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Catherine V. Schmitt

Maine Sea Grant, catherine.schmitt@umit.maine.edu

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The monkfish: So much more than just a pretty face

The monkfish is not a pretty fish.

It sits on the bottom of the ocean, always hungry, resting its oversized head and dangling a fleshy, modified spine over its jut-jawed, toothy mouth.

Its strategy is simple: Whatever comes along, attracted by the dangling “bait,” the monkfish eats. Hence the nickname, “anglerfish.”

Monkfish also are known sometimes as “allmouth,” because most of the fish is taken up by the head, and the head is mostly mouth.

Chocolate-brown above and whitish underneath, the monkfish moves along the seafloor powered by a strong tail and large, arm-like pectoral fins. Sometimes, the monkfish is scooped up by a trawler or gillnetter looking for other groundfish species: hake, haddock, cod, flounder, redfish, or others.

Once caught, most of the monkfish – namely, its head – goes back to the ocean, leaving the edible, muscular tail. Some, though, are kept whole for their

Don't try this at home



An unappetizing lump when whole, monkfish tails are firm, white, and delicious.

Julia Child, familiar with monkfish, or “lotte,” from France, featured monkfish on one of her more memorable shows in 1979.

The monkfish profile illustrates why it is also known as “allmouth.”

livers, which go to Japanese restaurants to be served as *ankimo* sashimi.

In the United States, monkfish is considered an underutilized species, although fishermen have always been able to count on it for a reasonable market.

Europeans love it (so much so that they depleted their own stocks) and call it the “poor man’s lobster.”

In Asia, the stomachs and livers are a delicacy. Perhaps because of the decline of some other groundfish species, American restaurants are starting to catch on; monkfish is on the menu at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, among other fine establishments.

Excellent texture, flavor

The tail meat of the monkfish is delicious: dense, sweet, and similar to lobster tail meat in both flavor and texture. Because it is dense, it takes slightly longer to cook. Monkfish is an excellent low-fat, low-cholesterol source of protein and B vitamins.

About 20 percent of the product that moves through the Portland (Maine) Fish Exchange is monkfish or monkfish tails, which dealers buy for \$2.50-\$2.75 per pound, more expensive than cod, hake, and other groundfish species.

In Massachusetts, monkfish is an



important fishery after cod, lobster, and scallops.

Sea Fresh USA Inc., located across the parking lot from the Portland Fish Exchange, is the largest dealer of monkfish in Maine. Most of its monkfish tail is exported fresh and frozen to European wholesalers for sale in chain grocery stores, according to the company’s Jesse Wendell.

The dealer offers three products by the pound or the kilo: skin-on tails frozen in 10-kilo packs that are shipped for use as is or for further processing; frozen, skinless tails, a preferred preparation since most people want the membranous skin removed; and fresh skinless fillets. Sea Fresh also offers “monkfish medallions” in an *osso bucco* cut with the bone in the middle, the way it is served at Harvest in Cambridge, Mass. ■

What you need to know

Species Name: *Lophius americanus*, monkfish, goosefish, anglerfish.

Range: Western Atlantic continental shelf from Newfoundland to northern Florida.

Season: Year-round steady supply, with a peak in late summer-fall.

Fishery Status: Managed by the New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management councils, monkfish stocks are rebuilding and are not considered overfished. However, not much is known about monkfish populations, and management may change in the future.

Portion Size: 8 ounces.

Packaging: Fresh fillets and tails are packed in ice and Styrofoam containers; frozen 5- or 6-kilo packs of blast-frozen, plate-frozen, and glazed IQF product are available from Sea Fresh USA Inc. in Portland, Maine, which claims, “If you can afford it, we can pack it.”

Frozen monkfish will keep for 18 months; fresh should be used within a week.

Cost: Prices fluctuate depending on the market. Recent wholesale prices for fillets ranged from \$4-\$6/lb., for tails \$3.25 to \$5/lb.

Supplier: Sea Fresh USA Inc.
11 Portland Fish Pier
Portland ME 04101, United States
(207) 773-6799; fax (207) 773-7804



The true monkfish should not be confused with a band called Monkfish (Motto: “Playin’ punk cuz there ain’t nuthin’ better you can do”), whose latest release is New Age Beverage.