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Matador Riesling
Spätlese trocken

ON THE TABLE

When the work in the kitchen was done, citizen scientists enjoyed the fruits of their labor. They set the table, called other members of their household, removed their aprons, and sat down to eat. They filled their bellies and tested their taste buds.

But that was not the end of their job: after closing their mouths, they opened their computers and used the Fish Diary to upload their impressions of the meal. What were the texture and flavor of the species like? How would participants score its enjoyability?

These questions shed light on the potential of 52 local species to find favor among New England seafood lovers. For example, they highlighted which species were already popular and which species need a marketing boost. They identified a few species that, despite not being well-known, have what it takes to become new favorites—and others that do not.

The purpose of seafood is, after all, to be eaten, and while marketing tactics may determine whether or not a customer takes a species home, it is ultimately the flavor and texture of the species itself that will determine whether a customer buys it again. The fate of each species in the market, then, is heavily influenced by what takes place on the table.

FIGURE 20. IMPRESSIONS OF FLAVOR

Participants most frequently used positive words like “mild,” “sweet,” and “buttery” to describe their seafood meals. Words like “fishy” and “strong” were associated with negative perceptions, which were less common. Species-specific impressions of flavor can be found in the Species Summaries at the end of this report.

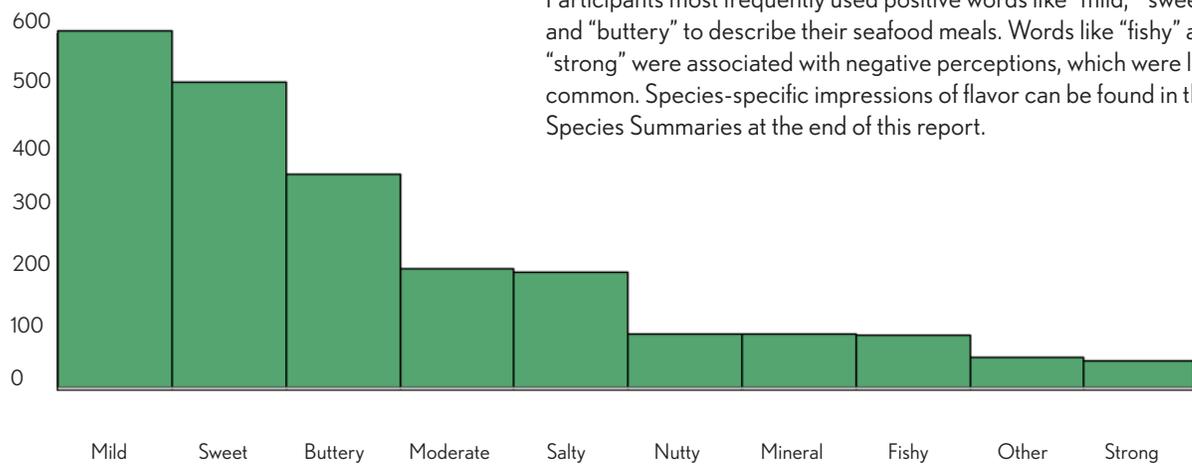
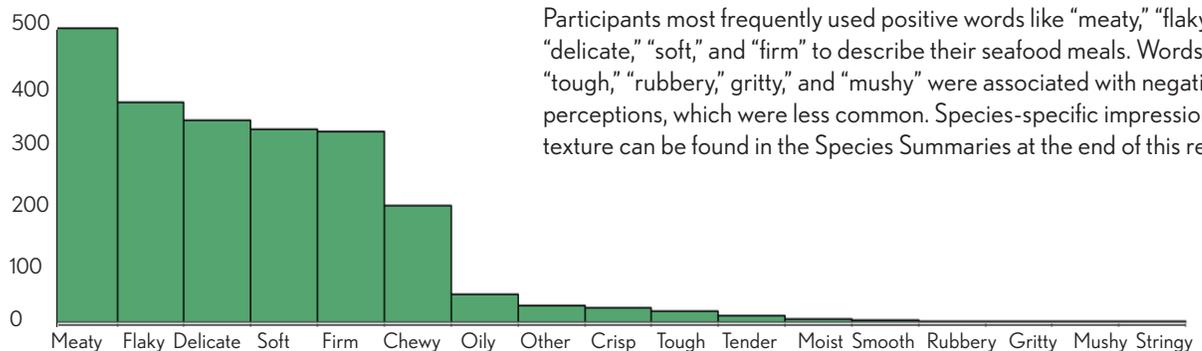


