

NATIONAL CULINARY REVIEW

THE VERSATILITY OF TUNA

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The Enduring Appeal of Tuna

By Jeffrey Spear

Today's consumers are pursuing healthier lifestyles while maintaining diets that embrace lean proteins and nutritionally dense ingredients. In response, chefs and restaurateurs are developing new dishes and adjusting their menus to better align with these preferences.

Recognized as a nutritious source for high quality protein, packed with omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin B12 and vitamin D, tuna performs consistently well across all day parts and in every imaginable application. When cooked, it can be presented as carefully seared steaks, incorporated into casseroles or featured in pasta dishes. Alternatively, when served raw as sashimi, ceviche or poke, tuna is celebrated for its vibrant color and delicate, melt-in-the-mouth texture.

The most popular varieties of tuna are yellowfin, albacore and bluefin, all providing highly desirable colors, textures, flavors and versatility. It's important to note that, according to recent findings from Datassential, sustainable wild-caught seafood holds the greatest interest for the majority of consumers, whether fresh, frozen or canned.

At Stages at One Washington (Dover, NH), **Chef-owner Evan Hennessey** works exclusively with bluefin tuna, harvested seasonally just off the coast of New Hampshire. He explains: "I find its muscle structure, tighter grain and almost buttery texture make it ideal for our purposes. It's well suited to everything from canapés to mains. I especially like the way bluefin tuna holds up to any number of sauces." When asked about fluctuations in availability, he adds: "They're big fish. We'll break them down, serve some of the tuna fresh and Cryovac and freeze the remaining portions to avoid loss and ensure availability during the off season."





“They’re big fish.”

Another fan of bluefin tuna is **Chef Francis Ang**. At Abacá (San Francisco, CA), he applies his Filipino heritage to their bluefin tuna “Singulaw,” favoring its richness and versatility for this ceviche style dish. Paired with grilled pig’s ear, grape and black vinegar, this dish delights with contrasting flavors and textures.

At Leonetta (New York, NY), **Chef-owner Ed Cotton** prefers yellowfin tuna for his menu. “For my purposes, bluefin is a bit too intense” he says. “I prefer center cut, #1 sashimi grade yellowfin.” When asked about using the whole fish, he adds “We don’t always have time to break down a whole fish, and I tend



Bluefin tuna tartare by Chef Evan Hennessey at Stages at One Washington (Dover, NH), served with a split sauce made with buttermilk, squid ink and black sesame oil. Photo courtesy Stages.



Chopped yellowfin “Puttanesca” by Chef Ed Cotton at Leonetta (New York, NY). Photo courtesy Create & Align.

to be fussy about ingredients. Buying prefabricated, beautifully finished cuts from highly qualified vendors ensures the quality and consistency I insist upon.”

When it comes to selecting the right tuna, **Bill Weiss**, President of Wulf’s Fish (Boston, MA) offers “While a lot of chefs know what they want, a good vendor will understand the application and make appropriate recommendations in terms of species, color, texture, cut and culinary performance. Plus, we understand that those attributes can vary over time, depending on seasonality as well as weather.”

Apart from fresh cuts, there are other options to consider. Some operators rely on canned tuna for everyday applications including sandwiches, salads and casseroles, appreciating its affordability and years-long shelf life. For others, fresh tuna stands in as a premium upgrade from canned, transforming these very same dishes into extraordinary experiences.

There’s also growing interest in “conservas” or “tinned fish” that have been appearing on seacuterie boards, small plates and bar menus. Described as an elevated culinary experience, these are the seafood products, including tuna, that offer a unique provenance, rich and complex flavors and appealing textures. When looking specifically at tuna, Artesanos Alalunga, Spain’s smallest cannery, applies sous-vide to cuts such as ventresca (belly) and tarantello (behind-the-belly) before canning, creating an incredibly buttery texture and rich flavor. Other brands including Fishwife and Ortiz (both from Spain), as well as Gulf of Maine Conservas (New Hampshire), have their own distinctive tuna varieties that are equally attractive.

Whether you prefer fresh, frozen, tinned or canned, tuna is undeniably popular. Combined with its versatility and healthful attributes, there are countless opportunities for culinary innovation in the kitchen and guest satisfaction at the table.