U.S. BUSINESS NEWS

Chasing the Perfect Fish

The 'Chilean Sea Bass' Craze Set Off a Seagoing Gold Rush, Tempting Toothfish Poachers

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On August 7, 2003, an Australian patrol boat spotted a fishing vessel near Heard Island, a barren scrap of land halfway between Australia and South Africa, 900 miles north of Antarctica.

The Australians knew the boats that had permits to fish these waters, and this wasn't one of them. The chase that ensued became one of the longest pursuits in nautical history, the vessels sailing halfway around Antarctica through building-size waves and an obstacle course of icebergs in the dead of winter. The quarry was a single fishing boat, the Viarsa, loaded with Patagonian toothfish -- better known to diners as Chilean Sea Bass -- but the issue was much greater: the fate of a species.

Wall Street Journal reporter G. Bruce Knecht's new book "Hooked: A True Story of Pirates, Poaching and the Perfect Fish" recounts the chase and explains how a fish that was unknown not too many years ago set off a global gold rush. An adaptation:

In the fall of 1977, Lee Lantz, a young fish merchant from Los Angeles, was climbing between the colorfully painted wooden fishing boats that had recently returned to Valparaiso, Chile's largest port. They had been tied to docks and then to one another, side by side, so Mr. Lantz could go from one to another to examine the piles of fish lying on the decks. He was disappointed with what he saw. The key to his business was, as it always had been, finding new things to sell, but he saw nothing but familiar species.

Then, just as he was about to leave, Mr. Lantz did spot something new: an exceptionally large, fearsome-looking gray-black fish that had been separated from the others. Close to five feet long, it looked as if it weighed more than one hundred pounds. With its dark skin and bulging eyes, a protruding lower jaw that was studded with teeth so pointy they looked as if they had been honed by a pencil sharpener, even this lifeless specimen looked menacing.

"That is one amazing-looking fish," Mr. Lantz declared. "What the hell is it?"

"They call it *bacalao de profundidad*, which means cod of the deep," replied Eduardo Neef, a tough-minded businessman who owned the plant that processed congrio for Mr. Lantz. Mr. Neef said fishermen had never seen the fish until they started using deep-water longlines a few years earlier. "It's an accidental catch. Nobody knows what to do with it."

Mr. Lantz was intrigued. He guessed it was a previously unknown type of sea bass. If he was right about that, its flesh would be flaky and white, the characteristics many Americans look for in a fish. Two days after he first saw the mysterious big fish, Mr. Lantz came across another one during a predawn visit he and Mr. Neef made to Santiago's bustling central market. Mr. Neef bought a few pounds. When the man behind the counter cut into this fish, Mr. Lantz was even more excited: Just as he had hoped, it was white, its oiliness very much apparent.

Later that day, Mr. Neef carved the fish into several small pieces and gave them to his housekeeper, who placed them in a frying pan with a small amount of cooking oil. Mr. Lantz's first bite was anticlimactic. Whereas most big fish have a lot of flavor, this one had almost none. But he still thought its attributes were a perfect match for the American market. It had a texture similar to Atlantic cod's, the richness of tuna, the innocuous mild flavor of a flounder, and its fat content made it feel almost buttery in the mouth. Mr. Lantz believed a white-fleshed fish that almost melted in your mouth -- and a fish that did not taste "fishy" -- could go a very long way with his customers at home.

Mr. Lantz knew he could not sell Americans something called *bacalao de profundidad*. He had never heard of the species' other common names -- *mero, merluza negra*, or Patagonian

The fishing vessel Viarsa, seen from the patrol boat Southern Supporter.

toothfish -- but he would not have wanted to use those either. Mr. Lantz needed to create his own name, one that would spark some sort of favorable recognition in the American market. "Sea bass" was an obvious choice. Although toothfish are not bass, it is a term that has broad resonance among American seafood eaters. Mr. Lantz's initial ideas were "Pacific Sea Bass" and "South American Sea Bass," but he later thought they were so geographically imprecise that they sounded almost generic. A reference to Chile was the perfect solution, so he settled on "Chilean Sea Bass."

