

Bad fish on fancy menus

Feds: Wholesalers traded in PCB-tainted bass

By GREG B. SMITH
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Diners at exclusive Manhattan restaurants unwittingly ate striped bass that was caught under the George Washington Bridge and exposed to dangerous chemicals, prosecutors said yesterday.

High-end customers were served the fish in dishes like striped bass stewed in seaweed — for \$36 a plate.

“The illegal trail from river to plates at ‘prominent and elegant restaurants and private clubs,’ was detailed yesterday in charges filed by Manhattan U.S. Attorney Mary Jo White.

Five wholesalers in the Fulton Fish Market allegedly peddled

PCB-laden fish at \$5.25 a pound to restaurateurs, who sold the fish at premium prices.

No restaurateurs were charged, and it wasn't clear whether any knew they were buying bad fish.

Striped bass taken from the lower Hudson is potentially dangerous for pregnant women and young children under any circumstances, and for healthy adults if consumed in large amounts.

Officials said, however, that the restaurants involved should have known something was not right because the fish lacked special tags showing they were obtained from untainted waters.

“Experienced restaurants should know that any striped

bass bought or sold in New York State are required to be tagged,” said Jennifer Post, spokeswoman for the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

“If somebody said I have fish from the Hudson, I wouldn't buy it. I go to people who I know, who I know are honest,” said Gramercy Tavern chef and co-owner Tom Colicchio.

Colicchio, himself a sport fisherman, said he skips the Fulton market altogether, getting his fish directly from fishermen in Maine; Chatham, Mass.; Montauk; Chesapeake, Va., and Rhode Island.

Authorities allege that for years, a New Jersey fisherman, Ronald Ingold, pulled the fish

from the waters under the George Washington Bridge with an old-fashioned gill net.

Each spring, Ingold sold the fish for \$1.25 a pound to M.V. Perretti Corp. in the Fulton Fish Market, which resold it to other wholesalers, including Gotham Seafood, F. Rozzo & Sons and M. Slavin and Sons, stuffing the fish in boxes marked “Bux,” court papers allege.

In April 1998, someone tipped agents with the National Marine Fisheries Service about Ingold. Agents shadowed him and arrested him in November 1998.

He pleaded guilty and cooperated with prosecutors, claiming he'd sold thousands of pounds of bad fish to Perretti since the mid-1990s.

Early yesterday, owner Michael Perretti and Louis Rozzo of F. Rozzo & Sons surrendered to authorities, and three workers were arrested at the market. All face up to five years in jail.

In court, Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph DeMarco alleged Perretti has bought nearly 100,000 pounds of tainted bass since 1995.

In December 1997, state DEC authorities twice cited Perretti for selling tainted bass. Both times Perretti pleaded guilty and paid fines.

Neither Perretti nor his attorney, Harold Levy, would comment after Perretti was released on \$50,000 bond.

With Helen Peterson