

# Top-Grade Meat And Seafood Are More Accessible, Thanks To COVID-19

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This past Father's Day, Maeve Webster decided to splurge by cooking a socially distanced lobster dinner for her parents. But instead of the sometimes hefty price she's used to paying at her hometown market in Arlington, Vermont, she discovered that the crustaceans were selling for \$5 a pound.

"I've never seen lobster so cheap," Webster, the president of Menu Matters, a consultancy focused on trends and consumer behavior for the food industry, told HuffPost. "I think the least I've ever paid before is \$7 a pound. At that price, I even bought a little extra and we had lobster rolls the next day."

It's not just high-quality shellfish that's suddenly more available for home cooks. "I'm noticing that prime cuts of beef are consistently available at grocery stores," Webster said. Prime is the highest grade for beef, usually sold almost exclusively to restaurants. "It is more expensive than other cuts, like those labeled 'choice,' but I'm finding it to be far more affordable than it ever was before the pandemic."

## Why this is happening

The unprecedented affordability of Webster's Father's Day dinner was a result of how the coronavirus pandemic has affected the food service industry, and how that slowdown is rippling through supply chains to ranchers, farmers and the fishing trade.

Traditionally, restaurants get dibs on all the best stuff, like dry-aged steaks, racks of lamb, sushi-grade tuna and the season's most delicious lobsters. But with restaurant sales at an all-time low, many of the suppliers who used to sell exclusively to the food service industry are now finding ways to get their goods into the hands of consumers. Depending on where you live, how you shop and how lucky you are on any particular day, you might be able to find food fixings that would normally only be available as part of a high-priced white-tablecloth meal.



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Lobster wholesalers turned to home-cook consumers after many restaurants shut down during the pandemic.

## Lobster-palooza

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Most seafood — an estimated 70% — has traditionally been eaten outside the home in the United States, whether at restaurants, events, casinos or on cruise ships. With all those sources of revenue drying up this spring, wholesalers had to look for new places to sell their products. That's why you might be noticing an abundance of lobster at your local grocery store, whether it's being sold fresh from tanks, as precooked lobster meat or in ready-for-the-grill split lobster tails.



“Maine lobster is an important part of summertime for many people,” said Marianne LaCroix, executive director of the Maine Lobster Marketing Collaborative. “We catch most lobster in the summer and fall, so having the pandemic hit in March gave us the opportunity to find new methods of distribution before we had product to sell.”

The good news is that lobster season lasts until fall. Check at your local market to see what's in stock, and you might be able to enjoy a lobster dinner without a restaurant markup.

Don't feel hesitant if the only lobster you're finding is frozen, LaCroix said. "It's not like the frozen fish sticks you remember from your youth. We have advanced freezing technology right here in Maine, and we can freeze a lobster in under 20 minutes, so the flavor and texture still are amazing."

Prep should be uncomplicated, she said: "Some fish can be tricky to cook correctly at home, but lobster has such a sweet flavor all on its own. Even prepared very simply, it will still be a delicious meal."

## **Now's a good time to buy lamb, too**

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There's good news for lamb lovers, too – especially those who love rack of lamb.

"Nearly 50% of our business is with food service, and they typically bought almost all the racks of lamb we sell," said Anders Hemphill, vice president of marketing and brand strategy for Superior Farms, an American lamb purveyor. The rack is a "middle meat" that's similar to the prime rib or ribeye steak in beef.



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Before the coronavirus pandemic, half the sales of rack of lamb typically went to the restaurant industry.

Long considered a restaurant cut, rack of lamb might seem intimidating for a home cook to tackle, but it's actually easy to prepare, Hemphill said. "You can put it right on the grill whole, with some salt and pepper, and maybe a little garlic and rosemary, and it will turn out great," he said. "Or cut it into individual chops to cook and serve it that way, instead." He suggested checking out [recipes on Superior Farm's website](#) for more inspiration.

One reason to consider adding rack of lamb to your grilling repertoire this summer is the price. While it typically costs about \$20 a pound, it's now selling in most places for \$13 to \$14 a pound. That's not cheap, but it's much less than you'd pay in a restaurant — and you'd have to wear pants in a restaurant, so win-win.

## **Dry-aged beef is having a moment**

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After issues with shortages in the spring, beef is back in stores, and with many higher-quality cuts for sale than ever before. "When restaurants shut down, we had to divert all that beef product into retail," said Bridget Wasser, executive director of meat science, culinary and supply chain at [National Cattlemen's Beef Association](#). "Right now, your grocery store probably has some cuts that are usually just on restaurant menus, like prime-grade middle meat steaks like ribeye, tenderloin/filet and strip steaks. Cuts that previously were almost solely used in restaurants have made their way into grocery stores, too, so you might be able to find cuts like petite tender, chuck flap, bavette and short ribs," she said.

While beef prices spiked during the early days of the shutdown, they have now returned to levels that are similar to the same time last year, Wasser said.

Even though this upgraded grocery store inventory is welcomed by many, there still are those who feel that there's nothing quite like a favorite cut of beef from a traditional steakhouse. [The Whitney](#), a longtime Detroit eatery, has been offering customers cook-at-home kits that allow them to enjoy some of its signature menu items. "We're planning to reopen Sept. 9, and we were looking for a way to make a contribution to the community and to encourage folks to visit us again then," [Dave Duey](#), director of operations, explained.

Duey and his team came up with [The Grill Box](#) (\$100), which includes two 14-ounce, dry-aged USDA prime New York strip steaks, a jar of grilling steak seasoning and a bottle of Whitney-label champagne. Each box comes with a \$25 gift card to be used when the restaurant reopens. The Whitney also makes a \$50 gift card donation to Detroit's [Coalition on Temporary Shelter](#) for every Grill Box sold.

Four Star Seafood sells [meal kits](#), such as [a \\$150 package](#) that includes sushi-grade yellowfin tuna, uni, Ora King salmon, albacore, kampachi and salmon roe, plus sushi rice, nori sheets, white shoyu, rice vinegar, pickled young ginger, grated Japanese wasabi and all the ingredients needed to make miso soup.

## Is it worth it to spend your money on restaurant-quality food?

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Is restaurant-quality food a good addition to your grocery shopping cart? It's true that many people are shopping differently these days, and that extends to items that might be considered premium, like steaks, seafood and racks of lamb. Even in tough economic times, some consumers are willing to splurge now and then, especially if they can be assured of getting a top-quality product or of satisfying their craving for a dish usually served by a favorite restaurant.

“People are canceling vacations and other big expenses, so they're more willing to spend on things they can enjoy at home together,” said Melissa Abbott, vice president at The Hartman Group, which provides research, analysis and consulting services to food and beverage brands.

“Some consumers seem willing to say, ‘We're really gonna go for it’ on a better cut of meat or great seafood, especially if it seems like a good deal compared to what they used to pay for it in a restaurant,” Abbott said.

For many, she noted, there's also more time to shop for great deals. “For many people, food is our hobby, our pastime and a way to distract us,” she said. “So finding a seasonal item that's cheaper than usual, or a supplier with a great deal on something you normally could get only when eating out, might feel like it's worth the splurge.”