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Clearwater's Sixty South Salmon aims to change the world with its super-premium farmed salmon

By [Laura Reiley](#)



Sixty South Salmon are 11 to 13 pounds when harvested, the meat processed on the mainland and then flown to the U.S. and directly to restaurateurs and retailers. (Credit goes here) (All photos provided by Alex Malaguti via thumb drive on 3/8)

Your seatbelt is still fastened, you have not yet reached cruising altitude and you're calculating just how to while away the eight hours and 40 minutes from Santiago, Chile, to Miami. Here's what you don't know: Beneath you, in the belly of the plane, are hundreds of boxes of Chilean farmed salmon.

Chile is the world's second-largest producer of salmon, behind Norway, much of it making its way into the United States via Miami. Humans' appetite for this fish seems inexhaustible, many countries jumping headlong into large-scale salmon farming.

But stand at the southernmost tip of Chile and look south, south to the fjords inside the Alberto de Agostini National Park in Tierra del Fuego, nearby Antarctica keeping the waters icy cold. Something different is happening here. Located nearly 1,000 miles from any major city, this is where Sixty South Salmon is farmed. With its U.S. office in Clearwater, it is one of a small handful of super-premium farmed salmon that aims to change the world.

Farmed salmon has gotten a bad rap. Because of how they are raised, farmed salmon are frequently bad for the environment, bad for the fish themselves and bad for the folks eating them. But what if they were raised another way, one that met the highest standards for sustainability?

It's been done before. New Zealand's marine-farmed Ora King salmon gets the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch's highest rating, and brands like Scotland's Loch Duart wins awards for the way the fish tastes

as well as for its sustainable farming practices. Sixty South Salmon is the newest to enter the fray, investing \$300 million in a farm that's 600 miles from its nearest neighbors.

The founders, Chilean Nicos Nicolaidis and Norwegian Yngve Myhre, set their sights on America, debuting the Sixty South product here 10 months ago. It has been picked up by Florida Walmart stores and regional restaurants such as the Loder family's Crabby Bill's restaurants. Why was the United States their target? Increasingly, American consumers, especially young ones, care about the where their food comes from and how it was raised.

"We felt it was a market that could understand a premium brand coming out of South America," said Alex Malaguti, the company's director of sales. "Provenance is a big part of this story. The Antarctic location is exotic, far away from pollution and contaminants."

Malaguti, an Eckerd College graduate, is the main reason Clearwater is the company's American headquarters. His job is a tricky one: How do you market a premium brand from the southern tip of Chile, a part of the world that has not been known for its premium farmed fish? Turns out, it's getting the chefs on board, doing taste tests, meeting face to face to tell this fish's story.

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Once you land at the southernmost airport in Chile, Sixty South's boats pick you up and take you another 10 hours south. The founders wanted to replicate the quality of the most expensive salmon from Norway, but to do it in South America requires super cold water. They found their place, the water a brisk 38 to 49 degrees — a great spot for salmon, but one with no human beings.

They erected floating net pens that go from the surface to 140 feet under water among a constellation of islands, each with a floating house occupied by one of 10 employees who work two weeks on and two weeks off feeding and tending the fish. The icy waters are too cold for sea lice, elsewhere a big problem for farmed salmon, which means Sixty South has the luxury of never treating the salmon with antibiotics, pesticides or other chemicals.

For the first year of their lives, from the time they are eggs to when they go in the net pens, the fish grow in freshwater tanks. (Many salmon farms grow the babies in lakes, where it's hard to control runoff and other contaminants.) Once the fish are introduced to the saltwater net pens in Tierra del Fuego, they spend up to 18 months swimming in big circles, eating feed pellets made of vegetable proteins, starches, wild fish and fish oil. In such cold water, fish grow slowly, something that adds to the flavor and texture, but also to the price.

For organizations like the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch or the Aquaculture Stewardship Council, which sets standards for sustainable aquaculture, there are many other factors that go into giving a farm a high sustainability rating. They require data on water quality, mortality rates, fish escapes and negative effects on other animals. At Sixty South, whales and sea lions are potential predators for the salmon, so they've had to erect a double net system to deter crafty sea lions from the fish buffet without injuring the sea lions.

Once the fish reach mature weight, 11 to 13 pounds, a boat picks up the harvest and the salmon is processed on the mainland and flown immediately to the United States. The company is selling 5 million pounds per month, 10,000 pounds per week in Florida. That's still fairly small for a salmon farming operation. Walmart sells it for \$10.24 per pound, comparable to Publix or Fresh Market's prices for more traditionally large-scale farmed salmon.

"Walmart is using the Southeast region as a test market. They approached us and said they're seeing a shift in the interests of the public and they realized they needed to have a premium offering," Malaguti said. "It's a signal, right, that the market is changing?"

As Walmart goes, so goes the nation.

Sixty South, named for its southern latitude, has ambitious goals on the horizon. In 2019, the hatchery will move to the Tierra del Fuego farm, minimizing any risk of introducing disease or other creatures in tanks from further north. And they aim to introduce more vegetable protein into the salmon's feed. For sustainable seafood advisory lists like Seafood Watch, feed high in wild fish is frowned upon as an unsustainable practice.

For restaurateurs like Matt Loder, Sixty South fits into an overarching commitment to serve sustainable seafood locally: Rhode Island calamari, Alaskan crab, Florida-farmed beef even for burgers, local mullet cut and smoked on premises.

"Sixty South may cost more, but it fills our commitment," Loder said. "It really does taste better. Some people like wild Alaskan salmon, but to me its (minimal) fat makes it very dry when grilled."

Crabby Bill's Indian Rocks Beach, Seabreeze Island Grill and Crabby Bill's St. Pete Beach have table tents that tell the Sixty South tale, those icy Antarctic waters and eco-friendly farming practices. Bottom line, what will signal the success or failure of the young company is people's ability to understand the story and to perceive value, which means this: It tastes good and it is worth the premium price.

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