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## Trolling for a market niche -- smaller tuna's health hook Younger catches farther out at sea lower in mercury

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A feisty band of West Coast fishermen is pulling in a healthful catch of small albacore tuna for boutique canneries from California to Washington, branding their tuna "the other albacore" both low in mercury and high in beneficial fish oils.

It is a throwback to the old days of fishing: hundreds of small trolling boats venturing hundreds of miles off the coast to throw their old fashioned hook-and-line "jigs" into the ocean. No 50-mile longlines or floating fish- processing factories.

Called the "organic albacore of the sea" by environmentalists, the fishermen's quarry are young tuna, weighing from 10 to 20 pounds, that aren't old enough or big enough to accumulate the mercury levels found in the 40-to- 70 pounders that are preferred by StarKist, Chicken of the Sea and Bumble Bee canners.

The smaller tuna have other benefits, too: They are even richer in heart- healthful omega-3 fatty acids than their elders. And now Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch, a guide to sustainably fished species, is singling out troll-caught tuna as a "best choice" for consumers.

With all this going for them, troll-caught albacore tuna have all the makings of a new niche market in the United States. Fishermen are responding accordingly, starting new canneries and marketing their special catch for grocery store and Internet sales.

"If U.S. consumers could realize what a great local product it is, then the fishermen would receive a better price and people would get a nutritional food," said Petaluma fisherman Stan Davis, 53, who fishes for the small albacore like his father before him.

In updating its consumer advisory for mercury in fish last month, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommended that children and women of child- bearing age limit the consumption of canned white albacore tuna -- generally the big tuna -- to 6 ounces a week.

Mercury can cause neurological problems in humans, and the developing fetus, toddlers and young children are particularly at risk.

Some experts say that even 6 ounces of big albacore is too high. Any person under 200 pounds eating that amount, for example, would exceed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's safety guideline, and a 55-pound child would be eating 3.5 times the amount in the guideline.

Big albacore has mercury at an average of 0.358 micrograms per gram, about three times greater than canned "chunk light" tuna, which is smaller skipjack tuna and is considered low in mercury.

The small albacore tuna contains an average of 0.14 micrograms per gram, or about the same as the canned chunk light tuna, according to tests on 91 albacore conducted last year by Oregon State University Seafood Laboratory in Astoria, Ore.

The smaller albacore also has more fat, which is a good word when it comes to fish. There are 1 to 2 grams per 2 ounces in big albacore, and 3 to 5 grams per 2 ounces in small albacore.

Little is known about the ecology of the fast-swimming tuna. In the spring, adults spawn off the southern part of Japan. The juveniles are probably sedentary for the first year, but by the time they're 2 and 3 years old, they're migrating thousands of miles to the California coast.

"This animal can arrive on this coastline in a month. Albacore are literally built for speed. With torpedo-shaped bodies, smooth skin and streamlined fins, they can reach speeds of more than 50 miles per hour," said Paul Crone, research scientist at the National Marine Fisheries Service in La Jolla.

While the juveniles migrate yearly, the older tuna, which get up to 12 years old, stay in the western Pacific. The trollers don't come across them. Even if the big albacore are nearby, they won't bite on the lures, but instead go for the hooks on longlines, which are deeper in the ocean and stretch up to 50 miles.

Many of the 400 small trolling boats stationed from San Diego to Illwaco, Ore., are now out in the northern Pacific. Some, like San Rafael resident Joe Sheean, 78, who fishes out of Newport, Ore., is waiting until the albacore get closer to the coast before he goes out on the 50-foot boat Irish Miss.

"We're going to get the boat ready for May," Sheean said.

Along with his brother, Sheean catches the tuna, freezes it on the boat and delivers it to Charlestown, Ore., where his son, Mike, cans it under the Pacific Fleet brand and sells it in United Markets in San Rafael and Star Grocery in Berkeley.

The troll-caught albacore fishery is an old one. The albacore population fell in the 1970s and 1980s because of overfishing and changing ocean temperatures and other conditions. In 1992, the United Nations banned the use of high-sea drift gill nets, and since then the stocks have rebounded.

Called a "highly migratory species," the troll-caught albacore are managed under the U.S. Magnuson Stevens Act and a treaty with Canada. The Pacific Fisheries Management Council is working with the Western Fishboat Owners Association, which represents 400 trollers, in devising a permit system to keep the fishery sustainable.

Kate Wing, ocean policy analyst at the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco, a national environmental group, praised the trollers for their cooperative spirit.

"The northern Pacific albacore is one of those fish you want to support because it comes from a sustainable fishery. There's very little bycatch, and the fishermen are actively working to manage their own fishery," Wing said.

Crone, of the National Marine Fisheries Service, said populations of north Pacific albacore are generally healthy and can probably handle long periods of troller fishing, which take only 7 percent to 15 percent of all the albacore tuna. He cautioned that eating a lot of any species has repercussions.

In past years, the U.S. trollers have sold their catch mostly in Europe, where the small, oil-packed albacore is considered a delicacy, and in Japan, where it's used in sashimi. For the U.S. market, they've been selling to the big canners, which do not mark the product as being any different from big albacore, so the benefits of their low-mercury, high omega-3 content get lost on the grocery shelf.

Out of 16,000 to 18,000 tons caught in 2003, about one-third went to U.S. canners and about two-thirds to the foreign market.

Dave Burney, executive director of the U.S. Tuna Foundation, which represents the big canners, said they prefer buying the larger, longline fish. U.S. consumers pay more for the big albacore because it's whiter in color and not so oily.

"Over the years, we used to take everything the local fishermen could catch. We recognized people didn't like the darker tuna. But we took it anyway," Burney said.

In local fish markets, fresh troll-caught small albacore comes into season July through October. It is sold in triangular loins, and has the same low mercury levels as the troll-caught canned albacore. The big longline albacore has the same moderately high mercury levels as the white albacore sold by the big canners.

Retired albacore troller Janet Gillette, 78, who fished from 1975 to 1989 with her partner, the late Capt. James Brandenburg, brags about the flavor of barbecued small albacore.

After reading headlines that canned white albacore has worrisome levels of mercury, Gillette said, "All of us albacore eaters were upset." Those in the know, she said, realized the mercury warnings didn't hold true for the troll-caught albacore -- "the other albacore."

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#### Where to find it

Small albacore tuna, whether canned or fresh, isn't available at most grocery stores. Here are some markets that carry it.

#### Canned

Berkeley: Star Grocery

Emeryville: Whole Foods

Palo Alto: Oakville Grocery

Kentfield: Woodland Market

San Rafael: United Market, Western Boat and Tackle Shop

Online: Mary Lu Seafoods, Crescent City; Dave's Albacore, Soquel; Vital Choice Seafood in Bellingham, Wash.; [www.albatuna.com](http://www.albatuna.com).

Fresh

Triangular loins are usually available from July through October.

San Francisco: Mission Market

San Rafael: Andronico's

Berkeley: Monterey Market

Oakland: Rockridge Fish Market, which is moving from Market Hall to the Ferry Building in San Francisco.

Helpful Web sites to determine mercury levels in fish: [www.seaturtles.org/gotmercury.htm](http://www.seaturtles.org/gotmercury.htm) and [www.environmentaldefense.org/go/seafood](http://www.environmentaldefense.org/go/seafood).

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