

Florida Grouper: Getting the Real Deal

Grouper is one of Florida's most valuable commercial fisheries. In 2009 over 6.7 million pounds were landed in the state with an estimated dockside value of approximately \$18 million dollars. Because of its economic value,



Photo: Captain Tom Marvel

popularity among consumers, and limited supply, however, grouper has also been the target of species substitution and mislabeling by some wholesalers, restaurants, and retailers in recent years. Often the substituted product is a lesser-valued fish imported from other countries such as basa or swai to name a few.

Species substitution and mislabeling is illegal!

While perpetrators who sell fake grouper might generate economic gains in the short-run, their fraudulent acts can have long-term negative consequences for the industry as well as consumers. As seafood consumer, it is important to "know your seafood". There are several things you can do to ensure you are getting grouper you paid for and expect. Deal with merchants that you trust.

Get to know your fish mongers and talk with them about what kind of grouper they have and where it is harvested. Any respectable business should be able to answer these questions. If still in doubt, ask to see the fish before purchasing it.

Know the appearance and texture of grouper



While individual species have unique identifiable characteristics, grouper is commonly described as a lean, white-flesh fish with a taste and texture, distinct from most common white-flesh fish. Grouper fillets are usually

thick with a firm texture.

When you order grouper fried, it makes it harder to distinguish it from other species so take this into consideration. Also consider the size of the grouper you get. Because of U.S. regulations, domestic grouper has to be a minimum size to harvest, meaning a grouper filet will be comparably large. If you order grouper and the whole fillet can fit on your plate, it's probably a strong indicator that it is either not grouper or perhaps grouper imported from another country where size limits are less restrictive.

Bryan Fluech
Collier County
Sea Grant Agent
fluech@ufl.edu

Lisa Krinsky
Miami-Dade County
Sea Grant Agent
lkrinsky@ufl.edu

Steve Theberge
Florida Sea Grant
Agent
stheberge@ufl.edu

What's in a name?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is the federal agency responsible for regulating proper seafood product labeling. Over fifty species from around the world that are in the seabass family (*Serranidae*) can legally be labeled as grouper in the U.S. market place. However, the term "Florida grouper" can only legally refer to grouper species harvested from Florida waters. Look for the "Fresh from Florida" logo to help ensure its a Florida product. To view the complete 2010 FDA approved seafood names, visit:

http://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/SEARCH_SEAFOOD/index.cfm?other=complete

Is the price right?

Buyers should be wary of grouper prices that are suspiciously low. Because the supply of domestic grouper is limited and the demand great, it is typically a more expensive fish to purchase than others. Wholesale fillet values are generally between \$11 to \$13 per pound, which means retail value, what consumers pay, is typically even higher. Prices that are considerably lower should raise a red flag that the fish is not grouper, but instead a substituted species of lesser value. When dining out, the price you pay for grouper will depend on the type of restaurant you visit and whether you get a sandwich or an entree. Entree prices can vary from \$14 to \$27 and sandwiches can range from \$8 to \$10 at a low-end restaurant to \$13 to \$16 dollars at a high-end restaurant.

Report Fraudulent Acts

If you suspect the grouper you are purchasing isn't really grouper, report it! Remember, species substitution and mislabeling is against the law! To learn more about species substitution and how to report possible violations visit: http://www.fl-seafood.com/consumers/grouper_substitution.htm

References:

- Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services: www.fl-seafood.com
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute: http://research.myfwc.com/features/view_article.asp?id=19224
- Ropicki, A., Larken, S., & Adams, C. Seafood Substitution and Mislabeling: WTP for a Locally Caught Grouper Labeling Program in Florida. *Marine Resource Economics*, Volume 25, pp. 77-92