Onaga
longtail red snapper (Etelis coruscans)

Longtail Red Snapper is one of Hawaii’s fish better known as onaga (derived locally from one of its Japanese names onagadai), than by its Hawaiian name, ula‘ula. It is also called ruby snapper in other parts of the country. Most of the onaga caught off the Hawaiian Islands range in size from 1 to 18 pounds. Onaga caught in the South Pacific are often larger.

Seasonality & How They Are Caught

Availability and Seasonality:
Onaga is Hawaii’s second most important bottomfish after opakapaka in terms of total landed weight and value. Although onaga is harvested mainly during the fall and winter months (October–March), its availability peaks during the month of December when the traditional demand (and prices) for red-colored snappers among Hawaii’s Japanese population is at its peak.

Fishing Methods:
Onaga is harvested exclusively with vertical hook-and-line gear. This bottomfish is caught in deep waters (600-1000 ft), near around outcappings along rocky bottoms. The bottomfish fishery is basically divided into the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) and the main Hawaiian islands. The fisheries are undergoing change. The establishment of the National Monument in the NWHI has set in motion the phasing out of the sustainable, NWHI limited-entry bottomfish fishery. The main Hawaiian Islands fishery remains under intensive management with an annual commercial catch limit. The restrictions on the NWHI fishery greatly reduce the supply of this important fish.

Distribution:
Onaga caught off the main Hawaiian Islands is sold at the Honolulu fish auction, through intermediary buyers on the major islands, and directly to retail fish markets and restaurants. The NWHI catch is sold primarily through the Honolulu fish auction.

Quality
Onaga does not keep as long as opakapaka, but if well handled, it has a shelf life of about 10 days. Onaga caught off the main Hawaiian Islands are marketed within a few days, whereas the fish taken in Northwestern Hawaiian Islands in some cases may not reach the market for 7-8 days.
Product Forms and Yields:
All of the onaga catch is landed as whole, iced fish. Onaga is filleted to supply a growing demand for Hawaii-caught snappers in up-scale restaurants. The average yield of fillet from a whole fish is about 45%. However, restaurant buyers often request whole fish for display and to prolong the shelf life of their onaga purchases.

Color, Taste, Texture:
Onaga has clear, light pink flesh similar to that of the opakapaka but somewhat softer and moister. Fish caught during the winter months tend to have a higher fat content than those caught in the summer; hence onaga yield the best sashimi during the winter season.

Preparations
Onaga has a delicate flavor which is enjoyed when served raw (sashimi style) or when baked, steamed, or prepared in a host of other ways. Hawaii’s residents have a strong culturally-oriented demand for red snappers for ceremonial occasions such as the New Year’s season and weddings, when onaga sashimi is traditionally served. The ornate preparation of onaga sashimi displayed with the body with its bright red skin color and long tail make a striking and beautiful center piece.