



Abalone: Best Choice or Avoid? It Depends.

By AMY MCDERMOTT • FEB 4, 2016

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Red Abalone raised at Monterey Bay Abalone Company takes four years to reach market size.

KRISTA ALMANZAN



Kelp is harvested from the Monterey Bay to feed the abalone at Monterey Bay Abalone Company.

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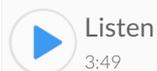
The abalone hang in cages below the municipal wharf in Monterey.

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The Monterey Bay Abalone Company on the municipal wharf in Monterey.

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Abalone is classic California seafood, but the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch lists it as a "best choice" and a shellfish to avoid. Why the split?

Turns out, the way abalone is raised makes a big difference. Growing techniques vary between aquatic farms; some are environmentally friendly while others are destructive.

At the Monterey Abalone Company, in Monterey California, local farmers work to minimize ocean impacts. Getting a look at their abalone isn't easy. The farm is at the end of the commercial wharf, through an old hatch and down a ladder, beneath the docks.

It's dim and loud down here. Sea lions sleep on the wooden pilings and machines pull large black cages of abalone up out of the water. A handful of farmers are hard at work in plastic overalls and galoshes.

They're loading an order for Quince, a Michelin-starred restaurant in San Francisco, explains co-owner Trevor Fay. He leads the way across the wet, wooden floor to a large black cage. It's about hip high and stuffed full of brown seaweed.

"For the small abs, we put a plastic net liner inside of the wire mesh that keeps the abalone in and the predators out," Fay explains. "Once a week we pull up every cage we have, we clean it off first with high pressure seawater, open it up, and then stuff it full of fresh kelp."

That kelp is dinner for their growing red abalone, which take at least four years to reach market size. The reds, along with four other species— used to be common in California, but overfishing in the 1900s tanked their populations. Now, red abalone is the only species that's commercially available. It's raised on aquatic farms.

Here under the wharf, the abalone grow in their wild habitat. Company co-owner Art Seavey says their farming methods are environmentally-friendly. “The animals are eating local plant production,” he explains, “instead of for example, an artificial feed that’s made with grains from the Midwest and fishmeal from Chile.”

It’s not just what they’re eating. It’s also what’s not eating them. Since the abalone are suspended in cages, this operation doesn’t have to deter predators, like starfish, crabs, and otters.

Monterey Abalone Company is one of two California farms (both in Monterey) that grow abalone directly in the ocean. Other operations, like Davenport’s American Abalone Farms, grow their product on land, in closed tanks that are also environmentally friendly. The key is leaving predators and ocean habitat healthy.

But not all abalone is farmed that way. Ryan Bigelow is outreach manager for Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch. He says abalone raised in ways that hurt the environment makes the aquarium’s avoid list.

“So when we talk about the avoid options, mostly from China and Japan, we’re talking about what we call sea ranching operations,” Bigelow says. “We call them that because there’s basically an underwater pasture.”

At first, underwater pasture sounds good because the abalone are in their natural habitat. But the ranchers are destructive; they remove any critter that would threaten their investment.

“They go through and clean out all the different predators,” Bigelow explains. “So everything from starfish to crabs, in much the same way that we might have cleaned out wolves or other predators when we were farming cows 100 years ago.”

So was that abalone on the menu raised on a responsible farm or a sea ranch? Well, that depends where in the world it came from. As of 2009, about 20 percent of US abalone was raised nationally. The rest was imported, with thirteen percent from China.

Seafood Watch recommends asking the origin of any abalone at a restaurant or market, and the way it was grown. If it’s from California, it’s probably a safe bet, but imports from China and Japan deserve more scrutiny.



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