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RETAIL

3 seafoods that are only popular because of marketing schemes

Grace Eliza Goodwin Jan 14, 2024, 1:31 AM PST

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... used to be served as prison food and used as fish bait.

... sea bass is actually a deep-sea cod called Patagonian toothfish.

- **And fishermen used to throw squid back into the sea, until it got rebranded as calamari.**

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Sometimes, a little rebranding can work wonders on your reputation, and that's true even for seafood.

Some of today's most popular seafood that we consider fancy and delicious were once thought to be gross, garbage food.

Here's how some savvy marketing schemes in the 1800s and 1900s gave lobster, calamari, and Chilean sea bass the glow-ups they needed to become so loved.

Lobster used to be considered low-class

When European settlers first came to North America, lobsters were so abundant along the New England coast that two-foot-high piles would line the shores in Massachusetts Bay Colony, Business Insider

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y reported.
 — considered a poor man's meal and the "cockroaches of the
 then — were often used for fertilizer, fish bait, and even
 prison food.

But when the railroad industry burst onto the scene in the mid-1800s, train managers realized that passengers from different parts of the country didn't know about lobsters' bad rep on the East Coast, according to the Pacific Standard. So they began to serve it on trains, marketing it as an exotic item despite being very cheap at the time and considered low-class, the outlet reported.

Thanks to the savvy railroad managers, lobster became more and more popular on and off the train over the next few decades, according to the Standard. In the 1920s, lobster prices peaked, and the food was suddenly considered a pinnacle of luxury — only to be brought back to earth during the Great Depression and WWII, Mother Jones reported.

But by the 1950s, lobster was back to being considered decadent, according to the Pacific Standard — and still is.

Chilean sea bass is actually called Patagonian toothfish

Chilean sea bass is a top-dollar fish typically sold at ritzy restaurants alongside other luxury items like foie gras and caviar.

But its beginnings were much more humble.

In 1977, a California fish merchant named Lee Lantz was on the hunt in South America for new products when he stumbled upon the Patagonian toothfish in Chile, the Wall Street Journal reported.

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is 5-foot-long bulbous fish with giant eyes and teeth, the

an toothfish was just a throw-away deep-sea cod that nobody

at to do with, according to the Journal.

Lantz discovered that the fish was white and flaky on the inside and didn't have much of its own flavor, which would make it the perfect blank canvas for American chefs, [Priceonomics](#) reported.

But the name "toothfish" wasn't very marketable, so Lantz gave it a much more exclusive-sounding name: the Chilean sea bass — and Americans ate it right up.

Slimy squid was battered and rebranded as "calamari"

It's no secret that calamari is just squid, but the popular seafood item has only infiltrated American appetizer menus in the last few decades.

Squid — known as calamar in Spanish and calamaro in Italian — has been cooked into dishes in Europe for centuries. But before 1970, when American fishermen caught squid, they'd just throw it back or use it as bait to attract more lucrative fish, [according to The New York Times](#).

And when more popular fish became less available in the early 1970s, politicians and conservationists realized they needed a way to convince Americans to eat more plentiful fish like squid, the Times reported.

But squid had a bad reputation — until one enterprising young business student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology discovered that if you breaded and fried squid-like onion rings, you could successfully mask its slimy texture, according to the Times.

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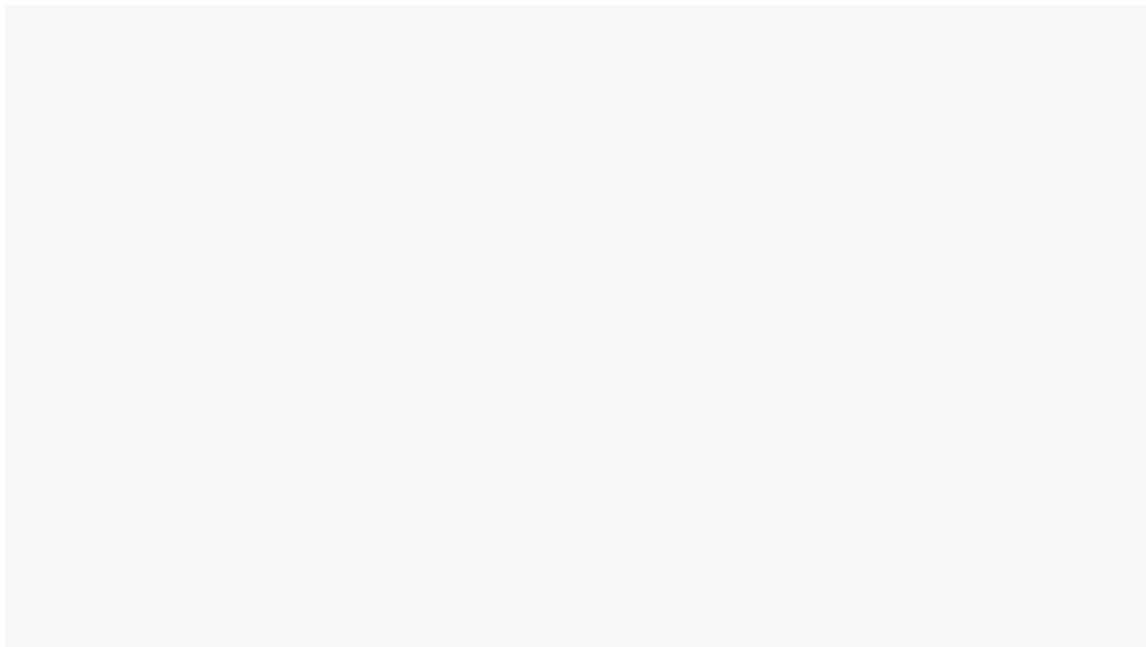
Industry leaders decided that if squid was rebranded as "calamari" — derived from Romance language words for squid — it would seem more exotic and palatable to consumers, the Times

And so, by the 1980s and 1990s, squid skyrocketed in popularity, becoming one of the trendiest foods of the time, according to global calamari supplier [The Town Dock](#).

So if your meatloaf recipe just isn't hitting at holiday parties, maybe all it needs is a little rebrand — bœuf fumé, anyone?

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