FIGURE 21. IMPRESSIONS OF TEXTURE

Participants most frequently used positive words like “meaty,” “flaky,” “delicate,” “soft,” and “firm” to describe their seafood meals. Words like “tough,” “rubbery,” “gritty,” and “mushy” were associated with negative perceptions, which were less common. Species-specific impressions of texture can be found in the Species Summaries at the end of this report.



GASTRONOMIC LIKABILITY

Participants reflected on their eating experiences by rating how much they liked each species on a scale of 1-5 (with 5 being the most liked and 1 being the least liked). Average scores for the highest and lowest scoring species are displayed below.

"MOST LIKED" SPECIES

(arranged from most extreme to more moderate)

1. John Dory (5.00, n=3)
2. Striped bass (4.89, n=27)
3. Sea scallops (4.88, n=92)
4. Lobster (4.88, n=75)
5. Winter flounder (4.86, n=7)
6. White hake (4.83, n=18)
7. Grey sole (4.80, n=10) and Tautog (4.80, n=5)
8. Cod (4.79, n=76)
9. Jonah crab (4.79, n=28)
10. Swordfish (4.77, n=56)

"LEAST LIKED" SPECIES

(arranged from most extreme to more moderate)

1. Periwinkles (3.00, n=3)
2. Butterfish (3.25, n=4)
3. Whelks (3.50, n=5)
4. Red hake (3.80, n=5)
5. Whiting (3.86, n=7)
6. Mackerel (3.93, n=14)
7. Razor clam (4.00, n=3)
8. Squid (4.25, n=44)
8. Bluefish (4.25, n=40)
10. Herring (4.28, n=7)

When participants gave a high score to a species' gastronomic likability, they often mentioned its firmness, flakiness, and freshness. Particularly for finfish, these were winning qualities that won eaters over time and time again. When participants gave a low score to a species' gastronomic likability, they often attributed it to bones, fishiness, grit (for shellfish), or a perception that the fish was boring, plain, or generic. This latter observation was particularly true for whitefish such as haddock, cod, and several types of flounder. It was exacerbated by the fact that these fish were often all that participants were able to find, week after week, and thus they were forced to eat them again and again even though they would have preferred to try something new.

Participants' evaluation of their meals was influenced not only by the species eaten but by other aspects of the seafood's journey to the plate, such as how fresh it was when purchased and how it was prepared. These connections stress the role of optimal handling and preparation practices in bringing out the best that a seafood species has to offer.

John Dory: "Delicious!" "Like a better version of flounder."

Striped bass: "Nice texture and rich taste." "Very versatile."

Sea scallops: "Sweet and substantial." "Wonderful texture."

Lobster: "Sweet and delicious." "They came out perfectly."

Winter flounder: "Delicate fillets." "Light, sweet, and flaky."

White hake: "An easy, palatable fish." "Up there with haddock."

Grey sole: "Very light flavor."

Tautog: "The best dish!." "It was easy to bake."

Cod: "You really can't mess it up." "Delicious, flaky taste."

Jonah crab: "Flavor was awesome, although a lot of work."

Periwinkles: "They are small and fussy to eat. Not very attractive."

Butterfish: "I wasn't a fan of the oily texture." "Too fishy-tasting."

Whelks: "After preparing it, I was so disgusted I couldn't eat it."

Red hake: "The fish was too old."

Whiting: "My husband overcooked the fish."

Mackerel: "The fishiness was a little strong." "Like an oily tuna."

Razor clams: "Some of the clams were a bit gritty."

Squid: "I did not do a good job of cooking the squid."

Bluefish: "A bit fishy." "I did a terrible job of grilling it."