But Mr. Lantz's main customers, seafood wholesalers in Los Angeles, were initially unimpressed, even though he offered to sell the fish for just $1.25 a pound.

By 1980, Mr. Lantz was desperate. He had given free samples to everyone who would take them but made just a handful of small sales. Running out of ideas, he went to see Roger Mooreheart, an executive at Young's Market Co., which sold a broad array of food, including shrimp it bought from Mr. Lantz. He had already pitched Chilean Sea Bass to Young's unsuccessfully, but Mr. Mooreheart had a reputation for being a creative marketer. And he had a problem: Halibut, the main ingredient for one of Young's "Fish Fingers," was becoming too expensive. Although the two fish did not taste the same, they were both white, and Mr. Mooreheart thought the difference in flavor might not be noticed in breaded fish sticks. Mr. Lantz was hopeful as he drove back to his office, and just a few hours later, Mr. Mooreheart was on the phone.

"How much of your Chilean Sea Bass do you have?" he asked.

"About 40,000 pounds."

"I'll take it -- all of it!"

Young's became a regular buyer, ordering about 25,000 pounds every few weeks. During the next couple of years, wholesalers began to warm to Chilean Sea Bass. Many of the early buyers were Chinese restaurants that used it as a low-cost substitute for black cod, but it eventually found its way into top-rated restaurants, including New York's Four Seasons, which started serving it in 1990. Its popularity spread rapidly as chefs discovered that it could hold up to any method of cooking and accept any spice, and that it was virtually impossible to overcook.

By the time the Australian patrol boat spotted the Viarsa near Heard Island in 2003, Chilean Sea Bass had become a ubiquitous bestseller, and fleets of sophisticated fishing boats, many of them operated by pirates, had set out to meet the demand. Antonio Garcia Perez, Viarsa's fishing master, was one of the most successful hunters. The 39-year-old Spaniard does not look like a fisherman. His body is slender and unmuscled, and his face, pale and serious, looks like it might belong to an academic. But using longlines that stretch over more than 15 miles and carry up to 15,000 baited hooks, he regularly extracted 10, even 20 tons of toothfish in a single day. During one extraordinary 24-hour period, he reeled in 40 tons.

When the Australian patrol boat Southern Supporter gave chase, Mr. Perez ordered Viarsa's captain to flee to the south, toward Antarctica and into a violent storm. Mr. Perez was angry. He believed he was being pursued because Australia was trying to protect not fish but domestic fishermen who were not skilled enough to handle world-class competition. Except for fish living within a few miles of a country's inhabited coastline, Mr. Perez believed marine life should belong to whomever finds it first.

There was never much doubt that Mr. Perez, who grew up in Riveira, a fishing town in northwest Spain, would go to sea. When he was just 14, his father told him, "You don't want to study, so you're going to fish." In 1983, he joined the 500-year procession of Spanish fisherman who set across the Atlantic to harvest cod on Canada's Grand Banks, but within a decade, that depleted fishery was shut down.

Mr. Perez -- just 28 at the time and the father of two -- realized the only solution was to shift his sights to the less intensively fished waters of the Southern Hemisphere. In 1993, he flew to Punta Arenas, a Chilean port near the tip of South America, and embarked on his first toothfish expedition. Soon, he was chasing the fish from ports in Argentina, South Africa, Namibia and Mauritius. Whenever the population of fish dwindled, Mr. Perez moved on.

Christo Loots was part of the heavily armed boarding party that stopped the Viarsa after a nearly three-week pursuit.

Although his role is as obscure as Lee Lantz's, he too became one of the toothfish industry's pioneers. By the time the Viarsa was spotted by the Southern Supporter, Mr. Perez had completed 30 voyages and captured about 30 million pounds of the fish -- more than one million toothfish.

A few hours after Viarsa began its flight toward Antarctica, the weather suddenly worsened. The wind strengthened relentlessly, until, late in the afternoon, it was howling at almost 60 miles an hour and gusting up to 75. The wind in turn had whipped the sea into a monstrous frenzy. Like the wind, the waves were coming from the southwest, so Viarsa and the Southern Supporter were heading almost directly into them.