

Farmed Fish

With the increasing demand for local and organic foods, it's no surprise that people are starting to look for sustainable seafood on their plates as we become more aware of the impact that our eating habits have on the environment. (On a selfish note, I'm sure we would like to be able to enjoy seafood for years to come!) But is eating foods that are better for the environment better for us too?

Salmon seems to be the poster child for the farmed vs. wild debate. Farmed salmon is generally regarded as a big no-no for environmentalists, as they are often raised in open-net systems, which allow for the passage of waste, chemicals and antibiotics into the marine environment. The fish can also escape, causing imbalance in the local ecosystem. Marine life in the surrounding area can get caught in the open nets too.

From a nutrition standpoint, wild salmon is a better choice than farmed salmon – it is lower in fat and higher in vitamins A, D and B12. The difference is in what they eat – wild salmon feed on small fish, shrimp and krill, while farmed salmon are fed pellets made with fish oil, fish or plant proteins and other nutrients that try to match the natural diet. However, some studies have shown that fish feed is contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) which are synthetic compounds previously used in coolants and lubricants, until they were banned in 1977 due to their toxic effects and ability to persist in the environment for a long time. Farmed salmon are usually fed to satiation every day – while this helps the

salmon grow faster, helping meet market demand, it leads to a fattier product. In some cases, this means it has more omega-3 fats, but since PCBs accumulate in fat, farmed salmon have been consistently found to have higher levels of PCBs than their wild counterparts.

Although wild salmon is better for you and better for the environment, we know that it can be expensive! Many health experts say that the benefits of the omega-3s and other nutrients in farmed salmon outweigh the risks of the trace amounts of PCBs that they may contain.

Since tuna is almost always wild, (most grow to several metres long, making it hard to keep!) tuna is never part of the farmed vs. wild debate, but is still a controversial fish in terms of sustainability and nutrition.

Part of the confusion stems from the different species of tuna available and the fishing methods used to catch them. SeaChoice, Canada's largest sustainable seafood program, is very specific about recommending which species (almost all except bluefin), fishing method (usually troll/pole) and origin

vs Fresh

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are safest to eat.

Like salmon, tuna are a lean source of protein rich in heart- and brain-healthy omega-3s. They are high in potassium and selenium as well. However, since tuna are quite high on the food chain, they may contain higher levels of methylmercury than other fish. Women who are or may become pregnant, or are breastfeeding, should avoid eating more than 150 g (two Canada's Food Guide servings) of fresh or frozen tuna per week, while children under 12 should eat even less.

To make matters even more confusing, this does not apply to canned light (yellowfin or skipjack) tuna. Since the tuna used in canning are often younger and smaller, they have low methylmercury levels and are safe for consumption. You can skip all this confusion by getting your omega-3s from fish that are lower on the food chain, like sardines and mackerel.

When is farmed better than wild? In most cases, when it is shellfish. SeaChoice recommends choosing farmed oysters, clams, mussels and scallops over wild – raising shellfish causes minimal impact to the environment, and in fact can

improve the water quality in the surrounding area as they act as filters.

Finfish seem to get all the attention when it comes to health, but shellfish are lean proteins that are great sources of minerals like iron and zinc. A Canada's Food Guide serving (about 75 g) of oysters has almost three times as much iron as beef, while clams can have up to seven times! There is not much data as to whether farmed or wild shellfish are more nutritious. The only example in the Canadian Nutrient File (2010) is that wild eastern oysters contain more phosphorus, zinc, copper and vitamin A, and less sodium than farmed varieties, so it looks like consumers will have to choose between their health and the environment.

Nutrition and sustainability are obviously not the only factors that govern what we eat – there's cost, accessibility and of course, taste! At the end of the day, it's up to you to vote with your fork and choose what you want to eat and how you want your food to be produced.