

Diane's Blog
6.30.2010

Genetically Engineered Salmon

I had thought I would write this week about how fun it is to grill buffalo burgers for July 4th cookouts. You know, a lean, meaty twist on the usual burgers and dogs cooked over charcoal for our national celebration. But then I was disturbed – deeply disturbed – by a cover article in the New York Times this past Saturday, June 26th. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/26/business/26salmon.html?scp=1&sq=genetically%20engineered%20salmon&st=cse>)

I have followed salmon issues and salmon policy closely ever since I began to write my book *Salmon: A Cookbook*, published in the spring of 2005. I started the research and recipe development for this book in the spring of 2003. I traveled to Norway, Scotland, and Alaska in search of the salmon story. I visited the Wild Salmon Centre (Norsk Villaks Senter) in Laerdal, Norway, to learn about the collapse of the wild salmon population in the Northern Atlantic and to understand why the famous Laerdal river could support only sport fishing of wild Atlantic salmon and, in reality, only to a privileged few. I wanted to understand why Norway, which once had a vibrant commercial fishing industry focused on Atlantic salmon, had to develop the science of salmon farming in order to save its fishing economy and all of the tiny fishing villages that dot its long Atlantic coastline.

I then traveled to Scotland to see firsthand an organic fish farm at the far northwest tip of the country. Europe has organic certification for aquaculture, unlike the United States, and I wanted to see what “best practices” looked like for farmed salmon.

Then, I came home and turned my attention northward to Alaska, visiting Cordova, home to the Copper River fishing fleet and my friend Kent “Curly” Hershleb, a fisherman in the fleet. With the start of the Copper River spring run just under way, we waited for “openers,” the windows of time designated by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game for the commercial catch of salmon. When enough wild salmon, monitored and counted at the mouth of the river, have made it upstream to spawn, thus ensuring a sustainable population of wild salmon, the Department opens a window of time (12-36 hours) for the commercial salmon fishermen to fish. This protocol lasts the entire salmon fishing season.

What smart science. What smart fishery management.

In contrast, the development of fish farming was driven by a combination of greed and mismanagement. The Atlantic was depleted of commercial populations of wild salmon decades ago, as huge numbers of salmon had been tracked and taken from the Atlantic using sonar without regard for sustainability. There was a blind faith that fishery resources were limitless even in the face of rising demand. It seems

obvious today that if not enough salmon make it back to their natal rivers to spawn, then a sustainable catch over time is not possible. This doesn't even begin to factor in all the other obstacles for salmon, such as dams, non-specific pollutants, and industrial growth that diminished the viability of the North Atlantic rivers for safe return and spawning.

Unfortunately, we now appear to be heading towards another environmental disaster in the making—genetically engineered salmon. The FDA is reviewing the data but can't comment further due to confidentiality rules. AquaBounty, the Massachusetts-based company that has developed this genetically-engineered salmon—a supposedly bio-identical Atlantic salmon that contains a growth hormone gene that produces a market size fish in 18 months instead of 3 years—sees this as an opportunity to help supply the world's food needs using fewer resources.

I can't help wondering why we spend all this money and scientific resources on altering our food sources instead of trying to protect our waterways and the natural bounty our planet provides. Just think of the investment we could make in restoring and protecting wild salmon stocks and the natal rivers where they once swam and spawned. We are watching another fishing industry in the Gulf threatened and potentially collapsing because of the BP oil spill. Aren't we learning anything?