Herring: "The appearance is not exciting." "Fishy flavor."

DINNER TALES

In their Fish Stories, participants vividly described a rich variety of sensory experiences when savoring local seafood species. Not every meal was deemed successful, but for the most part, participants' experiences were positive. Their eye-opening adventures contain many important lessons for diversifying market demand for local seafood. Two major themes emerged from participants' Fish Stories at the table:

- Trying a new fish: Participants shared 99 stories about cooking and eating a new fish for the first time.
- Overcoming negative preconceptions: Participants shared 24 stories about learning to love species they had previously dismissed as unappealing.

THEME 1: TRYING A NEW FISH

Many participants relished the opportunity to step outside their seafood comfort zones. They expanded their palates and culinary skills by trying many different types of fish they had never eaten before. Most experiences were excellent, and participants found new favorite fish to add to their seafood repertoire. For many participants, this was the most exciting part of the project.



"I called my 'go-to' guy early this week and asked if he could find for me in order of preference: (1) sea robin; (2) smooth dogfish; (3) pollock; or (4) summer flounder (fluke). I was so disappointed, but not surprised, that he could not find sea robin for me, but my disappointment was not long lived because Robert found smooth dogfish for me. What the heck is it? It's a small shark and highly abundant. I found some information that said it is used as a substitute for cod and is interchangeable in recipes. OMG! This species is a keeper! Firm, very mild tasting, no bones, helps the ecosystem, and extremely inexpensive. I would even serve it for company. Dogfish is the next best thing since sliced bread!"

- DEBORAH MAGER, CONNECTICUT



"Golden tilefish is so colorful! My partner purchased two pounds of it from a farmers' market, and we cooked one pound a night for two nights in a row in a cast iron pan on the stove. Perfect. The tilefish reminded us a lot of monkfish in its texture, both raw and cooked—tender, but makes you chew a little. A very clean and almost nonexistent flavor on its own (but would be fabulous in a curry or saucy concoction!), and made our teeth squeak against each other a little when chewing. Weird! Would buy and eat tilefish again in a heartbeat."

- JEAN DAO, MASSACHUSETTS

"I loved the taste of the sand crab. Maybe the best crab I've ever had. But it's way too much work for the small amount of meat you get. I bet one could starve to death if all you had to eat was sand crab, since you would pass away before you got your essential nutrients!"

- DAVID FORD, RHODE ISLAND



"I was surprised at how good it was. I'd never had mackerel before. It'll definitely be in rotation and the price was reasonable as well."

- SIÓN VAUGHAN-THOMAS, MASSACHUSETTS



THEME 2: OVERCOMING NEGATIVE PRECONCEPTIONS

Consumers in general tend to be more squeamish about seafood than about other food groups. Often, one bad experience can turn an eater off for life. Some citizen scientists used this project as an opportunity to give previously rejected seafood species another chance. Often, they discovered that they liked them! Other times, participants who initially looked askance at certain species in the market—concluding, for example, that there must be some reason they are not commonly sold in New England—were pleasantly surprised by the species' unsung virtues after enjoying them at the table.



"Bonito has been on my list at least two other times before this week and I have been avoiding it in favor of other fish. I feed my cat bonito flakes (sold as a cat treat) so I have to say that when I saw bonito on my list, it didn't seem appealing. This week it was the only fish The Local Catch had available from my list, so I bought it because I prefer to buy from them if it's an option (it feels like I'm more directly supporting local fishermen when I buy from The Local Catch). Dave, who sells for The Local Catch at the Pawtucket Village Farmers' Market, gave me some tips about how to cook the bonito when I told him I was wary of the fish. He also told me he removed the bloodline before packaging the fish which was great because I don't think I would have known how to do that on my own. I made a citrusy Asian marinade for the fish and let it soak for a few hours. Then I pan seared the bonito and added it to some stir fried vegetables and rice. Dave had told me that bonito tastes a little like tuna, so I wasn't anticipating liking the fish because I'm not a tuna fan (except when it's from a can). But I ended up really enjoying the bonito. I think I cooked it a minute longer than I should have (I still get a bit nervous about undercooking seafood) so it was a tiny bit dry, but I didn't mind. I was able to get a nice sear on one side of the fish and that provided some nice texture. All in all, I think I would eat bonito again!"

