



Langostino vs. lobster: What's the difference?

As buyers turn to less expensive langostino, species identification gets muddled

By Steven Hedlund

Long John Silver's became the latest restaurant operator to add langostino to its menu when it launched Buttered Lobster Bites as a Lenten promotion. The item's Feb. 27 debut was a big hit among the quick-service chain's patrons (see Newline, p. 8). But it also caused consumers to wonder what langostino really is. One newspaper columnist quipped, "For all I know [langostino is] Italian for lobster."

Actually, langostino is Spanish for "little lobster." Although langostino's taste and texture are similar to lobster meat, langostino is not the crustacean Americans typically refer to as "lobster" — American, or Maine, lobster and spiny lobster.

The langostino debate is nothing new. Ten months ago, Rubio's Fresh Mexican Grill was slapped with a class-action lawsuit for using only langostino in its Lobster Burrito and failing to menu it as such (the item's name was changed to Langostino Lobster Burrito a month before the lawsuit was filed). But that's not to say consumers are any less confused. Following are a few questions buyers should consider when menuing or retailing langostino.

Q. How are langostinos and American and spiny lobsters related?

Langostinos are in the same order, Decapoda, and suborder, Pleocyemata, as American and spiny lobsters but different infraorders.

American lobsters are in the Astacidea infraorder, while spiny lobsters are in the Palinura infraorder.

Langostinos are in the Anomura infraorder, with and hermit and porcelain crabs, and in the Galatheididae family.

Anomurans are superficially crab-like. But unlike true crabs, which are part of the Brachyura infraorder, anomurans' last pair of "walking" legs is reduced and hidden under the carapace, giving the impression of four pairs of walking legs instead of five.

"Chile exports two species of galatheid crab that are marketed as langostino," says Larry Lovell, senior scientist at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California, San Diego. "One is pelagic, the tuna or red crab, the other is benthic, or bottom dwelling. These two species are what Rubio's uses."

Lovell is referring, respectively, to *Pleuroncodes monodon*, or langostino colorado, and *Cervimunida johni*, or squat lobster or langostino amarillo (Spanish for "yellow").

What's more, El Salvador and New Zealand produce two other species of galatheid crab marketed as langostino: *Pleuroncodes planipes* and *Munida*

gregaria, respectively.

According to one U.S. importer, El Salvador increased exports of *P. planipes* to the United States after Chile reduced its langostino quota to protect the resource a few years ago. The El Salvadoran species is marketed as langostino. *M. gregaria* is called squat lobster, lobster krill and New Zealand langostino.

"It's simply a matter of semantics and name/language usage from different parts of the world," explains Lovell. "Another example of semantics is the use of prawn vs. shrimp. As the seafood industry has gone global, language use has followed the product from the country of origin."

To make matters even more confusing, Europe yields a lobster-like crustacean the French call "langoustine." But it's not a langostino; it's a "lobsterette" (*Nephrops norvegicus*). The species is also known as scampi, Norway lobster and Dublin Bay prawns.

Q. Can langostino be labeled as lobster?

No. According to the Food and Drug Administration, the term "lobster" can't be used to depict langostino unless a modifier such as "langostino" or "squat" is attached.

"It would be confusing to consumers," says an official at the FDA's Office of Seafood. "The main thing we look at when deter-

mining what's acceptable and what's not is whether the name is misleading."

When Americans think of "lobsters," they think of American lobsters (*Homarus americanus*) and spiny lobsters (*Panulirus spp.* and *Jasus spp.*), not langostinos, she says.

