

Ahi

bigeye tuna (*Thunnus obesus*)



Bigeye tuna is one of two species known in Hawaii simply as **ahi**. Similar in general appearance to yellowfin tuna (the other species known as *ahi*), the bigeye tuna is recognized by its plump body, its larger head and its large eyes.

Seasonality & How They Are Caught

Availability and Seasonality:

Bigeye tuna is the most important tuna species caught by Hawaii's longline fleet.

Fishing ranges to as far as 800 nautical miles from port. Hawaii bigeye tuna landings occur year round with a peak during the winter season (October-April).

Fishing Methods:

Bigeye tuna is harvested in Hawaii

primarily by longline boats which set hooks at the deep swimming depths of this species.

Adult bigeye tuna are the deepest occurring of all tuna species. Deep-set longline fishing gear is set from 150 to 1000 ft depth to catch bigeye tuna. Smaller bigeye (20-30 pounds) may be encountered in shallower waters in the vicinity of seamounts or floating objects, including fish aggregation buoys.

Bigeye tuna is also caught in the handline fishery focused on fishing near seamounts off the island of Hawaii. This species is rarely caught by trollers.

Distribution:

The longline catch of bigeye tuna is marketed primarily through the Honolulu fish auction.

If marketed outside of Hawaii, it

is shipped by air freight usually in dressed (headed and gutted) form or as loins. Most of the handline catch is sold to wholesalers in Hilo on the island of Hawaii. Virtually all bigeye tuna in Hawaii is sold fresh.

Quality

Caught in deeper, colder water, bigeye tuna typically has a higher fat content than yellowfin tuna.

In Hawaii and Japan, bigeye is generally preferred over yellowfin by more discriminating sashimi buyers. Bigeye tuna has a longer shelf life than yellowfin tuna, and the natural red flesh color is slower to oxidize to brown.

Some longline boats which catch bigeye tuna remain at sea for up to 12-16 days, but with proper care, these fish will retain a high quality



for over two weeks after capture.

Handline-caught bigeye is more variable in quality due to the differences in fishing method and handling by small-boat fishermen.

Product Forms and Yields:

Bigeye tuna landed in Hawaii range from 20 to over 200 pounds in round weight.

The larger fish are preferred in the *sashimi* market for their typically deeper red color, higher fat content and greater yields.

Smaller fish of good quality may also be used for *sashimi*.

Fresh bigeye may be sold already prepared as *sashimi*, and it is also marketed as loins, loin sections, *sashimi* blocks or steaks at fish markets or markets with fish counter service or self-service counters. The yield of fillet from a whole *ahi* varies from 55-65%, depending on fish size.

Color, Taste, Texture:

Bigeye tuna of good quality has intense true red flesh color.

When exposed to air, bigeye tuna flesh will begin to discolor (although at a rate slower than yellowfin flesh).

Larger bigeye typically have a higher fat content than smaller bigeye, but even a fish as small as 25-30 pounds may be rich in fat.

Preparations:

Bigeye tuna is one of the preferred species for raw preparations.

Bigeye tuna with a high fat content are especially sought after for *sashimi* and *sushi*. Its mild flavor adapts well to a variety of preparations.

Historical Note

Bigeye tuna is the second most revered tuna species for *sashimi* and *sushi* in Japan after bluefin tuna.

But not all markets in Japan share this preference. Some prefer yellowfin tuna and still others prefer white meat *sashimi* over red colored tuna.



Hawaii Seafood Council

Acknowledgement: produced with support from NOAA
www.hawaii-seafood.org

