Two Sides to Every Tilapia
It's Mild and Eco-Friendly. Consumers Have Caught On, but Chefs Aren't Hooked.

By Walter Nicholls
Washington Post Staff Writer
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It's the fish that chefs love to hate but shoppers prize, and both for the same reason: This fish isn't fishy. The consumers are winning the debate, though, and tilapia is swimming its way to ubiquity, thanks to selective breeding programs, improvements in farming efficiency, skilled marketing and the commitment of some big grocery chains.

That it's ecologically sustainable and relatively cheap doesn't hurt, either. In just a few years, Americans' annual consumption of tilapia has quadrupled, from a quarter-pound per person in 2003 to a full pound in 2006. The National Marine Fisheries Service now ranks it as the fifth-most-consumed seafood in the nation, still far behind shrimp (at 4.4 pounds per person a year) but growing fast. Researchers think tilapia is destined to be one of the most important farmed seafood products of the century.

But then there's the taste, or lack of it. What plenty of customers appreciate as versatility is also what gives tilapia a bad name among chefs who think mildness isn't a virtue. Bob Kinkead, chef-owner of Kinkead's in Foggy Bottom and Colvin Run Tavern in Vienna, didn't pull any punches when asked about tilapia, calling it "insipid," "sponglike" and "inferior."

"Not in my restaurant," he declared. "Never sold it, won't sell it."

At Seven Seas Restaurant in Rockville, though, shimmering tilapia have been making their way from tank to table for 20 years. When a customer orders, say, fried tilapia in Hunan sauce, a server first carries the live, flopping fish to the table in a plastic bucket. In the time it takes to finish the shrimp wonton soup, out comes the same specimen -- now crisp and spicy -- that was swimming 20 minutes before.

In this country, owner Edward Shen could be considered a tilapia pioneer. In the mid-1980s, the average American had never heard of this firm-fleshed North African native, also known as the Nile perch. "In the beginning, I had to go to a little house on the Eastern Shore, where they were raised in the back yard," says Shen, who says he sells about 100 whole fish per week.

Tilapia has been farm-raised as far back as ancient Egypt, and now such farming occurs in more than 85 countries. The fish is widely available in many chain restaurants and in most supermarkets, where it's sold freshly filleted, frozen and, in some stores, live. Shen's tilapia travel from an aquaculture farm in southern Virginia to the kitchen door at Seven Seas in a truck equipped with aerated holding tanks.

At Red Lobster restaurants, where tilapia is served grilled, blackened, broiled or stuffed with lobster and crab meat, sales of the fish have doubled over the past three years. "With customers, it's one of the most popular seafood products," says company spokeswoman Wendy Spirduso. "Americans tend to like mild-tasting fish, and our chefs call it a blank canvas, open to changing flavors."

Chef Jeff Black of the Black Restaurant Group, which includes the seafood bistro BlackSalt in the Palisades, is one of the few upscale chefs in Washington to use the fish, which can sometimes be found on his lunch menu. "Fried, in a fish taco, it's delicious," Black says. "Raised properly, it's a nice fish."
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Tilapia's biggest boom is in imports, which make up as much as 95 percent of tilapia consumed in this country: 349 million pounds last year, up 17 percent from 2005. The overwhelming majority of the imports are frozen fillets from China. In June, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration imposed a ban on imports of five types of farmed seafood from China, including shrimp and catfish, but tilapia imports were not affected.

Fresh fillets come primarily from Ecuador, Honduras and Costa Rica. There is no tilapia season; the fish is available year-round. Wild-caught hybrids are common in warm waters of Africa and Southeast Asia, but farmed varieties, raised in a controlled environment, are said to have a more desirable flavor.

Most of the U.S. farm-raised tilapia, about 20 million pounds per year, is sold live at Asian markets and restaurants in this country. In the mid-Atlantic, Blue Ridge Aquaculture in Martinsville, Va., raises nearly 4 million pounds each year.

At retail, imported fresh fillets sell for about $5 to $6 per pound, frozen fillets from China for about $2 per pound. Tilapia from U.S. farms, where operating costs are higher, is the most expensive, about $8 to $10 per pound. In comparison, at fishmonger M. Slavin & Sons in Arlington, fresh flounder sells for about $12 per pound, and fillets of fluke -- another mild, white-fleshed fish -- go for about $13 per pound.

Kevin Fitzsimmons, a professor of environmental science at the University of Arizona who has worked with tilapia farms for 25 years, traces the fish's turning point to the early 1990s.

"That's when you had the selective breeding programs, in Brazil, in Thailand and in the Philippines," Fitzsimmons said before leaving recently to work on aquaculture restoration projects in Indonesia. "The average size went from under one pound to two pounds, producing center-of-the-plate portions with fillets of five to seven ounces. That made a big difference."

As the tilapia grew in size, so did the aquaculture farms in developing countries: above and below hydroelectric dams, in lakes and in raceways. Larger, inland and more technologically advanced indoor systems were developed with little, if any, pollution risks.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium's consumer guide to ocean-friendly fish gives U.S.-farmed tilapia its "best" rating and Central American-farmed tilapia a "good" rating. It advises consumers to "avoid" tilapia imported from China and Taiwan, where it says "pollution and weak management are common."

Chef Barton Seaver, who promotes the use of eco-friendly seafood at his new Hook restaurant in Georgetown, says that "as far as sustainability, it's where we need to go." He calls tilapia "a great choice: a vegetarian fish that is fast-growing and largely disease-resistant." Still, he prefers wild-caught fish and says tilapia is not up to his restaurant's "taste standards." Seaver instead serves delicately flavored tautog from waters off South Carolina and more assertive barracuda from Trinidad and Tobago.

Unlike farm-raised salmon that are fed fish meal and have been shown to contain polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), contaminants and antibiotics, tilapia are hardy herbivores that grow well in high densities. Tilapia produced in China, where there are hundreds of thousands of tilapia farms and more than 100 processing plants, can sometimes have an off-, muddy or grassy taste after consuming certain types of algae. But Fitzsimmons disagrees with the Monterey Bay rating and says that, for the most part, "the Chinese do a pretty good job" with tilapia.

Marketing executives at Rain Forest Aquaculture, a Costa Rican company that was among the first to
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bring fresh tilapia fillets to this country in early 1990, credits supermarkets with creating the tilapia explosion.

"It was retail that drove the growth," says spokesman Jim Nunneley. "Grocery store chains like Costco and Wegmans saw the potential of a mild, white-fleshed fish when no one knew what it was, and they have done a tremendous job. The pioneers were not chefs, who don't want anything to do with farm-raised fish."

Still, early on, restaurateurs such as Shen of Seven Seas recognized that for Chinese cooking, tilapia was perfect.

"You can taste the other flavors and ingredients, the ginger and garlic, and [tilapia] are so easy to marinate," says Shen, a native of Taiwan, where he says live tilapia sales are common. "Live tilapia: That's as fresh as you can get."

But that's not Shen's only reason for serving them. "They are tough, consistent and the only fish that survives in the tank," he says. "Try that with a rockfish, and they are upside down."