

With shark fin ban, a slice of Asian culture ends in California

June 30 2013, by Louis Sahagun

An ancient Asian dining tradition comes to an end in California on Monday, and grocer Emily Gian is none too happy.

Gian has slashed prices on shark fins, the astoundingly expensive ingredient of a coveted and ceremonial soup, in hopes she will sell out before a California ban on sale or possession of the delicacy takes effect.

"The law is unfair," said Gian, whose store in Los Angeles' Chinatown sells shark fins for \$599 a pound. "Why single out Chinese people in California when shark fins are legal in many other states?"

Across town, retired science teacher Judy Ki offers an answer.

Ki grew up in a wealthy Hong Kong family that served steaming bowls of [shark fin soup](#) to honor guests at birthdays, banquets and weddings. These days, she sees the delicacy in historical context.

Shark fin soup dates to the Ming Dynasty, when it was reserved for emperors as a symbol of status and power over the most dangerous predators. "Back when it was quite a physical feat for a [fisherman](#) to land a shark, it was the ultimate symbol of yang, or male energy," said Ki, a spokeswoman for the Asian Pacific American Ocean Harmony Alliance.

It certainly wasn't prized for its flavor, which is almost nonexistent. Its chief culinary merit is an ethereal, gelatinous texture, achieved through

careful drying, precise trimming and a complex preparation method that takes several days. For flavor, cooks often add chicken or ham.

As China's [middle class](#) grew in recent decades, the number of people who could afford the delicacy rose sharply. To meet growing demand, the [fishing industry](#) found a particularly cruel way to harvest several million fins each year. Fishermen slice the fins off live sharks and throw the crippled animals back into the sea to drown.

An estimated 73 million sharks are killed each year for their fins, which can sell for more than \$2,000 a pound in California. The International Union for Conservation of Nature estimates that the populations of some shark species, such as hammerheads, have been reduced by as much as 90 percent in recent years.

Ki finds that morally wrong. "It is not right to slaughter massive numbers of sharks for a bowl of soup that lasts five minutes," Ki said. "Culture evolves. Extinction lasts forever."

Gian and others who are skeptical of the ban do have a point, however. It can seem unfair to ban shark fins in California while chefs and grocers in other states continue sales unfettered.

The state, and supporters of the ban, hope that will change.

"This is an important milestone in the global campaign to end shark finning," said Aimee David, director of conservation policy at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. "California's example has inspired several states to act, and we hope many others will follow suit."

So far, Hawaii, Washington, Oregon, Illinois, Maryland and Delaware, and the Pacific territories Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands, have also enacted legislation prohibiting the sale of

shark fins. New York is pursuing similar legislation.

Korean Airlines Co. and Cathay Pacific Airways Ltd. have stopped carrying shark fins as cargo. Even the Chinese government has announced that it will phase out fins from official functions within three years, according to the U.S. Humane Society.

Despite protests from some Chinese American leaders, California Gov. Jerry Brown outlawed the possession, sale and distribution of shark fins 18 months ago. Stores were allowed to sell existing stocks until Monday. Violators could face penalties of up to six months in prison and fines up to \$1,000, authorities said.

In January, a legal challenge in federal court by San Francisco merchants who claimed that the ban is unconstitutional and discriminatory toward Chinese culture was resolved in favor of the ban. The court found that the law was within the state's authority, based on findings that the decline of [sharks](#) is a threat to the marine ecosystem and that the ban would help eliminate the demand for shark fins.

Since then, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife and supporters of the ban - including the Humane Society and the Asian Pacific American Ocean Harmony Alliance - have been reaching out to Chinese American communities across the state, reminding them about the new law and its consequences.

Chinatown is in the last days of preparation.

Across the street from Gian's shop, Wing Hop Fung Ginseng & China Products was down to its last three bins of dried [shark fins](#), including one marked by an eye-catching sign: "Father's Day Special! 20 percent off. \$999 a pound."

At the nearby Ocean Seafood, where shark fin soup costs \$42 a bowl - \$138 when combined in a pot with a whole chicken - manager Dennis Fong said the restaurant was changing its menus this week to remove the item.

Some Chinese restaurants are cooking up "faux" recipes that replace shark fin with non-endangered seafood.

As for Gian, she still had a lot of fins to move.

"Maybe we'll reduce the prices even more, or eat them ourselves, or maybe move them to a state where they are still legal," she said.

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