

## More restaurants caught in fish-switch

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Are you getting the fish you paid for and the fish you ordered, or are you eating something else entirely? We've asked the question before and found surprising results.

Now we are putting local restaurants to the test again.

Buying one thing and getting another? Is it fraud? A mistake? An oversight? Or a cheap way to increase profits margins? Whatever you call it, you can't call it grouper. Our hidden camera investigation took us to nine different local restaurants, all selling grouper.

We ordered the grouper, put the sample into a bag, on ice, and in the mail to be DNA tested at the Guy Harvey Research Institute at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale.

Our mission? To find out whether, seven months after we first busted local restaurants substituting grouper with cheaper fish, restaurants have learned their lesson.

The results? Out of the nine restaurants we tested, a third were not giving you the grouper you ordered.

"I'm a bit surprised because I thought with all the publicity from the last time we found a lot of substitution, restaurants would sort of get the message that (there) are forensic methods that are able to identify whether they are substituting seafood or not," said Dr. Mahmood Shivji, Nova Southeastern University.

Our tests showed the grouper sandwich we ordered at Jocks & Jill's Sports Grill is really catfish. We confronted the Jocks & Jills manager.

Anna asked, "You don't know how it happened?"

The manager replied, "I have no idea. I mean our grouper is grouper. It comes in on a truck as grouper."

Anna asked, "Do you have the box that it came in where it might say grouper on the side of it?"

The manager said, "Ah. I mean I don't know."

Later, we did speak with Jocks & Jills General Manager Mark Parrish. He told us a former company employee changed their standard fish order form from grouper to catfish. He says it should have never happened and from the moment we set foot in the West Charlotte restaurant, the fish was pulled from the menu until the mistake could be corrected. Parrish would not go on camera to answer our questions, but did say it's not his intention to serve something that's misrepresented.

The next flunkie: Moosehead Grill in South Charlotte. Their grouper sandwich turned out to be a cheaper fish called hake, "which is in the cod family, something that is completely different from a grouper," explained Dr. Mahmood Shivji.

With cameras rolling, we asked Moosehead Owner Chris Neilsen what happened.

"I don't know what to tell you," Neilsen said.

Anna asked, "Did you think it was grouper?"

Neilsen responded, "Probably, yea, if we put it up there."

Then as we were leaving, Neilsen came out to our car and said, "I have nothing to hide. If it was grouper, it should be."

But Neilsen became a little camera shy after looking into how he served hake to customers who bought grouper. Refusing to appear on camera he told us by phone, "It was completely operator error on the part of my staff. My staff mislabeled the special board. The management of Moosehead Grill would like to apologize for a mislabeled lunch special. The fish was mislabeled as grouper"

Our third failure is a repeat offender: Vinnie's Raw Bar on South Boulevard. The first time we found catfish masquerading as grouper in their signature original grouper sandwich, the manger told us, "We don't condone any misleading whatsoever."

Really? Because here's what happened when we called to order the blackened grouper sandwich this time:

Ordering over the phone, Anna said, "I'd like to order the blackened grouper sandwich that you have?"

The Vinnie's waitress asked, "Blackened Grouper Sandwich?"

"That's right," said Anna.

When we shipped the "Vinnie's Blackened Grouper" off to the lab, DNA tests showed that grouper is really catfish.

"It's quite disturbing because that same restaurant was found substituting the first time, clearly they have (not) learned their lesson and they've done it again," Shivji, our DNA scientist, said.

North Carolina's Department of Agriculture Director Joe Reardon was also blown away by what we found.

Anna asked, "When we placed our order and asked specifically for a grouper sandwich, that's what they agreed to give us."

"We are disappointed. We know they made some initial steps to correct this back in 2007 and we would have expected to seen total compliance," explained Reardon.

In fact, after the first time we caught Vinnie's substituting grouper with catfish, the state investigated. The state's documents show that more than a month after we aired our report, investigators visited Vinnie's, saw grouper advertised, but could not actually find any grouper in the restaurant, and instead they found Asian catfish.

Now our DNA tests show it's still happening. The term "Original Grouper Sandwich" is still advertised in the window and on their Internet menu. When you call the restaurant and ask for grouper as we did, the waitress takes the order. The only change is in the in-restaurant menu, it simply says fish sandwich.

"If we find that there's continuing issues, then we have been in contact with the Attorney General's Office and we will be referring this to the Consumer Protection division. They stand ready to investigate this," said Reardon.

State investigators will visit all three restaurants who flunked our DNA tests. Reardon said, "We are going to make sure that in North Carolina, if it says it on the menu, then we expect it to be served on the platter."

We have also learned that the U.S. Congress received a report about food substitution and mislabeling called "Combating Fraud and Deception." According to that report, seafood is not what it's supposed to be 37 percent of the time.

We told you the three restaurants that failed. Now we name the six restaurants who gave us exactly what we ordered. So which restaurants actually passed the test?

Blue Restaurant in Uptown, Angry Ale's on Montford Drive, Providence Road Sundries, Upstream at Phillips Place, Red Rocks Cafe at Birkdale Village, and RJ Gators at Lake Norman. RJ Gators in the University Area failed our first fish test, but did in fact serve us grouper this time around.

"It's an integrity thing," said Blue Restaurant Executive Chef Gene Briggs. He says if you are educated about fish, knowing the difference between grouper and catfish is like comparing beef to pork.

"If you were to put cod in the grouper box, there are four or five guys that would catch it before it ever even made it to the line," explained Briggs.

Blue inspects every fillet and says a third of the fish delivered to their kitchen doesn't meet their standards, so they turn it away. A delivery arrived while we were there and Briggs took us through their quality check procedure.

"First thing we do is make sure it's the fish we want," Briggs said. "The blood is red. It's not brown. You know it's fresh that way."

Anna smelled the fish. Briggs explained, "There is no smell whatsoever and that's what you're looking for. There is a nice sweetness."

Blue Owner Alex Myrick's advice for customers?

"Know your restaurant. Just like if you were to have your car repaired, know your mechanic because then you know what exactly is being done to your car," he said.

Chef Briggs also says if you want to be able to identify grouper down to the species, talk to the people who sell you fish. Call the chef at a restaurant that serves it and ask questions.

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