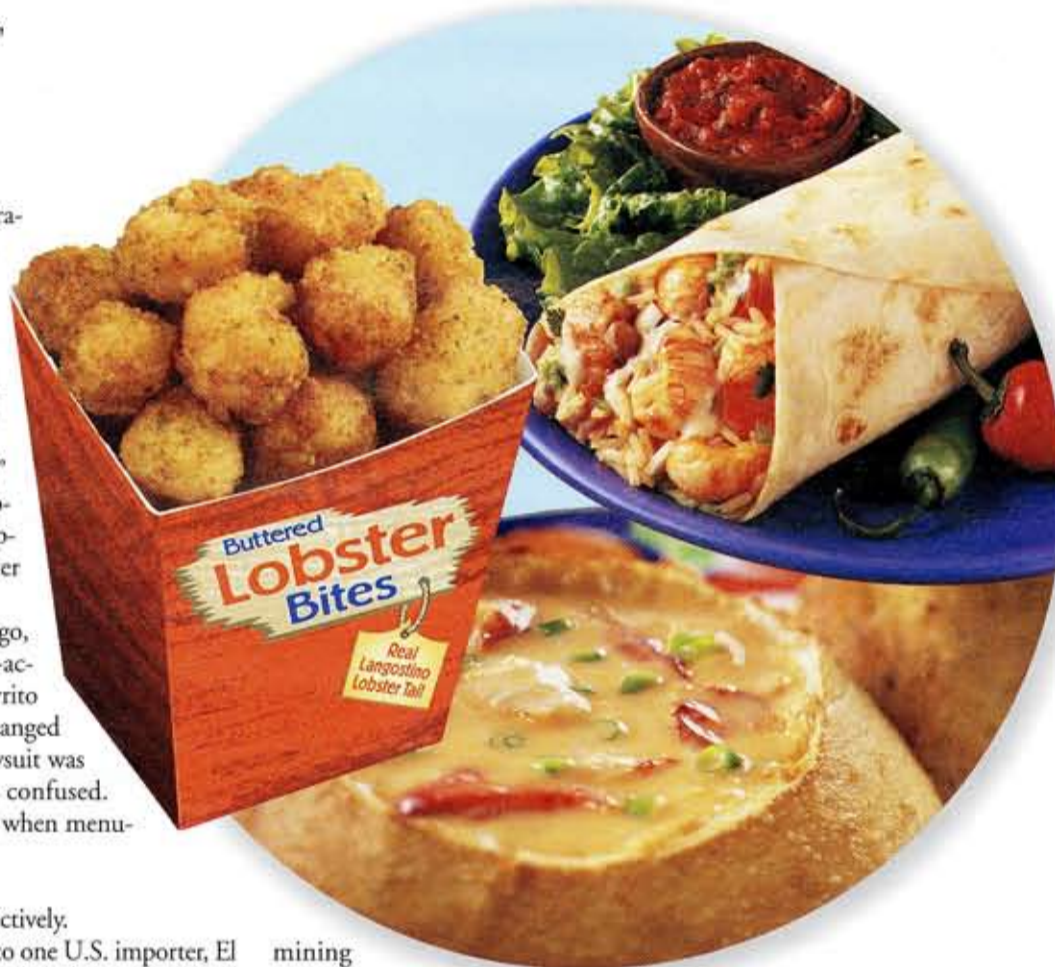
Anyone with questions about the acceptable market names for langostino should contact the Office of Seafood or visit the Seafood List (www.cfsan.fda.gov/~frf/seaintro.html) and type "langostino" in the search field. The FDA encourages the use of a species' market or common name, but discourages the use of the vernacular name.

Only three langostino species are currently listed on the FDA's Seafood List: *P. monodon*, *C. johni* and *M. gregaria*. More species will be added to the list in the near term, says the official.

Q. Are langostino and American lobster meat similar in taste and texture?

"The taste of the [tail] meat is pretty similar," says Lovell.

"As far as I'm concerned, they taste and eat pretty much the same," he told National Public Radio last year. "It's just that one has a larger tail to begin with and another has a smaller tail to begin with."



Red Lobster's Lobster Bisque, Long John Silver's Buttered Lobster Bites and Rubio's Langostino Lobster Burrito all contain langostino.

The edible morsel of meat in langostino is found in its inch-long tail. It has a sweet, delicate flavor more like lobster or crab. But its texture resembles shrimp more than lobster.

Q. What attracts foodservice operators to langostino?

Size and cost.

The size of a langostino tail is ideal for restaurant operators looking for bite-sized portions of meat.

Moreover, "langostino [tail meat] is well under half the price of lobster," says the importer.

American lobster prices remain extremely high. Last month, frozen American lobster tails were tagged in the \$15 to \$18 range per pound. IQF langostino tails are usually marked in the \$7 to \$8 range.

"Our customers tell us they crave the taste of lobster," says Don Gates, Long John Silver's director of marketing. "But they don't have \$20 to spend or an hour to waste in order to get it."

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