- KATE AUBIN, RHODE ISLAND

"Bluefish are voracious predators. They employ a feeding behavior call the 'bluefish blitz' where large schools of big fish attack bait fish near the surface, churning the water like a washing machine. One resource described bluefish as an 'animated chopping machine.' But they seem less desirable as a meal. Just as for all extremely active predators, their meat will spoil quickly, due to their powerful digestive enzymes that are activated by the bait they ate, and they need to be cooked soon after being caught. They also have darker meat and a bloodline along the dorsal fin that gives them a strong flavor. But they are very nutritious to eat—full of Omega-3 fatty acids and a good source of selenium, magnesium, and other minerals. All my research had me very wary of how bluefish would taste. So we chose to blacken the fillets in cast iron using a homemade blackening seasoning with paprika. The fish was very good, with no strong overwhelming fish taste or super oily texture. I think it is a testament to the local fish market. I would definitely eat bluefish again."

- ANDREA MCCARTHY, CONNECTICUT



"I'm not a huge fan of whole shellfish. The textures are hard to get past, especially when you get a sandy one (gross). So I had my doubts about these clams. But we found a recipe for steamed, chilled clams with a smoky mayonnaise that was just perfect! The clams were chewy and meaty without any gritty or slimy bits, and we ate them with thick slices of heirloom tomatoes and avocado, and some sweet corn we steamed in the leftover clam juice. It was a perfect, fresh summer meal for a hot night."

- CATHY PETTKE, MASSACHUSETTS

"I avoid swordfish when dining out. It's never been a favorite of mine, and I hadn't cooked it in years. Had my heart set on haddock, but when that wasn't available, I 'settled' for swordfish. Surprise! I loved it! I pan seared the peppered fillet, flipped it, and finished it in the oven in 10 minutes... made a compound butter with garlic, parsley, and lemon zest, swirled it in the hot pan out of the oven... Voila! Quick, delicious, healthy, and yes, I'll do it again."

- JUDY TARR, MASSACHUSETTS



"I've never liked scallops. Maybe it was that one time I tried to order scallop ceviche while hungover... But despite disliking them, I've always been drawn to them. I once had a boyfriend that had to remind me every time we went out to eat, 'Devon, you don't like those. You'll be disappointed when you order them.' So for our last week with the study, I decided to push myself a little to see if I could figure out this weird disconnect. Maybe it was time, preparation, or just an open mind, but I loved them! Just pan seared in a little (read: a lot) of butter and topped with a quick lemon, butter, and garlic reduction and cilantro garnish. Hot damn, I'm a new woman. But I'll still probably avoid scallop ceviche after a night of drinking."

- DEVON MULLIGAN, MAINE

"I was not totally thrilled about the prospect of bluefish, and I was under the impression that it always has the real fishy, oily flavor that I personally am not always a fan of. As I spoke to the fishmonger, I could tell he knew I was not thrilled about bluefish, so he suggested that I grab the lemon caper marinade that they sold, dredge it in marinade, let it sit for an hour, and bake it in a Pyrex. Once I arrived home, I placed the fish into a Pyrex, put the lemon caper dressing on it, and let it sit. I baked the fish at 350F until it was flaky, and took a taste. No fish taste to be found! I put the fish over a bed of rice with some fresh-from-the-garden asparagus. I enjoyed it a lot more than I expected. I can't wait to see what Week 3 has in stock for me."

- RACHEL HUTCHINSON, MASSACHUSETTS



TAKEAWAY

Perceptions about which species constitute "good" and "bad" seafood are deeply entrenched culturally and informed by individual experience. Lack of familiarity, unfavorable reputations, and previous negative experiences can act as barriers to trying new local species. However, when citizen scientists got past these barriers and tried many local seafood species—either for the first time ever or the first time after a long period of rejection—they often discovered newfound favorites! Exposure and training can help consumers learn to enjoy a much wider variety of local seafood.