

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Sardines With Your Bagel?

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THE first chinook salmon from Alaska's Copper River arrived in Seattle last month, for shipment to fish counters throughout the country. With the commercial chinook season in California and most of Oregon canceled for the first time in 160 years, Alaska chinook were going for record prices: \$40 a pound for fillet.

There was a time that the thought of a good salmon meal would leave me feeling faint with desire. Just imagining a toasted bagel papered with near-translucent slices of lox, a roll of vinegared rice stuffed with crispy salmon skin or a thick steak of lightly grilled chinook would have me searching for the nearest deli, sushi bar or bistro.

It was an impulse I never hesitated to indulge. Salmon — so low in saturated fats, so high in brain-protective omega-3 fatty acids — was that rarest of commodities: a guilt-free, heart-healthy self-indulgence, and one of the cleanest forms of protein around.

Not any more. Wild Atlantic salmon are commercially extinct, and runs of Pacific salmon south of the Alaska panhandle are experiencing catastrophic collapses. This year, for the sake of the remaining wild salmon on the West Coast, as well as my own health, I'm changing my diet. Whether it's wild or farmed, I'm swearing off salmon.

It's not a decision I make lightly. I grew up eating wild salmon. As a boy, I was given my first chunk of maple-smoked salmon at a dude ranch in northern British Columbia by a crusty old lawyer from Tennessee named Lucius Burch ("better than candy," he cackled — and it was). Wild salmon is my madeleine: it is the taste of my childhood.

Until recently, it was something for which I was willing to pay a premium. But with so many fisheries closed this year, I can no longer afford to splurge on sustainably fished salmon. It's just too scarce and too expensive.

What happened to the mighty chinook of the Pacific Northwest? Regional fisheries officials have blamed ocean conditions for a temporary decline in the plankton and small fish that juvenile salmon feed on. But most of the problem is man-made.

Spawning salmon need gravel streambeds and cold, fast-running water to lay their eggs. Giant pumps have been piping water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to towns and farms in California's Central Valley, degrading river habitat and even sucking up young fish before they reach the sea. Farther north, dams on the Snake River have prevented egg-bearing fish from reaching streambeds inland.

Overfishing is also a factor; too many nets have been scooping up too many fish for too long. What's more, higher water temperatures brought on by global warming prevent the eggs of spawning females from maturing. It's not surprising that the only consistently healthy salmon runs left are those in the cold waters of Alaska.

The fact that salmon is still available in supermarkets, and is cheaper than it ever was, is no comfort. Ninety percent of the fresh salmon consumed in the United States is from farms, and I have come to believe that the farmed product is not a healthy alternative to wild.

Three Norwegian-owned companies dominate the salmon-farming industry in North America, and their offshore net-cages dot long stretches of the west coast of the Americas. In Chile, overcrowding in these oceanic feedlots led to this year's epidemic of infectious salmon anemia, a disease that has killed millions of fish and left the flesh of survivors riddled with lesions.

The situation in Canada, which supplies the United States with 40 percent of its farmed salmon, is not much better. In British Columbia, offshore net-cages are breeding grounds for thumbtack-sized parasites called sea lice. In the Broughton Archipelago, a jigsaw of islands off the province's central coast, wild pink salmon are infested with the crustaceans. Scientists think that the tens of millions of salmon in Broughton's 27 Norwegian-owned farms are attracting sea lice and passing them on to wild fish, killing them. They say that this infestation could drive Broughton's pink salmon to extinction by 2011.

To rid salmon of the lice, fish farmers spike their feed with a strong pesticide called emamectin benzoate, which when administered to rats and dogs causes tremors, spinal deterioration and muscle atrophy. The United States Food and Drug Administration, already hard-pressed to inspect imported Asian seafood for antibiotic and fungicide residues, does not test imported salmon for emamectin benzoate. In other words, the farmed salmon in nearly every American supermarket may contain this pesticide, which on land is used to rid diseased trees of pine beetles. It is not a substance I want in my body.

I avoid farmed salmon for other reasons. It takes four pounds of small fish like sardines and anchovies to make a single pound of farmed salmon, a process that deprives humans of precious protein. (Feedmakers have lately increased the proportion of soy in the pellets, which means the fish have even lower levels of beneficial omega-3 fatty acids.) Organic farmed salmon would be a good option, if the term meant something — outside Europe, there is still no credible, widely available eco-label for responsibly raised farmed salmon.

Fish farming is an essential industry, but it must be sustainable. Striped bass, trout, Arctic char and even ocean species like halibut and cod are already being raised in concrete tanks, which prevent the transmission of disease and parasites to wild fish. A few pioneering companies have started raising salmon the same way. Such techniques have to become the industry norm.

In the Atlantic, overfishing, habitat destruction, disease and parasites from farms have left only struggling remnant populations of the ocean's original salmon stocks. If we don't want the same thing to happen in the Pacific, we need to give the salmon a break. Legislators could start by calling on companies to remove net-cages from migration routes, dismantling superannuated dams, reducing fishing quotas in rivers and oceans and committing money to habitat restoration. Consumers can help by looking at salmon as an occasional luxury, rather than expecting it as an alternative to chicken or beef in in-flight meals.

If my hankering for salmon gets the better of me, I suppose I could eat wild salmon from Alaska. The state does not permit salmon farms in its coastal waters, and its cold rivers still teem with healthy salmon runs. But as much as I'd enjoy a fresh chinook fillet from the Copper River, at \$2.50 an ounce this summer, I just can't afford it.

So, I'll wait for next year and hope the West Coast fisheries show signs of recovery. Until then — or until salmon farmers convince me they've cleaned up their act — I'll be eating closer to the bottom of the food chain.

Sardines, it turns out, taste pretty good barbecued.