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Imported Fish Move In on Fin Ordinaire

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Take another look at that fish on your plate. Chances are very good that it is a world traveler, and just got off a plane.

At one Greek restaurant in TriBeCa, diners can choose among unusual varieties fresh from the Mediterranean. The menu lists barbouni, a small, intensely flavored red fish also known as rouget or red mullet; lavraki, a sleek, mild-tasting flaky bass sometimes called branzino or loup de mer; and tsipoura or dorado, a popular dish in Italian restaurants, where it is known as orata and is a favorite for grilling.

Barramundi, a rich-flavored reef fish from Australia that some chefs compare with Chilean sea bass, and bluenose from New Zealand, a big variety with firm flesh, are also showing up on menus. In markets, they are giving flounder a run for the money.

Most surprising about these fish from distant ports is that they arrive, fresh and glistening, just two or three days out of the water. It can sometimes take longer to get local fish from net to plate.

The days when Dover sole from the English Channel impressed diners are clearly over. Chefs have other fish to fry, sauté, grill and roast.

"Efficiencies in air freight make it possible to put fresh fish from anywhere in the world on the plate," said Howard M. Johnson, a consultant to the seafood industry from Jacksonville, Ore. "And it's increasingly important, since we've seen reductions in many of our native fisheries, like cod, grouper and rockfish."

Today, 76 percent of all seafood consumed in the United States is imported, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service, a government agency; only Japan imports more fish. From 1992 though 2001, imports to the United States increased from less than \$6 billion to nearly \$10 billion. Shrimp account for more than half the total, and salmon imports are also significant. But the American market for other finfish from afar is growing rapidly.

Some fish, like barramundi or bluenose, are destined for high-end restaurants and markets. The fast-food industry, meanwhile, is buying hoki, a bland-tasting but abundant fish from New Zealand.

Australia has doubled the amount of fish it sends to these shores in the last 10 years to 16 million pounds, said Beth Goslin, the business development manager for the Australian Trade Commission. This increase in imports reflects the growth in fish consumption in the United States - from less than 10 pounds a person 50 years ago to more than 20 pounds now.

Just a year ago, Peter Jarvis, the owner of Triar Seafood, a fish importer in Hollywood, Fla., began bringing in barramundi, a wild fish that is also farmed. He started with a weekly 300 pounds of the farmed variety and is now up to 6,000 pounds a week.

The Republic of Cyprus began exporting farmed fish, mostly orata and branzino, to the United States in 1996, and since then its shipments have increased from \$300,000 to \$1.6 million a year. "We send it off on Sunday and it's in the restaurant kitchen by Monday," said Dennis Droushiotis, the trade commissioner for Cyprus. The country's fish farms are state-of-the-art facilities in deep, clean waters, Mr. Droushiotis said, adding, "We're relatively new at this, and we can take advantage of the latest technology."

Greece, where some 200 fish farms raise most of the branzino and orata sold here, has become another important source.

Richard Martin, an owner of Wild Edibles, which has two fish shops in Manhattan and also supplies restaurants, said the change in his import business in the past five or so years has been "tremendous."

"We imported almost nothing five years ago because most of what was available was frozen," he said. "Now almost all of it is flown in fresh, and imports account for at least 15 to 20 percent of our business."

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Because of increased availability and competition, the price for most imported fish has declined, making many varieties comparable in price to domestic fish, even with the cost of air freight factored in, said Joe Gurrera, the owner of the five Citarella markets in New York and on Long Island. For example, in his stores whole pink snapper from New Zealand is \$5.99 a pound, the same price as local porgies.

Except for varieties like rouget and sardines, the flesh of these imports is white, the flavor quite mild and the texture meaty enough. Many of the fishes weigh two pounds or less, a convenient size for home and restaurant use. Their novelty, of course, is another plus.

"I'm always looking for fish that's different," said Tom Colicchio, an owner of Craft, who, when he can find it, has taken to roasting Tasmanian sea trout. "It's rich, like arctic char," he said. "And I can get it within 24 hours so it's in great shape."

Not everyone is so smitten.

"Most of those farm-raised fish have no flavor," said Eric Ripert, the chef and an owner of Le Bernardin. He does use a few imports, like rouget from Spain or Brittany or hamachi, from Japan. The mainstays of his menu, however, are the halibut and sea bass found in American waters.

But severe declines in the fish populations off domestic shores, largely because of overfishing, have made aquaculture even more important. Some problems have come to light, however, like the destruction of natural mangrove habitats by shrimp farms and the farms' use of pesticides and antibiotics. Critics of the farms say the booming Atlantic salmon industry pollutes the water with fish waste and additives.

Mr. Johnson, the consultant from Oregon, said that the new farms being established in many countries "have better practices, and others are cleaning up their acts."

But some experts are not convinced.

"Fish farming is relatively new, and the regulations are weak," said Michael Sutton, a program officer at the Packard Foundation, a nonprofit organization in Los Altos, Calif. "I might have more confidence in some of the developed countries. Other countries have no controls." The foundation, which supports ocean conservation, promotes education so consumers can make informed choices.

In Australia, both wild fisheries and farms "have to answer to seven different authorities, government and industry," said John Susman, the manager of Fishbizz, a consulting company in New South Wales. "We've looked at where there have been disasters and we're taking precautions."

Rachel Roper-Taulelei, a trade commissioner for New Zealand who is based in Los Angeles, said that all fish imported from her country are wild. "We bring in 51 kinds of fish, and we've had a sustainable program in place since 1986," she said. "Our scientists assess the populations and set quotas."

Bluenose, grouper, several snappers, dories and orange roughy are among the fishes that New Zealand exports to the United States, Ms. Roper-Taulelei said, adding that fish lovers should begin to look for tarakihi, a "delicious white-fleshed fish."

American consumers, however, usually do not know where the fish in their markets comes from. Department of Agriculture regulations requiring labels in stores indicating country of origin and information on whether seafood is wild or farm-raised will not go into effect for a year.

As tempting as it may be for chefs and consumers to sear a thick piece of barramundi or put a whole orata on the grill, the availability of these novelties is no reason to ignore the local seasonal catch.

Vikki N. Spruill, the president of SeaWeb, a nonprofit organization in Washington that supports seafood conservation, said rebuilding local fisheries should be a priority.

"Fish does rebound if it's well managed - striped bass is a fabulous example," she said, "and that way we can become less dependent on imports."

But these fish may be here to stay.