are in place to ensure that the fish arrive in excellent condition. Most Alaskan salmon is available fresh now, with the exception of pinks. Most of the fishing grounds are near landing strips, which easily accommodate regularly scheduled flights to Anchorage, the major point for fresh shipments."

The best way to find out more about Alaskan salmon, including seasonality and availability, is to poke around ASMI's Web site: [www.alaskaseafood.org](http://www.alaskaseafood.org).



A crew of fishermen reel in heaping nets of silvery sockeye salmon and unload their catch of the day into holding bins aboard the boat. Photo by Bob Hallinen/AlaskaStock.com.

## An Alaskan salmon primer

From the cook's perspective, **Christine Keff**, chef/owner of **Flying Fish** and **Fandango** in Seattle, offers suggestions on how to prepare Alaskan salmon:



### King or Chinook

**Season:** Mostly year-round, with lapses in April/May and September/October

**Attributes:** Deep color, full flavor, and oil rich flesh make them prime candidates for grilling and other high-heat cooking methods.

**Keff:** "We grill the kings because they have so much fat, then douse them with olive oil and vegetable- or citrus-based sauces. A favorite is made with a little bit of cream and smoked oysters."



### Coho or Silver

**Season:** July through late September

**Attributes:** Firm textured, orange-red flesh with moderate oil content and full flavor; good for grilling, broiling, and baking.

**Keff:** "I'm perfectly comfortable grilling a coho or cooking it any other way, for that matter. Because cohos have less oil in general than kings, they're not as strongly flavored and go with a wider variety of sauces. We like cohos with a grainy mustard sauce or a crisp skinned fillet, glazed on the meat side with a hoisin/red chile/black vinegar sauce."



### Sockeye or Red

**Season:** May through September

**Attributes:** Rich, deep red flesh and full flavor; moderate fat con-



### Pink, Humpback, or Humpy

**Season:** July and August

**Attributes:** Rose-pink flesh, mild flavor, and moderate oil content.

**Keff:** "Pinks don't really have the fat for broiling or grilling, so I like to bake them. They're milder in flavor than other types of salmon, so you can use them more as a vehicle for sauce. They're good when baked with some liquid, like a dry white wine, with the liquid turned into a pan sauce with maybe a little butter or cream."



### Chum or Keta

**Season:** Early June through early October

**Attributes:** Lower oil content and more variable flesh color than other species; drier texture lends more to brining than hot smoking.