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## ABALONE

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JIM BETTINGER

**I SAUTÉED UP SOME ABALONE** for the wife and me a few weeks ago. If it hadn't cost \$70 a pound, it would have been disappointing. As it was, we savored every bite, and agreed later that we should have dressed for dinner.

Why is this shellfish so pricey? Because it's hard to find, and it takes a lot of work to get on the table. A diver and a tender on a three-day trip to the Channel Islands would bring back 3 dozen to 10 dozen abalone, according to Steve Rebuck of the California Abalone Association, each fetching about \$40 and netting about 2/3 of a pound of meat. The meat is then sliced very thin and pounded even thinner. You need about 1/4 pound per person.

And be careful: you can overcook it in the time it takes to pour yourself a slug of wine.

Our abalone was frozen, not fresh, and I could find it only at Safeway. But the season begins March 1, so it should be more plentiful then, if not much less expensive.

Forty years ago, when Rebuck's father operated a fishing boat, abalone fetched only about \$6 to \$10 a dozen, or as little as 50 cents apiece. In California's peak year, 1957, fishermen turned nearly 5.5 million abalone into steaks. (And each abalone shell, I believe, got turned into a groovy ashtray the following decade.) By 1992, the most recent tally, the number of abalone taken had dropped to around a half million.

What happened? Abalone fishermen blame the sea otter, and pollution from sewage treatment plants and oil drilling operations. Otter partisans blame the fishermen.

The otter, a protected critter, dines on abalone with relish. The fishermen consider themselves the endangered species, down from about 800 in the 1960s to about 125 now, according to Rebutk. The state would like to get that number down to about 70.

On the Northern California coast, abalone can be taken legally only by sport fishing. Abalone's value lures some sporting types into poaching. Fish and Game officials last fall broke up a ring that they said sold 20 tons of illegally harvested abalone meat for quite a bit less than the \$4 an ounce I paid.

California Indians would have understood how abalone could be such a big deal. Abalone was a key part of the cultures of several coastal tribes. Besides food, the shells were used for ornaments, containers, fishhooks, and for currency.

The Carmel Bohemians of the early twentieth century, on the other hand, might not. For them, an abalone diet symbolized their break with society, and they sang this song to drive the point home:

Oh! Some folks boast of quail on toast,  
Because they think it's tony;  
But I'm content to owe my rent,  
And live on abalone.

JIM BETTINGER *writes on California subjects, often for the Mercury News. He is presently Director of the John S. Knight Fellowships at Stanford University. This article was printed in the San Jose Mercury News, 12 March 1995.*