

OFF the HOOK

*In a sea of grim news about fish, West Coast albacore is one you can eat without worry.
Discover how to make the most of this prize catch.*

BY MARGO TRUE | RECIPES BY JULIA LEE



***A torpedo-shaped creature that looks
as if it's been dipped in liquid silver,
shooting through the water at up to
25 miles an hour, albacore tuna is an
unexpectedly beautiful fish.***

Its remarkably long pectoral fins give it an extra measure of grace. If—like most of us—you've known albacore only as canned "white" tuna, it's mesmerizing to see them alive.

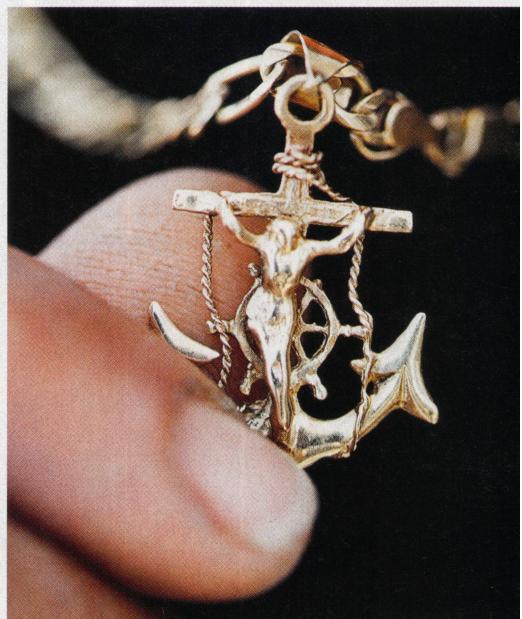
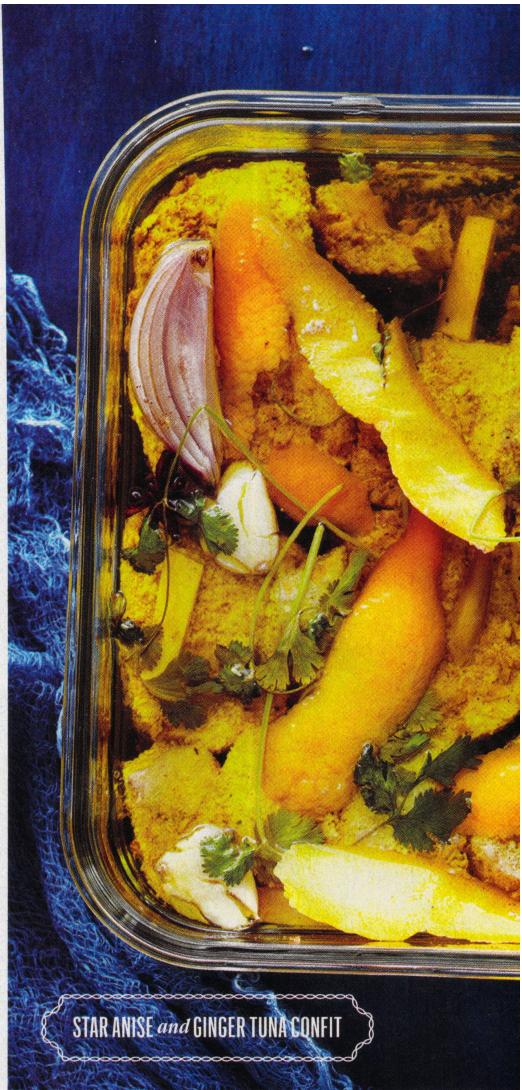
From the cook's perspective, it's just as surprising. "Fresh albacore are so versatile," says Wayne Heikkila, executive director of the Western Fishboat Owners Association. "They're good raw or baked or barbecued. They're pretty hard to ruin." While the list of seafood you shouldn't eat seems to grow by the day—and rumors swirl about radioactive contamination from Fukushima—West Coast albacore remain the rare fish that's both sustainable and good for you. Delvan Neville, lead author of a recent Oregon State University study about radioactivity in albacore, says the levels are far lower than what we're exposed to annually from sources like the air, the soil, and the occasional X-ray: "Just to equal that dose, you would have to eat more than 700,000 pounds of albacore."

Western albacore migrate across the Pacific over their life spans, swimming through our waters when they're less than five years old and weigh only 12 to 25 pounds (bluefin tuna, by contrast, can weigh more than half a ton). Because young albacore swim close to the surface, and tend not to cluster in schools, they're caught one at a time—an old-fashioned method you'll see on labels as "hook-and-line" or "troll-caught." In the South Pacific, where albacore are older and swim deep, they're often fished with longlines that stretch 50 miles behind the boat, bringing in so much tuna (along with endangered sea turtles, dolphins, and sharks) that the stocks can't easily bounce back. In the West, we dip into our albacore but don't deplete them—or accidentally catch what swims with them.

There are other benefits to Western albacore's youth. During their short lives, the fish don't absorb much mercury, so their levels are well below FDA limits. What they do have, though, are plenty of omega-3 fatty acids, thought to boost heart health, ease arthritis, and alleviate depression. In fact, young albacore have the highest levels of omega-3s of any tuna.

That fat also makes Western albacore delectable to eat. It's the most desirable tuna for canning, and a stunning 80 percent of our tuna goes overseas to be processed, says Natalie Webster, director of operations for the American Albacore Fishing Association (AAFA), near San Diego. In response, small fisheries are now canning their own local tuna (see "Where to Find Local Albacore," page 78). Handled gently and not precooked before canning (standard practice overseas), it's exceptional stuff—fresh-tasting and juicy, with more of its omega-3s retained.

But it's well worth seeking out fresh albacore too, whether you order it from a fish shop or buy it straight off a boat. Its mild, delicate flesh can be cooked in so many ways. Grill it, roast it, braise it. Cure it with salt and sugar, like gravlax, or poach it in oil to make a succulent confit. Just let it swim free of the can: The recipes that follow reveal all that fresh, local albacore can be.



Top right: Deckhand Ryan Fleek with a freshly caught albacore aboard the Pacific Marit, in Charleston, OR. Above: An albacore fisherman's good-luck charm.