



Wild, Natural & Sustainable®

A Foodservice Guide To Seafood Quality

Basic tips on handling fresh and frozen Alaska Seafood
Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute

FRESH SEAFOOD PURCHASING

There is no magic formula for judging freshness. The quality of some seafood ten days from the fishing grounds can be just as high as other product only two days old. Some seafood can be held longer than others and there are a host of other variable factors that influence quality.

Emphasize product quality when talking to suppliers. If you are able to physically inspect product when purchasing, let your eyes, hands and nose be your guide. The flesh of high quality fresh seafood is firm and resilient, and the skin is shiny. The gills of most finfish should be blood red. High quality fish have bright and clear eyes. The scales should adhere closely to the skin and be largely intact. Odors should be pleasant and minimal.

Specify shipping conditions. Tell your suppliers to pre-chill all fresh seafood before packing; the ideal shipping temperature is 30- 32 F. Carefully plan purchases of fresh seafood to minimize holding time and reduce disposal of old product. Learn as much as you can about the fresh products you are handling: special visual clues to quality; seasonal variations affecting quality; timing of fishing seasons and periods; etc.

RECEIVING

Inspect all incoming shipments of fresh seafood for quality. Your eyes, hands and nose should check for the basic clues of seafood quality: odor, resilience, scales, eyes, gills and overall appearance or physical condition. If any problems are detected, notify the supplier immediately.

Check core temperatures with a bi-metal thermometer. Fish held at 50 F. will spoil five times faster than a fish held at 32 F. If a shipping temperature was specified and the product delivered fails to fall within the acceptable range, both the supplier and carrier should be contacted immediately.

Watch for broken containers which can signal that the seafood has been physically damaged. Check for cleanliness of delivery vehicles.

Grade the incoming seafood according to quality. Use the older and warmer seafood first in your rotation cycle. Thoroughly rinse with ice-cold water all incoming product covered with blood, slime or other sources of nutrients for bacteria.

STORAGE

Fresh seafood should be kept cool and moist. Maximum holding times vary according to species, temperature and intrinsic quality. Fresh seafood held in storage should be periodically checked for quality by experienced personnel. A strong policy for rotating fresh seafood in storage and disposing of old product is very important. The best storage method is to gently place fresh whole fish on a bed of flake ice. Each single layer of fish should be covered with a layer of ice. The combined depth of ice and fish should never exceed three feet.

Fresh whole fish stored in ice should be protected against meltwater by using storage containers with drain holes. Steaks and fillets should not be stored in ice or held in any other method allowing direct contact with fluids. Seafood held in water or product fluids deteriorates very quickly.

Product quality also can be maintained by holding fresh seafood in a cold room kept at a constant 30-32 F. Avoid piling fresh seafood held without ice to eliminate "hot spots" which contribute to accelerated deterioration of quality. Minimize dehydration by periodic misting or other methods of moistening fish held in dry cold storage.

OTHER ADVICE

Fresh seafood should be handled with care. The delicate flavor, aroma and texture that make good seafood so special all are directly related to product quality. Blood seepage into the flesh from bruising damages the appearance of seafood as well as creating a strong "fishy" aroma and taste.

Fresh fish should not be picked up by the tail as this separates the vertebrae in the backbone and allows blood to ooze into the flesh. Make it a general practice to lift fresh fish gently with two hands. Sanitation is particularly important with fresh seafood. Bacteria and enzymes are present in all seafood; cooling a fish to 32 only slows down the activities of the invisible spoilers. When the seafood is taken out of cold storage for preparation, the bacteria and enzymes will go back to work breaking down the flesh, turning firm, resilient tissue soft and mushy. Don't allow fresh seafood to sit around waiting to be used--take it out of the cold store as needed.

FROZEN SEAFOOD PURCHASING

Ignore the myths about the inferiority of frozen seafood and base your purchases on product quality. Many seafood products are frozen within hours of harvesting, while it takes several days to get the same seafood delivered to your kitchen as "fresh." The freezing technology, and handling methods of the seafood industry allow the fresh-caught flavor, aroma and texture to be captured for months.

Tell your supplier that you're interested in top quality frozen products. Ask how long the product has been held in cold storage since production and at what temperature range. The best storage temperature is a constant - 10 F. or colder. Frozen product should not be held at temperatures above 0 F.

