

SEA GRANT

Telephone: (251) 438-5690

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By

Rick Wallace, Extension Marine Specialist
Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center

The fish called Tilapia are rapidly finding their way onto restaurant menus and into seafood dealer display cases. Tilapia are actually several closely related species that are widely used in aquaculture.

I first became aware of Tilapia some 30 years ago when I was a student at Auburn. At that time, Tilapia were well known to aquaculture researchers as fish that were easy to reproduce, did not require high quality feeds, readily tolerated culture conditions, and were good to eat. The down side of Tilapia was that they originated in tropical Africa and generally could not tolerate winter temperatures outside of South Florida.

For 20 or more of the last 30 years, Tilapia growers in the U.S. struggled to find markets for their product. Competition from wild-caught fish and from pond-raised catfish combined with a lack of market identity conspired to keep demand and prices low.

The trouble with market identity is an interesting side bar to the Tilapia story. The name Tilapia is the first part of the two-part scientific name for a group of very similar fish. I can't think of any other fish that is marketed by its scientific name. Have you ever gone to a fish dealer and asked for a *Lutjanus* (snapper) or an *Epinephelus* (grouper)? Probably, you have not.

Tilapia growers recognized this was a problem and tried to market their product as St. Peter's fish, Nile perch and others. For some reason, these names did not catch on.

In recent years, with domestic supplies of all fish down and demand up, more and more Tilapia are being imported into the U.S. As a result, supply is up and the name “Tilapia” has become the accepted market-place name.

The story has a further twist. Originally, all the species commonly cultured were in the genus Tilapia. Scientists decided to split Tilapia up into three genera and Tilapia was retained as the common name for fish in all three genera, particularly the cultured species. But what we call Tilapia is now in the genus Oreochromis.

Tilapia imports have risen from about 100 million pounds in 2001 to almost 315 million pounds in 2006. The majority of Tilapia comes from China followed by Latin America. Domestic production in 2006 was 19 million pounds.