

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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BY: Mary A. Keith, Ph.D., L.D.
Food, Nutrition and Health Agent

Swai, Basa or Plain Ol' Catfish

What's really inside those packages of frozen 'catfish' that you brought home from the store last week? If you pay attention to the news you have a right to wonder. Every month or so it seems there's a story about mislabeled fish from one restaurant or grocery or another. And of course there are regulations about the labeling, but not everyone who ignores them gets caught. So here is help.

By law, if the package says 'catfish' it must be channel catfish, raised and harvested here in the US. There are thousands of kinds of catfish in rivers and streams around the world. You can go out and catch lots of different kinds of catfish just around our state. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has eight on their main page, including the several non-native ones that have invaded our waters and made themselves at home. They're all catfish. Some make better eating than others. Some are too tiny to eat, others would feed a football team. The record size for a catfish from Vietnam is 763 pounds! Wow!

But if you buy it in the store as 'catfish' it has to be US raised channel cat. You won't find the other local kinds in a store to buy. What you will find in the local grocery besides channel catfish are several imported varieties. They're local to Asia and go by several names. The two most commonly sold here are Basa and Swai. Sometimes they're both called Twa too. They're Asian catfish raised commercially in the fast rivers of Vietnam for export.

One other source of information is COOL. That's the Country Of Origin Labeling. By law fruits, vegetables, *and fish*, have to be labeled with what country they came from. So look on the label of the package, or on the tag in the ice around fresh fish. It will tell you where that fish was harvested.

Food scientists at Mississippi State University did blind taste test studies. People were given samples of fish to evaluate, without knowing what kind of fish they were eating. Interestingly, people rated the imported Basa catfish as better: tastier and with better aroma and texture than the US fish. And if you compare the nutritional information they are about the same. The main difference is that the US fish are fattier.

Bacteria, including *Salmonella*, may be found on imported fish just as they might be on US

raised fish. The important thing to remember about bacteria on fish is that when you cook the fish you kill the bacteria. Fried US catfish and fried imported Basa or Swai will all be equally safe as far as bacteria – none. But if you insist on eating raw fish, all bets are off! Raw fish will be carrying whatever bacteria were in the water they were swimming in, as well as whatever might have been on the carton they were shipped in and the gloves of whoever handled them. From 2005 to 2010 there were 17 outbreaks of food poisoning from imported fish. So cook your fish!

The big concern over imported fish, from anywhere, is the use of antibiotics that are not approved. The main offender has been China. It's gotten so bad that FDA last month told all their districts that they can stop shipments of fish from China without even doing a first examination. They can order tests on every shipment, or refuse to let the shipments in. That was tons of fish and shrimp that won't make it to our grocery stores. Fish from other countries certainly could be carrying antibiotics too, but fewer have been found to be contaminated. Vietnamese Basa and Swai are raised in moving rivers, not still ponds, and are less likely to be carrying illegal chemicals.

Whichever kind you prefer, or your pocketbook can manage, fish are good eating. Here's a fancy but easy way to put catfish on the table. Serve with a tangy tartar sauce and steamed veggies.

Pecan-Crusted Catfish

4 catfish fillets (thawed)	2 Tbsp buttermilk
2 slices whole-wheat bread	2 green onions, sliced thin
5 Tbsp chopped pecans	½ tsp lemon pepper (salt free if possible)

Preheat oven to 450°F. Rinse fish and pat dry with paper towels. Put in large sealable plastic bag and add buttermilk. Seal and turn bag to coat fish. Let stand 10-15 minutes or refrigerate for up to 1 hour. Shred bread in food processor for 5-10 seconds to make soft bread crumbs. Put crumbs, pecans, green onions and lemon pepper in shallow bowl and stir. Drain fish. Discard buttermilk. Coat both sides of fish with nut-crumb mixture. Place on nonstick baking dish or sheet. Sprinkle extra crumbs over top. Bake 10-12 minutes until fish is done and reaches 145°F. Serves 4.

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