

Japanese bluefin tuna, by way of Winsted

**BY JIM MOORE REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN**

WINSTED — Stuffed with bags of ice, wrapped in Bubble Wrap and paper, encased in a Styrofoam sarcophagus, the recently departed pioneer from Japan arrived, on schedule, at Andrea A. Angera Jr.'s shop.

It was a bluefin tuna, and a special one, at that. This was a fish that may represent the future of a species on the brink of extinction.

And here it was in Winsted, a temporary stop after being born and raised in a Japanese university research program, then shipped to Angera, a meat and seafood distributor, on its way to pricey restaurants and markets in New York.

The blue-gray fish traveled farther in death (about 6,600 miles, as the crow flies) than during a life spent swimming in nylon net pens off the coast of Japan, near Wakayama. Researchers at Kinki University had raised it from an egg and tended to the tuna twice a day, hand-feeding the fish on a carefully chosen diet of squid, blue mackerel and sardines that had been previously frozen to kill bacteria.

The research program is intended to determine if bluefin tuna can be raised in ways that both mimic and improve on conditions in the wild, and therefore save the species from over-fishing.

"This is the only bluefin in the world that, raised from egg and sperm, does not deplete the wild population," said Angera, owner of Litchfield Farms Organic and Natural in the sprawling former Danfield Thread factory building on Colebrook River Road.

The university in Japan ships two fish to the United States each week — one to IMP Foods, Inc. in San Francisco, and one to John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, where Angera's staff collect it for the trip to Winsted.

An exclusive deal

It has taken 32 years, and a roughly \$50 million investment by Kinki University, to perfect a technique for raising these fast and skittish fish known for startling easily and breaking their backs by swimming into nets at full speed.

While most commercial fish farms toss food into the pens on a regular schedule, bluefin tuna are picky. Tenders feed the bluefins on demand, each fish swimming to the side of a boat for its meal, each allowed to eat according to its appetite.

This feeding method reduces potential pollution and bacteria, according to Tetsuya "Nick" Sakagami, owner of Trident Marketing, a fish importer with offices in California and New Jersey, chosen by Kinki University to market the fish.

Sakagami met Angera at the Boston Seafood Show in February, and again in New York City in March. Sakagami said he was impressed with Angera's concern about food sources and methods of production, and Angera became his agent for the New York metro area. As Sakagami's agent, Angera can purchase, for prices ranging between \$5,000 and \$7,000 each, one of the two fish flown from Japan each week.

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Smooth skin conceals delicate pink flesh that can be eaten raw. Angera scooped a piece with his finger, and offered it to a reporter.

Flesh marked by tiny filaments of fat unique to this species melts on the tongue, leaving a taste reminiscent of fruit but without sugary sweetness, and free of oiliness or pungent after-taste.

The fish is tagged at the tail with a "diploma" from Kinki University that includes a bar code link to a detailed life history of this particular fish from the day it hatched.

The pieces, or "cho," carved by McCabe are destined for gourmet markets in Fairfield County and New York City, and the menus of Manhattan restaurants like David Burke & Donatella, on East 61st Street, known for drawing chic crowds with cutting-edge cuisine.

Executive Chef Eric Hara prepares the tuna as an appetizer that will fetch \$50 for a four-ounce portion. Though not priced to sell in a down economy, the "foodie" crowd snaps it up, he said.

#### Overfished

Bluefin tuna are treasured by sport fishermen and sushi chefs, and are "part of the national identity of Japan," Angera said. "It's a cultural fish."

Eating wild bluefin is tantamount to a crime in the eyes of many conservation groups.

The World Wildlife Fund estimates 60,000 tons of bluefin are caught each year, double the level allowed by law and four times the amount considered sustainable by scientists, according to the organization's Web site. So-called "farming" operations in existence typically involve fattening juvenile fish caught in the wild.

"It's a very profitable aquaculture that is quite damaging to the wild population of the bluefin tuna, the way it's being done in the Mediterranean," said Yonathan Zohar, professor and director of the Center of Marine Biotechnology, University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute.

The efforts of Kinki University and Zohar, who has also worked on the many difficult challenges associated with captive breeding of fish for more than 30 years, have taken on fresh urgency as the world's population of bluefin has declined sharply, "particularly in the last five years," Zohar said.

Angera, a third-generation meat packer born in New Jersey, wants to develop an organic and sustainable meat business but those plans stalled while Winsted officials decide if he will be allowed to slaughter naturally and sustainably-raised pigs, sheep and other animals at his shop. In the meantime, fish, including other breeds obtained from Kinki University, has become up to 90 percent of his business.

"I only sell sustainable fish," Angera said. "People are just becoming aware that you have to get your fish from a sustainable source."

Angera has in recent months increased his fleet of trucks from two to five. McCabe and other staff members crisscross routes between airports in the New York metro area, the Winsted plant, then back to buyers in New York.

"It's not out of the way, really," Angera said. "We're always going back and forth."

Angera sells his Kindai tuna to markets and restaurants for about \$50 a pound. The fish McCabe cut on a recent afternoon, at about 150 pounds among the smallest to arrive to date, will yield about 140 pounds of meat. The meat from the head can fetch more than \$100 a pound, though Angera said he sells it for the same price, along with the coveted toro (belly) and teshim (the meat lining the ribs).

Portions are carved up with destinations that read like a who's who of the gourmet world: Mt. Kisco Seafood in Mt. Kisco, N.Y., The Modern, and Brasserie 8 ½, where Chef Julien Alonzo waxed rhapsodic about the bluefin.

"There's so much care and love that's involved with raising these tuna," Alonzo said. I don't necessarily buy a lot of farm-raised fish. When I tasted the product, it was amazing. I get about 15 pounds a week."

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