Frozen Tuna That's Red (HOT)

It's been a long time since the seafood business has seen a product become so popular so quickly. Frozen red-marinated yellowfin tuna steaks at a fraction of the price of fresh. Actually, frozen red-marinated tuna has been around a long time. In Japan, it's readily available due to a special (and expensive) ultra-cold handling chain that keeps the tuna at -40°F or below to prevent the oxidation that turns a tuna's red meat brown. But in this country, where such a cold chain would be prohibitively expensive, frozen tuna meant brown (a.k.a chocolate) tuna. Until now.

Give credit to the Japanese founders of PescaRich, a General Santos company that was started in 1991 to supply fresh sashimi tuna to Japan. They pioneered a proprietary method in 1994 that cold-smokes yellowfin tuna to stabilize the red color at the temperature (-6° - 9°F) most frozen seafood is stored at. But even though the tuna is smoked, there's no smoke taste, as the taste-imparting particles are filtered from the smoke before the tuna is smoked. After the tuna is thawed out, it will keep its red color for a few days, just like fresh, before it starts to oxidize. While the taste and texture may not be exactly the same as a fresh belly cut, for the average consumer it's just fine. By 1996 the product was so popular, PescaRich was exporting 120 tons a month of smoked tuna loins and fillets to Japan, says Richard Friend, the company's president.

While it would appear that this would be a straightforward introduction of an eye-appealing, more-convenient product, this is, of course, the fish business. The rub with smoked tuna came when other seafood processors found they could buy industrial carbon monoxide (CO) and accomplish similar results—with a lot less hassle and expense. No brining, no smoking, no filtering. Just toss tuna steaks in a plastic bag, gas them, let them sit a day or so, put them in a blast freezer and they'll stay bright cherry red. In fact, in some respects, CO worked better as it could actually pump up the color.

But the concept of gassing tuna in a garage, as some exporters in Indonesia were doing, didn't sit well with the Japanese health authorities. After intense lobbying by the Japanese tuna industry, which didn't like the idea of either gassed or smoked tuna changing the rules of the tuna game, last August Japan set a very low tolerance level for CO in tuna that effectively eliminated the imports of either smoked or CO-treated tuna. "The level they set was unfairly low," says Friend.

After being shut out of Japan, the tuna smokers (and gasers) turned their attention to other markets, especially the U.S. As in Japan, the product met with immediate acceptance, says Charlie Umano of Hi5 Fish in Hawaii, which looked on the role of marketing PescaRich's product. "The product is very predictable, both in quality and price. Buyers like that. The demand is unbelievable." Buyers are also impressed, he says, when they show them pictures of PescaRich's HACCP-approved plant. "It's one of the most sanitary plants I've ever been in," says Umano who has purchased tuna in developing countries on both sides of the Pacific Rim.

The seafood buyer for one of Texas' largest supermarket chains says his annual tuna sales, which were running about 30,000 pounds a year, should hit almost 200,000 pounds since he began carrying smoked tuna in addition to fresh. He sells the frozen steaks for $7.99 a pound, compared with $12 or $13 for fresh. "Consumers look at the fish, they both look the same, and they take the one for $7.99," he says. "It's been great."

But white buyers love it, the new tuna treatments have been a headache for the FDA. Although the smoked tuna is not a problem, the gassed tuna is, since the FDA doesn't recognize the use of CO as a GRAS (Generally Recognized as Safe) additive. "If the FDA knew and could confirm you're hitting it with straight CO they would say you're adulterating the product," says Charles Cardile, an independent consultant who was formally the Director of Investigations for the FDA's New York office. "You're not supposed to make a product look better than it is." But since it's not a health issue ("CO only hurts you if you breathe it, not if you ingest it," says Cardile) and the FDA doesn't have an approved procedure to test for CO, the gassed tuna is not a high priority for the agency, Cardile maintains. "The FDA is reluctant to seize product because it's so difficult to test," he says.

At any rate, it's pretty easy to tell if your tuna has been gassed or smoked. The gassed tuna has a "bright, unnatural red" color, says Bill Kowalski of Hawaii International Seafood, who joined up with Joseph Chia, one of General Santos' top tuna buyers, to process tuna using tasteless smoke. Tuna treated with CO will also hold its red color longer than smoked tuna.