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Selling Cobia in U.S. Live Markets

Dan Kauffman

A small test market in Washington D.C. in 2009 indicated cobia (*Rachycentron canadum*) will sell in U.S. live markets. Because of the limited number of fish available, the test was run for just two weekends in three stores. All Cobia purchasers, responding to a survey, evaluated the fish positively and promised repeat purchases. The evaluations convinced Virginia Cobia Farms (VCF), the grower of the fish, to make its first marketing effort in domestic “international supermarkets.” That effort is planned for 2011. A more complete marketing study will be done then.

Cobia, a marine fish virtually unknown to consumers, is rarely caught commercially. It has attracted world aquaculture interest because it tastes good, grows fast, and has an excellent feed-conversion ratio. VCF is in Saltville, VA, 400 miles from the Ocean. The cobia is grown in salinity levels that are less than a one-third of ocean levels.

Problems with water quality and other fish stressors, which resulted in fish mortality, caused the first weekend’s test to be terminated early. However, a subsequent weekend test went well. Consumers, who filled out surveys after eating the fish at home, all liked it. None had tasted the fish before, but all planned repeat purchases.

Consumers were asked to take the survey only after they made a cobia purchase. Most declined the request, but ten agreed to mail back evaluations after tasting the fish at home. Eight of them did so.

All responding purchaser’s families of origin were from Asia. Thirty-eight per cent were of Chinese or Vietnamese descent. The remainder were other Asians, most likely Korean.

Half of the respondents said they would purchase cobia once every two weeks or more often; the rest said they would purchase cobia once a month. All said they would drive out of their way to purchase live cobia.

Half of the respondents either steamed or baked the fish. The rest grilled or sautéed the cobia. This indicates various fish weights in the tank are desirable, as the different Asian cooking methods use different sizes of fish.

Seventy-five per cent of the respondents said being able to buy live cobia from the tanks was an important part of their purchase decision. The remainder said iced cobia is acceptable if the price is lower. For domestic producers the live market is advantageous because it has a relatively high technical barrier to entry for foreign competitors.