CATCHING UP WITH FISH SALES AT THE COOP: WHAT'S NEW AND WHY

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By Jess Powers

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If you've noticed more fish and seafood options at the Coop lately, you're not alone. Interestingly, seafood consumption rose across the U.S. during the pandemic, as people sought out healthy protein options to prepare at home; sales dipped in 2023 due to inflation but remained higher than before the pandemic. Fresh-fish, frozen-fish and canned-fish buyers at the Coop have responded to the consumer demand by expanding our vendor list and accommodating member requests for new products.

New Fresh Fish at the Coop

Masha Bezlepkina, who was born in Ukraine and grew up in Moscow, joined the meat, fresh and frozen-fish buying team at the Coop in September 2022; she became the sole buyer in the spring of 2024. As a vegetarian, she doesn't consume what she sources for us, but her appreciation of the purchasing standards and of vendors who are passionate about their products is apparent.

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Hudson Valley Fisheries is one of two main suppliers of fresh fish to the Coop. They raise steelhead trout in a Recirculating Aquaculture System (RAS) and the sashimi grade trout are delivered shortly after harvesting. This closed, controlled land-based system reuses 95% of its water and upcycles waste into fertilizer, according to Hudson Valley Fisheries' website. Notably, they are committed to environmental stewardship, humane harvesting, and research and education.

Bezlepkina recalls visiting the facility and being struck by how innovative its practices are. On her visit, the growers mentioned "sometimes [having] tiny fish and wondering what to do with them." They decided to make dog chews and introduced the new product line within a year—they are now also available at the Coop.

The other main supplier of fresh fish to the Coop is Pierless Fish Corporation, a long-time wholesaler to NYC restaurants that was acquired by Baldor Specialty Foods in 2020. Newer items at the Coop, such as sashimi and poke, feature three rotating types of fish that change based on season and freshness. Pierless delivers daily: fish arrives at the Brooklyn Army Terminal, is processed that night and delivered in the morning.

There are practical limitations to the inventory the Coop can carry due to the size of the refrigerated case and how much space we have in general. "It's not possible to

carry live crab," Bezlepkina notes.

That said, Bezlepkina closely follows developments within the industry, recently introducing King Scottish salmon with good farming practices. She also listens to member input and requests. Recently, a member asked for tuna and swordfish steaks to be cut thicker so they work better on the grill. The request was accommodated and has received positive feedback (and sales) from other members.

Canned Fish and Supply-Chain Issues



There are many tinned-fish varieties from suppliers available at the Coop.
Canned (or tinned) fish is a staple in many households, offering quick protein options that are shelf stable. Depending on the harvest method and location, small fish like anchovies, sardines and other forage fish can be sustainable choices. (Check Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch for specific recommendations.)

Britt Henriksson and Gillian Chi are responsible for canned-fish buying at the Coop. Chi explains that the Coop sells an impressive 3,000 units of canned fish per week. This figure doesn't include the gourmet items located at the end cap. The everyday brands in Aisle 6 are mostly sourced from United Natural Foods (UNFI), and include Field Day, Henry & Lisa, Safe Catch, Scout, Ortiz, Season's, Tonnino, Matiz, Patagonia,

Wild Planet, Natural Sea and Fishwife. Not surprisingly, tuna is the biggest seller; sardines, anchovies and mackerel are the next-most-popular canned-fish proteins of choice.



Whether you enjoy sardines with preserved lemon on toast or use wild cockles in sea salt brine to make a quick spaghetti and clams, there is certainly something for everyone. The gourmet brands such as Fishwife, Minnow, Porto Muinos, La Brujula, Jose Gourmet, Siesta, Rizzoli and Iasa are sourced from Faire or A Priori. Minnow products are connected to the local restaurants Hart’s, Cervo’s and The Fly.

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In all, Henriksson and co-buyer Yuri Weber manage vendor relationships for about 45 different companies, with multiple deliveries a week from some of them, and all of the paperwork involved. Here, too, space and popularity are considerations that affect what to stock.

Henriksson recounts that during the pandemic, there were crop shortages and supply-chain issues that impacted the ability to source rolled oats. This led the team to pursue new distributor relationships, as we now do with fish suppliers. She says products from new brands like Minnow and Fishwife "fly off the shelf." Minnow's stark, retro-reminiscent, jewel-tone-and-black labels are striking, as are Fishwife's psychedelic, colorful graphics. Fishwife, founded in 2020 by two women who aim to produce ethically sourced and delicious tinned seafood, sells smoked salmon with Fly by Jing chili crisp, slow-smoked mackerel with chili flakes, and smoked rainbow trout.



Henriksson doesn't eat canned fish herself. "I OD'd on tuna in college," she jokes. "I'm not into the smell." But she is dedicated to satisfying members' demand for it.

Recently the Coop received samples from a French sardine company. “People thought they were yummy,” she shares. “Now we have to see if it’s at a good price point.”

New products, meanwhile, often emerge from member requests. A member recently requested that the Coop carry cod liver. Henriksson found it available from an online ordering platform, Faire, that the Coop uses. (Another Coop member works at the company.) Minnow describes this product, sustainably sourced from wild cod originating in Iceland’s Westfjord region, as “butter of the sea,” much like uni.



Jess Powers enjoys good food and works in emergency management.