



Barramundi

Photo courtesy of Australis Aquaculture

U.S. market acceptance of Australian sea bass paves the way for future growth

By April Forristall

Barramundi has been called “the next big fish” by chefs and food editors around the nation over the past year and was deemed a “hot seafood trend” at this year’s Seafood Summit sponsored by the Seafood Choices Alliance. The mild-flavored whitefish farmed in western Massachusetts is working its way from high-end restaurants all the way down to mid-scale grocery stores.

A member of the sea bass family,

barramundi originally hail from Australia, which explains its popularity Down Under. Raised in the United States by Australis Aquaculture in Turners Falls, Mass., barramundi is generally regarded as a high-end fish, reeling in prices in the mid-\$20 range at restaurants. Prized for its sweet, buttery taste and delicate texture, barramundi holds up well to a variety of flavors and ingredient combinations, lending itself

generously to sauces and spices. It can be baked, broiled, fried, sautéed, steamed, poached, roasted whole or grilled — even the skin is edible. Its fat content keeps it from drying out and barramundi’s white flaky texture and taste prompted its use as an ingredient on “Iron Chef America.”

“[Barramundi] is a very versatile fish with a mild, sweet flesh,” says Anita Lo, chef and owner of Annisa in New York. “I don’t have a favorite recipe, but I think it’s best sautéed with the skin on. The skin crisps up exceptionally well.”

The Sea Grill in New York’s Rockefeller Center serves whole grilled barramundi with wild arugula-roasted fennel, spring vegetables and Sorrento lemon olive oil for \$34. RM Seafood in Las Vegas serves pan-seared barramundi with sweet onion soubise, crispy shallots and sherry gastrique. Phillips Seafood Restaurants in Philadelphia and Atlantic City feature roasted barramundi with warm vegetable salad for \$25.99.

Barramundi’s hardy nature and fast growth rate of less than a year make it well-suited for aquaculture. Australis began importing fingerlings from hatcheries in Northern Australia and raising them to harvest size of 1.5 to 2 pounds at its indoor fish farm in 2003. The company ships about 15,000 to 20,000 pounds weekly at \$4 to \$5 per pound wholesale, to both retailers and restaurants.

“We have introduced Australis barramundi as a special item to a number of retailers and specialty markets throughout the country. Whole Foods

has promoted it on occasion in the Northeast and in the Seattle area. We are in talks with several major retail and club chains to carry our fresh and frozen barramundi in the months ahead,” says Carol Devine, Australis’ VP of marketing and strategic development. The company is in the final stages of increasing its U.S. production by 40 percent.

But Australis isn’t the only game in town. Triar Seafoods in Hollywood, Fla., began supplying barramundi to U.S. customers in 2002. The company imports the fish from Humpty Doo Barramundi farm near Darwin, Australia, flying in approximately 2,000 pounds of fish a week, according to Triar President Peter Jarvis. Triar sells its barramundi fillets wholesale for \$12.95 to \$15.95 per pound to restaurants, hotels and some retail markets. Jarvis doesn’t expect the fish will move beyond the upscale market.

“There has never been anything inexpensive about it,” says Jarvis.

But Australis’ Devine disagrees, saying that supply just hasn’t met the demand — yet.

Last month Australis inked a deal with a Vietnamese aquaculture group to produce barramundi in Central Vietnam beginning in August. The product will be offered frozen to chain restaurants and retail markets.

“Our strategy was always to enter this market first by the white tablecloth restaurants and gain chef credibility, which has worked beautifully. The fish is extremely popular,” Devine says. “The goal was always to cascade that down to the restaurant and retail chains as our production grew. We are in the midst of doubling production right now, so with all of the new fish that we’ll start seeing this summer we’ll be able to enter more retail markets and more restaurants. We’re very excited about that.”

Rarely does a new fish receive such positive and rapid embrace as barramundi has. Due to its eco-friendliness it is poised to become the whitefish of choice for upscale restaurants and retailers across America.

Editorial Assistant April Forristall can be e-mailed at aforristall@divcom.com

At a Glance



Photo courtesy of Australis Aquaculture

fairly large flakes. The skin is edible and can be left on when cooking.

What’s it taste like?

Barramundi is prized for its sweet, buttery taste.

How do you cook it?

Because of its high oil content,

barramundi is hard to overcook. It can be baked, broiled, fried, sautéed, steamed, poached, roasted whole or grilled.

Substitutions

Sea bass

What’s it look like?

Barramundi flesh is white and moist with a medium to firm texture and

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