

# COLD AND RAW

How do you source a product that was recently swimming and begins to smell the moment it's caught? Last year, Plitt Co., a Chicago-based seafood wholesaler, sold nearly 500,000 pounds of tuna to local grocery stores and restaurants. Of that, 150,000 pounds were No. 1 sushi-grade fish. Here's how Maguro gets from the waters of Fiji to your plate.

*By Erika Schlaikjer*

## SUPPLIER Fiji Islands

"When these fish are coming off the boat, they're basically gold," says Bob Martin, Plitt's director of research and development.

- Fishermen travel 20 to 30 miles off the coast for seven to 14 days.
- Typical catch: 100 to 150 fish per boat, each weighing 60 to 100 pounds. Fish are stunned, cut and bled immediately.
- Fish are graded on a numeric scale, based on color, firmness, texture, freshness, fat content and size or shape. For sushi, the fattier the fish, the better.
- Whole fish are stored in ice or refrigerated seawater in the bottom of the boat.
- Upon docking, buyers from around the world negotiate prices and bid on heads of fish. **The average price is \$3 to \$5 per pound.**
- Fish are packed cold in insulated boxes, transported by truck to the airport and put on an 18-hour flight to the United States in the cargo hold of a wide-bodied passenger plane.
- **Average freight cost from Fiji: \$1.60 per pound, including customs and broker fees.**

## IMPORTER

### Los Angeles International Airport

"Dead bodies, flowers and fish—those are the three priorities for freight," says Scott Lichterman, Plitt's buyer.

- Shipment arrives in large metal cargo containers. Typical shipment weight: 500 to 2,800 pounds.
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration clears the shipments and they are admitted into commerce by U.S. Customs Service.
- Importer handpicks fish ordered by distributor, then regrades and repackages them for freshness. **Whole fish sell for \$6 to \$8 per pound.**
- Fish are loaded into cargo hold of plane within two hours for departure to Chicago. **Average freight cost from Los Angeles: \$1.10 per pound.**

## WHOLESALE DISTRIBUTOR

### Plitt's Chicago headquarters

"Price is secondary. I want the best fish," Mr. Lichterman says.

- Driver picks up shipment from O'Hare International Airport and delivers it to Chicago distribution facility.
- Receivers unload shipment; cutters regrade tuna and pull samples for mercury testing.
- Tuna is cut into four loins and shipped by refrigerated trucks to customers like Whole Foods, Frontera Grill, Shaw's Crab House and Naha by 8 a.m. the next day. **Final price per pound of No. 1 sushi-grade loins starts at \$14.95.**

Special orders? "One time we had to order live crayfish from Australia, and because of the way the planet was rotating, they arrived to us before they had left," says Mary Smith, Plitt's director of marketing and sustainability. Coordinating shipments for a volatile market like seafood is a tricky dance. Freights can get bumped because of bad weather, flight cancellations or other logistical problems. Tuna, especially, is hard to chase, since it's a migratory fish. "We use an internal computer system that has live tracking of inventory, sales, accounts payable, accounts receivable, what we're purchasing, what we're holding and what we're selling," Ms. Smith says. "All the sales people, buyers, accounting—everyone is accessing that information constantly."