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Fish fraud means what's on your plate may be an impostor

<http://www.sun-sentinel.com/health/fl-fake-fish-supplies-20110528,0,5172801.story>

By Peter Franceschina, Sun Sentinel
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LIGHTHOUSE POINT—

Veteran South Florida fishmonger Papa Hughie knows what he likes in a fish that is going to end up on a dinner plate – preferably a whole specimen, with clear eyes and vibrant colors.

If it's already filleted, he still wants a colorful sheen to the flesh. Swordfish, mahi mahi and snapper, for example, should have bright red "blood lines," not brown or gray. He lets his nose play detective — there should be no peculiar odors.

He will not tolerate so-called "seafood fraud," the substitution of one species of fish — usually of inferior quality — for another. The deception can be carried out anywhere in the international supply chain, from the boat that hauled the fish aboard in the far reaches of the Pacific to the restaurant down the street that promises that quintessential Florida delicacy — a grouper sandwich.

Seafood fraud is a problem in some parts of the industry, according to a recent report, "Bait and Switch: How Seafood Fraud Hurts Our Oceans, Our Wallets and Our Health," issued by the national conservation group Oceana. The report cites recent studies showing that 25 percent to 70 percent of the time, fish sold in the United States as red snapper, wild salmon and Atlantic cod is actually less desirable, cheaper fish that is more readily available.

"It's a money venture. The false labeling by country, by species or whatever they want to do with the false labeling, it's purely money driven," said Jeff Radonski, who supervises seafood fraud investigations in South Florida for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Mislabeled fish has been a problem in South Florida for at least two decades. When the Sun Sentinel had genetic tests performed on random fish samples purchased from retail markets in the late 1980s, the tests showed 90 percent were mislabeled.

Only two out of 20 samples of red snapper were the real thing. That delectable fish – Lutjanus

campechanus, native to the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic waters – is one of the most frequently impersonated by a fake.

After 35 years in the restaurant, retail and wholesale seafood business, Hugh Ganter, called Papa Hughie by almost everyone, knows his fish, and how to sniff out seafood fraud. If he ever has a question about a product he's purchased, he has DNA tests performed by state wildlife officials before he sells it or puts it on the menu of his restaurant, Seafood World.

That's how he once discovered 3,000 pounds of "grouper" he had bought was actually farm-raised catfish from Southeast Asia. There were clues: The fillets were not as thick as they should have been, and the flesh didn't have grouper's characteristic reddish tinge.

"It did not look like grouper to me," Ganter said. "Grouper would be a thicker, firmer fish. If a grouper is very, very small, it will still be reasonably thick. It is a belly fish. It is a fat fish, not like a flounder. ... When you cook it, it is flaky. It is one of the best fish in the water."

Grouper is expensive, and sometimes unavailable because of conservation rules. Those factors combine to make it one of the most faked fish in Florida. Its impostors include tilapia, king clip and Vietnamese catfish, marketed as swai or basa. Since 2006, state restaurant inspectors have issued more than 250 citations for the mislabeling of another fish as grouper, records show.

When Mahmood Shivji, a Nova Southeastern University professor and director of the Guy Harvey Research Institute who specializes in fish DNA research, first began testing grouper samples in 2007, he found 40 percent to 44 percent was not as advertised.

"Over the years, I found the prevalence dropped down to about 20 percent," he said, adding he believes news accounts about the fish substitutions may have reduced the practice in South Florida. "Once the media started to put these stories out, three or four distributors came to me, 'Can you test our stuff for us?'"

Still, when Shivji's students recently tested fish advertised as white tuna from 10 sushi restaurants in Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties, they found eight had been improperly labeled. Escolar, an oily fish that can cause diarrhea, is frequently substituted for white tuna on sushi menus, state restaurant inspection records show.

Eva Berman has run a small fish wholesale business in Miami, E & R International Seafood, for 40 years, importing seafood from around the world. She is a member of an industry group, the National Fisheries Institute, which promotes honesty in the trade through its Better Seafood Board.

"It is true in today's world we have substitution, not only in seafood items but many times in other food products," she said. "My commitment is to good seafood and to the consumers."

Fish substitutions can pose health risks, potentially exposing consumers to naturally occurring toxins — such as ciguatera in reef fish — that cause illness, according to the Oceana report. And if a less costly fish is substituted, consumers are paying a higher price for something they are not getting.

To avoid being duped, consumers should educate themselves about the seafood they buy, seek out reputable retailers who have been in business for years, and not be afraid to ask questions, Berman and other experts say.

"The first thing is always let your eyes and your nose be your guide," Ganter said. "If you can see the whole fish and they will cut it in front of you, that would be ideal. Otherwise, look at the color of the fish — the whole fish or the fillet — the colors should be bright."

If you find cheap prices on seafood that is typically more expensive, there could be a good reason — a lesser fish is masquerading as a pricier cousin.

"Given the price of grouper, if someone is pitching you a grouper sandwich for \$10, there is a very good chance you're not eating real grouper," Shivji said.

Radonski, the NOAA investigator, sometimes finds himself casting a wary eye at the fish in a seafood case or those listed on a menu. When he's out to dinner with friends, they warn him not to say anything.

"Even as a consumer, I sit there and look," he said. "And even at restaurants, sometimes friends will get upset. ... You want a grouper sandwich. You don't want any other fish."

pfranceschina@tribune.com or 954-459-2255

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