

1 fish, 2 fish, now a new fish

By any other name, escolar is the seafood of the moment, juicy, oil-rich and snowy white.

Say hello to escolar, this season's fish du jour, flavor of the month, successor to branzino, whatever. You may have encountered it on the menu recently. Then again, you may have eaten it — it is a supremely juicy, oil-rich, snowy-white fish — and never heard of it by that name before.

Like the fad fish that have come before it, escolar swims under assumed identities: At Vintage, the new wine bar at 13th and Sansom, they serve it thin and grilled over frisee salad as waloo. At Bywood Seafood Market in Rosemont, they sell it as Hawaiian butterfish. You can find a stellar example at Melograno, the corner cafe at 22d and Spruce, crisp-seared and seated on creamy potato puree, artichoke sauce to the side. (It has an Italian handle here — *tonno bianco*, or white tuna — though chef Luca Demontis says he never saw it until he left Italy.)

It has a clean, almost-citrusy-crisp flavor, sometimes compared to halibut or the silkiness (but not the flakiness) of Chilean sea bass, and a texture akin to swordfish, though it is considerably sweeter and tenderer. So it is a bridge fish of sorts — a far more enticing price point (at just over \$6 a pound wholesale) for the chef than red snapper and wild salmon, yet firm enough to suit a taste for firm steak fish.

They come and go, the fad fishes, proletarian protein one day, victims of fashion the next. Shad



APRIL SAUL / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Melograno restaurant in Center City calls its escolar "tonno bianco," or white tuna. Other names for the sweet and tender, almost-citrusy-crisp fish are Hawaiian butterfish and waloo.

had its run, then sturgeon. (For a time in the 1880s, a tiny fishing port called Caviar a few miles south of Penns Grove in New Jersey was the world's biggest supplier of caviar.) Then cod, the better cuts of which fed Boston's bourgeois at the same time the salted scraps were sent to African slaves cutting cane in the Caribbean.

Because the oceans are commons, difficult to patrol and open to abuse, fishery stocks have been in decline for years. To a small extent, you can blame the popularity of seafood set off by the 1970s warnings about heart disease and red meat. But hyper-efficient, high-tech fishing — the tracking and scooping up of vast schools of fish — is the

larger reason.

And the rechristening of whole species (by marketers as well as chefs) puts them directly in the crosshairs: After Louisiana's trusty old red drum became blackened redfish, the stuff was nearly fished out. The Patagonian toothfish was minding its own business until it turned into Chilean sea bass (even though it has no sea bass DNA whatsoever). Sablefish? Yawn. Black cod (which is not cod at all, but sablefish) found itself an instant hit at Buddakan and Morimoto.

The swordfish's depletion, it occurs, could have been slowed if they'd deglamorized it; called it, say, "plowshare fish."

So far, there's no labeling consensus on escolar. I got hooked on the stuff in Montana, where they'd bring it in (it's mostly a Pacific fish) on Tuesday and Thursday at the Good Food Market. We pan-seared it. We baked it. We chopped it up for fish tacos.

I hadn't seen it as "escolar" much since until the Buckingham, Bucks County, bistro JustEat by BrownGold — talk about weird names — offered it recently as an entree with almond sauce at \$22. I hustled up to try it and it didn't disappoint; they roasted it to a firm, smoky, sweet lusciousness in the wood-burning oven.

One reason escolar poses under other names, of course, is that if you eat too much (more than the recommended five or six ounces) the oils are known to occasionally have a downside — an unwelcome laxative effect.

Grilling, on the other hand, drains off some of that oil. So I grilled two dense six-ounce steaks from Bywood Seafood the other evening, resting them first in minced garlic and orange juice. They seared on the outside; stayed rich, moist and meaty in their interior.

No ill effects. It's my grill fish of the hour, maybe the month; could even last the summer!

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