

Finding a niche for organic seafood

Organic fish isn't right for every market.

BY JOAR GRINDHEIM

Organic salmon and cod production has been tried by many with varying degrees of success.

"If you are to succeed or not with ecological production, it's others than the aquaculture industry that decide," said SINTEF Fisheries and Aquaculture Research Director Trine Galloway. "The big question is why consumers choose or not choose ecological?"

A customer survey carried out by a major Norwegian grocery retail chain reveals one of the most important reasons people buy ecological or organic products is they perceive the food as healthier because chemical have not been used in production.

"But this applies first and foremost to plants and not fish. Personally I think it is a paradox that we have ecological fish," said Galloway. "Fish are wholesome regardless, and in my opinion it is the wholesomeness of the fish that needs to be marketed ahead of whether or not it is ecologically produced."

Standards and certifications for what is organic and vary from country to country, she said. "In the United Kingdom there are for example several standards, and what is regarded as organic in Germany is not the same as that regarded in the United Kingdom and Norway," Galloway said.

"It's all about finding a niche that people want. In the United Kingdom customers are convinced that organic fish is best. In Norway it's different. Here we have massive access to healthy fish, and I believe the fish should first and foremost be marketed as that," she said.

Choice matters

Norwegian Seafood Export Council (NSEC) marketing director Merete Kristiansen said organic fish have a future as a niche product.

"To develop a niche product and to offer a product adapted to smaller groups is positive. A wider range in the fish counter is good and attracts more customers," Kristiansen said.

She said organic salmon is relatively difficult to obtain in the United Kingdom, despite both retail chains and environmentalists promoting the concept.

According to a fresh survey carried out by the Scottish

Aquaculture Research Forum, 7 percent of respondents said they had eaten organic salmon, but 3 percent listed availability as being important for whether or not they would buy salmon.

"The most important reason given for buying salmon is flavor and health. That the salmon is organic is the second most important reason for buying salmon. Nonetheless it makes sense to be able to offer organic salmon. As long as someone wants it, they should get it," Kristiansen said. The big challenge in organic production is the cost, she said. "This means that you need to have regular customers. Some of the organic salmon may have a slightly lighter color than the usual salmon, and that means it cannot be sent directly to all markets," she said. "It's a challenge to expand the market when increasing production. You have to have regular customers."

Hot markets

Interest for organic fish is particularly widespread in the United States and European countries such as Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark and the United Kingdom.

"We've been overwhelmed by the interest shown and focus on this when we've been out in the market," said Villa Organic Research Director Pelle Kvenseth. "It appears to be a natural knock-on effect from the ongoing focus on the climate."

The increasing problems with fish health in relation to fish farming, he said, could play a part in increasing customer awareness of organic fish farming. Customers who choose to buy organic today are doing so, among other reasons, out of consideration to the environment, as well as food safety.

One standard

Today there are many organizations that certify fish, and often have different criteria for what is organic. The EU is now working on preparing a common standard for organically farmed fish products.

Kvenseth is on the committee working with preparation of the standard.

"Achieving a common standard is extremely important. There are currently at least 17 different organs that certify and inspect production, and they differ widely from one another," he said.

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