



# Super tuna offers cool savings

Ben DiPietro

**W**ith the restaurant industry suffering as much as any sector from the global economic downturn, eateries are looking hard to find cost savings wherever they can be found.

This is creating great opportunities in the United States for super-frozen tuna, which until now has suffered from the stigma of having the word “frozen” in its name, even though it has nothing in common with the frozen seafood that makes chefs cringe when they are asked to buy it instead of fresh fish.

“There’s a natural negative perception of frozen in the United States, and it’s something that will take time for us to overcome,” said Michael McNicholas, sales and marketing executive at Uoriki Fresh Inc., a Japan-based seafood supplier with \$250 million (€194 million) in turnover that in April purchased the North American super-frozen business from Japan-based Mitsubishi.

“The economy actually is a primary reason people are being so open minded,” he said. Eighty percent of the tuna sold in Japan is

super-frozen, and 90 percent of Uoriki’s tuna business in Japan involves super-frozen products. Japanese consumers are known to have sophisticated palates when it comes to seafood, and the fact they accept super-frozen is a strong endorsement of its quality and taste, said McNicholas.

## Tough crowd

“Japanese consumers probably are the most difficult seafood consumers in the world, they’re certainly the most educated. We have seafood markets where we do \$50,000 (€39,000) a day in seafood and there are supermarkets in the U.S. who would love to do \$50,000 a quarter,” he said. “The fact we’re investing so much time and effort here to bring it here means that we want to teach American chefs, and the American supermarkets, this is the way to go.”

Super-frozen tuna is cut and bled, then put into freezers at temperatures of minus-76 degrees Fahrenheit within an hour of being caught by fishermen, preserving it in as close to its natural state as possible.

It can stay at this temperature until it is needed, and once thawed – a process that takes

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six hours – it is as fresh as it was the day it was landed on the boat by the fishermen.

Because waste – byproducts, skin, blood, bone – all are taken off before the tuna is frozen, there’s no waste for chefs and retailers who can cut the fish to their specifications and sizes. “Culinarians, they have no problem, they know something frozen correctly and thawed correctly is as good as anything they

**SUPER FROZEN:** One major U.S. restaurant chain cut its tuna costs 30 percent using super-frozen product. PHOTOS: Uoriki Fresh Inc.



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enough about how happy they are with the super-frozen product.

Garey Hiles, executive chef and operating partner at the Oceanaire in Orlando, Fla., began using super-frozen tuna in the middle of last year, and now won't buy any other kind.

"I've pretty much stopped using all tuna except super-frozen," said Hiles. "The quality is spectacular. There's a reason why 80 percent of the tunas going into Japan are frozen. The quality is unmatched. It's a consistent product."

Some of his wait staff inform diners they are eating super-frozen tuna, and Hiles said no one has complained about eating frozen fish. "I think like all Americans, when you mention frozen, they think of things that come out of refrigerator. This is a completely different process," he said. "There is no loss, no tearing, like you find in other American frozen fish. That won me over."

### Eco-friendly fish

Tim Hockett, corporate chef at Chicago-based Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, which operates nearly three dozen restaurant concepts across the country, said all the benefits of no waste and low carbon footprint would matter little unless the tuna tasted as good, or better than the fresh or other forms being sold.

"We tested the product maybe six or eight months ago. We saw the product at a food show and it just looked like [it had] great quality, great flavor, sweetness, texture," he said. "That's all good, but if the product didn't taste good, we wouldn't have picked it up."

The consistent pricing and consistent quality super-frozen tuna offers is hard to find with fresh tuna, which Hockett called hit or miss. "Sometimes you get something and the color is off, sometimes it's a little softer. Super-frozen has a consistent texture and color."

Some restaurants in the chain buy 25 pounds a week, others between 75 pounds and 125 pounds, he said.

With fresh tuna, if you don't move it, you wrap it up and try to keep it on ice, and maybe you get two, three or four more days of using it before it deteriorates, he said.

"With this, we get it in a frozen state, keep it packed in dry ice and it stays in that state. Our seafood purveyor has one of those super-freezers," said Hockett. "They bring in 10 pounds, we thaw it out and use it right away, rather than getting 100 pounds of tuna in and having it doing its thing."

### Big savings

That has allowed the chain to cut its tuna costs

about 30 percent, he said. "We have a tuna ceviche here and there is no waste on the product. I give it to my guys and I don't have to worry if it's cleaned properly," he said.

"Sometimes they leave a little [muscle] sinew – and you don't have a consistent thing on the plate. With this, you have all sorts of cuts. They have bits, which are really kind of cheap, it's from the end pieces, and we use those for our tuna burgers, which are great and half the price of normal tuna."

In its sales literature, Uoriki shows potential buyers that, although they pay more per pound for super-frozen than fresh tuna, it ultimately costs less because there is no loss, no shrink, and no waste.

Lettuce Entertain You leaves it up to the individual restaurant operators to decide if they want to use it, and how much to use it, but Hockett said he tries to get the chefs to understand the value of serving the super-frozen product. "It makes total sense when chefs see it."

Hiles uses super-frozen tuna for Oceanaire's sashimi and tartare dishes, and for a special katsu dish that includes tuna rolled in nori seaweed that is sprinkled with panko and quick-fried before being covered in a ginger curry cream sauce.

He is averaging purchases of between 80 pounds and 120 pounds a week. "All the dishes have been spectacular," he said.

One concern super-frozen advocates have is confusion among potential customers and consumers with carbon dioxide-treated tuna, which some retailers and restaurants use to give tuna a fresh-looking color long after the tuna should be considered fresh. While most of the world – including all of Europe, Canada, Singapore, Taiwan, Japan and China – have banned CO-treated tuna, it remains legal to sell it in the United States.

While the law requires such product to be labeled "color added" or "preserved with smoke" or with some other identification, most supermarkets fail to do this, said McNicholas. "The U.S. is about the only developed country that allows CO-treated meat and tuna, which I find incredulous," he said. "This is a country where we pride ourselves on consumer protection, and we clearly allow a technology that is designed simply and solely to deceive the consumer."

A bigger challenge, McNicholas said, is maintaining the cold chain to ensure super-frozen tuna keeps the proper temperatures throughout the handling process. That said, he sees a bright future for super-frozen in the United States, which he likens to where Japan was in the process two decades ago.

"If we went back 20 years in Japan, it is no different than it is today [in the U.S.]. If we go forward 20 years, you will see super-freezers in every supermarket holding product at minus-76 degrees," he said. "You will see distributors, broadliners and even cold storage places hold product at minus-76 degrees."

"Super-frozen tuna is still in its infancy in this country. It is certainly something that will come in the future."

can get fresh, particularly with seafood, which has more moisture and muscle fiber structure than meat and breaks down quicker," said McNicholas, who works out of Uoriki's New Jersey office. "Properly frozen, the product can't be beat."

### How frozen is super-frozen?

Using the same technology medical science deploys to preserve body parts – think of the frozen heads of Walt Disney and baseball great Ted Williams – tuna is preserved absolutely, which means there is no rush to get it to market, and little carbon footprint, as the product does not have to be flown anywhere.

"Super-frozen has no frequent flier miles. There is nothing flown anywhere," said McNicholas.

"We process it at the source and the only product we are shipping is product that is usable."

Whole Foods is selling the company's super-frozen tuna at its stores, and several other major retailers are negotiating deals, he said. Restaurant chains such as The Oceanaire Room and Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises have signed on, and some of their chefs cannot say

