

[Back to Order toro \(and tuna salad\) while you can](#)

Order toro (and tuna salad) while you can

March 14, 2010

Garnet Fraser

Hiro Yoshida calls it "the king of the tuna." The boss of Toronto's Hiro Sushi is talking about the Atlantic bluefin, a mammoth creature that can live to 40, reach three metres long and 650 kilograms.

"It's tasty, and an unusual thing," says Yoshida, one of Toronto's pre-eminent sushi chefs. "In all sushi, tuna is always the main food" – and toro, from the bluefin's belly, is the most valued morsel of all, with its high fat content and lingering flavour.

"If we have nice toro, customers believe that my restaurant has nice variety and is high class," explains Yoshida from his King St. E. eatery. "It's the same as foie gras."

But the king of tuna's reign is in jeopardy.

Scientists suggest that stocks in the Gulf of Mexico and Mediterranean are down to 10 per cent or 15 per cent of their levels before industrial fishing began. Nations with bluefin industries have set quotas, which failed to protect the stocks.

Now environmentalists are hoping international trade of bluefin will be banned at a meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) this week in Doha, Qatar. There, 175 states will consider the fate of the bluefin, polar bears and other species.

A ban might have a major impact on the Canadian bluefin fishery around Prince Edward Island.

But industry expert Daniel Pauly from UBC says if countries like ours had been realistic about how much fish could safely be taken, such moves would have been unnecessary.

The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) sets the global take of the Atlantic bluefin, invariably at a much higher level than its own experts recommend. "What we wanted to see is ICCAT taking ... the advice of their own scientists, which they weren't doing," says Sarah King of Greenpeace Canada. In Canada, it's a familiar old choice between jobs and the environment. Greens might say that it's a false choice, given the risk the industry might be taking with its own existence, but Canadians in the tuna trade regard the possible ban as "a bit of a joke," PEI angler Scott Bruce told the CBC.

In this country, bluefin gatherers like Bruce practice hook-and-line fishing; the tuna are caught individually and tracked to market individually. Sarah King agrees that in recent years management efforts have improved, "but they haven't led to any improvement in the stocks." In the Mediterranean, however, seine fishing – the spreading of large weighted nets pulled behind boats, to catch large masses of fish – is the rule, and it's seen as more damaging to stocks.

Moreover, if the ban goes through, Mediterranean ICCAT members "are still able to catch the tuna and still able to consume it in their own country, where they do consume a fair bit," Bruce says, suggesting that the export-oriented Canadian industry would face a far grimmer future without the Japanese market.

The other problem is illegal overfishing – even beyond the generous ICCAT quotas – by Mediterranean countries. Everyone seems to agree that it's a problem, though Canadian activists suggest the Canadian government uses it as an excuse for inaction. (Spokespeople for Fisheries and Oceans Canada did not respond to requests for an interview for this article.)



Freshly harvested bluefin are pulled from a tuna farm off the coast of southern Italy Nov. 20, 2009. A conference beginning this weekend in Doha, Qatar, will consider an international ban on fishing the endangered species. Scientists estimate the global tuna population has dropped to 10 to 15 per cent of its pre-industrial-fishing level. (March 14, 2010)

TONY GENTILE/REUTERS FILE PHOTO

Such finger-pointing above the surface is lost, however, on the fish themselves. Catches in the almadrabas – the special maze-like system of tuna nets used off southern Spain and Portugal – are considered a good indicator of the general health of the stock, and Monaco's resolution notes that the catch there fell by 80 per cent from 2000 to 2006. Greenpeace notes the Atlantic stocks intermingle and are interdependent: if stocks elsewhere are at risk, King says, so are Canada's.

Whatever steps are taken, the stocks will need time for significant recovery; the bulky bluefin takes longer than most fish to reach maturity and begin spawning.

But those pushing for less fishing have cause for optimism; last week the Obama administration announced it would support the ban, and last year ICCAT lowered the catch from 28,500 tons to 22,000 tons for 2010, though that's still 7,000 tons beyond what scientists say they would advise.

Some aren't waiting for government action, however. Toronto-based Fairmont Hotels removed Atlantic bluefin (and Chilean sea bass) from its dozens of worldwide locations last year for environmental reasons. Fairmont Royal York executive chef David Garcelon said this way, "we can create demand and profit for people who fish sustainably," and he notes that customers have moved on. "We feel that we have good options for our customer, whether it's farm tuna or yellowtail ... we haven't had any negative feedback."

Though competitive pressures keep it on the menu at his eatery, Hiro Yoshida, too, thinks life would go on if bluefin suddenly became harder to offer: "Toro's very expensive (\$60 per pound) and it's a very small profit." The chef, who moved to Canada in 1983 at age 30, can remember a time in Japan – which now consumes an estimated 80 per cent of the world's catch – without it: "We used to throw away the tuna belly. We never cared for fatty foods."