

# Food for Thought: Psssst, Wanna Buy a Mollusk?

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

It has all the makings of a good thriller -- satellite tracking, surveillance teams, stakeouts and undercover operatives. Throw in webs of international intrigue that stretch around the world from California to Japan, from South Africa to Mexico. Even the vocabulary -- laundering, street value, interdiction -- would be familiar to anyone who has seen a movie about drug busts. Like drugs, the commodity doubles, even triples, in value as it passes along a chain of middlemen before reaching its destinations: Tokyo sushi bars and expensive Hong Kong restaurants.

Abalone, a large sea snail from the family haliotis, has become a very expensive delicacy in Asia. Particularly prized is the red abalone, the largest of dozens of species, that is found mostly in California. Rising prices have fostered unprecedented levels of poaching, not just in the United States but also in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. With poachers getting \$60 for each abalone, the species is increasingly at risk. Now authorities are using satellites and night scopes, abalone-sniffing dogs, sting operations, undercover agents and threats of conspiracy charges to stop the illegal trade.

The problem is particularly acute in California, where the state closed down commercial fishing of the mollusk two years ago and banned all taking of abalone south of San Francisco. Now law-enforcement efforts are focusing on the northern counties of Sonoma and Mendocino. Here the coast is not the sandy "Bay Watch" California seashore of popular lore but a wild place of towering cliffs, fog and cold, crashing seas. These natural obstacles have not deterred members of organized gangs of poachers, who can earn \$100,000 a year each, according to Fred Cole, deputy chief of law enforcement for the California Fish and Game Department.

## FULL TEXT

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Poachers sometimes go in using scuba gear, banned under local regulations, and "clear cut" the abalone from the rocks, taking even those that are undersized. Others drive vanloads of people to the coast; if stopped by game wardens, they claim that each person has only the legal limit of four abalone that recreational divers, using only snorkels or free diving without equipment, are allowed to take during the short season. While most divers will take only a dozen abalone in a season, these groups return twice a day, making sure to never carry more than the legal limit on each trip.

Last month, Mr. Cole's department arrested 16 people and seized nine vehicles after six months of surveillance of a group that was taking in an estimated million dollars a year. If found guilty, the defendants face up to three years in jail and \$40,000 in fines on felony conspiracy charges.

The appeal of abalone is a little hard to explain. The texture is politely described as firm, but in the wrong hands it causes your teeth to bounce apart. The taste is delicate at best, but often non-existent. When I expressed skepticism about its worth to a gourmet in Hong Kong, I was told that canned abalone can be disappointing but dried or fresh abalone cooked by a skilled chef is a sublime and unforgettable experience. It better be, as it sells for about \$115 at local restaurants, and \$160 in Tokyo sushi bars.

Abalone falls into a category of foods prized for their texture and for taking on the flavor of whatever they are cooked in. Chinese doctors regard abalone as having a quality known as pu -- foods that aid healing, cure anemia and act as a general tonic for the body. Foods that are pu are reputed, because of their gentle warming qualities and restorative effects on the body, to improve sexual performance although they are not regarded as aphrodisiacs.

The best restaurants often have just one specially trained cook who only handles the dry abalone, which must be ordered in advance, because it has to be soaked for up to four days. Fresh abalone, scrubbed and trimmed, can be eaten raw -- sliced very finely and beaten until tender. Otherwise it can be cooked in just a matter of seconds. In Japan it's prepared as ishiyaki -- on a heated rock brought to the table. In Chinese restaurants it's more commonly slow cooked, a process that involves up to four hours of simmering.

The most expensive abalone are the dried varieties that come from Japan. A large one, known as a one-head abalone, can fetch up to \$1,550 in a top restaurant, but, according to Patrick Leung, manager of the Lai Ching Heen restaurant at the Regent Hotel in Hong Kong, they are now impossible to find. The best dried abalone should be tender and shiny like crystal sugar when cut open. Texture depends on size: The bigger, the better. Mr. Leung has been stockpiling and freezing the largest, highest quality dried abalone for his restaurant as prices are shooting up all the time.

It can take 15 years for abalone to grow to seven inches (17.8 centimeters), the size at which they can be taken in California. This means it could take decades to replenish devastated populations. Other threats, including pollution and non-native seaweeds spread around the world in the ballast water of ships, are killing the mollusks. Undaria seaweed has nearly wiped out abalone in the Australian states of Tasmania and Victoria. Chinese abalone stocks were gone by the beginning of this century and few remain elsewhere in Asia. Abalone is now farmed around the world but these mollusks tend to be small, less than half the size of wild ones. If the current rates of poaching continue, however, this may be the only abalone available to diners.

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Guiltless Abalone
Abalone stocks may be threatened but diners can still order it
without adding to the problem. They'll have to adjust their
expectations and not eat the largest, probably illegally collected,
fresh abalone, and instead opt for smaller farmed ones. Canned abalone
is generally collected legally -- the illegal stuff is consumed fresh
on the whole as it is so valuable -- and Wing Tai and New World brands
are recommended. Canned abalone, which are cooked and canned in their
own juices, can be added to soups just before they are served. Add the
juices to the soup stock. Don't cook it for more than a few seconds or
it becomes rubbery and unpleasant. Charmaine Solomon, who's written
several top Asian cookbooks, has this recipe for marinated abalone:
1 can (14 oz or 425 grams) abalone
2 tablespoons (30 ml) Japanese soy sauce
2 tablespoons (30 ml) mirin (sweet
fermented rice flavoring liquid)
2 teaspoons (10 ml) sugar
1 teaspoon (5 ml) sesame oil
1 teaspoon (5 ml) ginger juice (squeezed from grated ginger)
Slice the abalone as thinly as possible. Mix the other ingredients
and pour over the abalone slices. Leave for 10 minutes and serve in
the marinade along with other cold appetizers.

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