If visually inspecting frozen seafood before purchase, look for signs of freezer burn, adequacy of protective covering and integrity of packaging.

Specific shipping temperatures. The best shipping temperature is a constant -10 F. or colder, but shipping temperatures at 0 F. or lower are acceptable.

RECEIVING

Inspect incoming shipments of frozen seafood, pay particular attention to the shipping cartons. Watch for damaged containers and signs of temperature abuse. Boxes with water marks may indicate that the product has been allowed to partially thaw during transit. If you have any questions about the quality of incoming product, contact your supplier at once.

Open at least one carton per incoming shipment and check core temperatures of product with a hi-metal thermometer. Re-package the seafood sample immediately upon completion of the inspection. If the temperature does not meet shipping specifications, quickly notify both the carrier and supplier.

Check the integrity of the protective coverings of frozen seafood. An inadequate water glaze or broken vacuum pack will speed product dehydration and freezer burn.

Move incoming frozen seafood into cold storage set at 0 F. or below as quickly as possible.

THAWING

Thawing can have a profound effect on seafood quality. Thaw frozen seafood slowly to minimize drip loss and protect flavor, aroma and texture. Plan your seafood needs carefully to allow sufficient time for thawing.

The best results are obtained when a product is thawed at 32-35 F. This can be accomplished by placing frozen products on a bed of flake ice in a cold room or by thawing without ice in a room or container kept at 32-35 F. Never let the temperature climb above 40 F. Allow 24-36 hours for this method.

During thawing operations, always place the product in drain pans or other containers that prevent buildup of meltwater and drippings. The quality of seafood held in water deteriorates rapidly.

One acceptable method of reducing thawing time is to immerse frozen product sealed tightly in a stout plastic bag in very cold water. Quick thaw methods should be approached with caution, however, as improper thawing can seriously damage seafood quality. Once the product is thawed, keep it chilled until ready for use.

OTHER ADVICE

Never re-freeze seafood. When using only part of a shatter-pack or package of frozen seafood, remove the desired portion quickly and immediately re-package the remaining product and return to cold storage.

The shelf life of frozen seafood varies according to species, temperature, intrinsic quality and packaging. As a general rule, don't hold frozen seafood for longer than six to nine months. This shelf life can be obtained only by proper handling and storage.

Establish a good sanitation program for seafood handling areas. Bacteria and enzymes resume their destructive work once the product has been thawed.

Remember, frozen products often are superior in actuality to fresh seafood; product quality should be the most important consideration in purchasing and menuing, rather than "fresh" or "frozen." The best seafood menus provide a good selection of both fresh and frozen seafood dishes.

ALASKA SEAFOOD MARKETING INSTITUTE

One of the most significant trends of the 1980s and '90s has been America's obsession with health and fitness. The lifestyles of millions of Americans have been profoundly affected by the interest in diet and exercise.

A 1983 Gallup Poll by the National Restaurant Association showed that half of Americans are ordering more nutritious meals when dining out. The biggest beneficiary of the switch is seafood, according to Gallup.

The success of foodservice operators in taking advantage of this opportunity will depend on more than the cooking abilities of individual chefs. Careful product

selection, proper holding temperatures and gentle handling are every bit as important as preparation. After all, the best chef in the world can't restore lost product quality.

The Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute has been actively working with the foodservice industry to broaden the demand for Alaska seafood. ASMI wants you to succeed in attracting a loyal following of diners who can't get enough of your seafood. That's why we prepared this short collection of seafood handling tips.

The spoilers of seafood quality: bacteria, enzymes, dehydration, oxidation, contamination and physical damage, will strike whenever they are given an opportunity. These spoilers can be beaten if everyone in the seafood delivery chain from fishermen to chef makes quality their business.

Fundamental to seafood quality is the understanding that seafood must be treated differently than beef, pork, lamb and other meat products. Fish and shellfish lack the tough muscular fiber of land animals and their natural environment and body temperatures are much cooler. Consequently, seafood must be handled with care while being kept cool and moist.

Carefully plan purchases to avoid prolonged holding and focus on product quality rather than "fresh" or "frozen." Learn how to select high quality products and work to transform the entire foodservice staff into quality "experts."

Build a seafood quality and sanitation program to fit your operation. These guidelines only provide a basic framework; the rest is up to you.

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