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Changes in consumer preferences for seafood products due to the COVID-19 pandemic: Summary of Hampton Roads, VA results

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Summary

The health crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic led to the shutdown of restaurants and nonessential businesses throughout the United States. With the majority (68%) of seafood products purchased at food service establishments, this has resulted in an unparalleled shock to U.S. fisheries and aquaculture producers (NOAA 2018). Furthermore, the USDA Census of Aquaculture reported that for shellfish farms only 4% of their first point of sales were direct to consumers (USDA 2019). As farms and businesses attempt to respond to the loss of revenue from traditional marketing channels and establish direct to consumer channels, a key question concerned the extent of changes in consumer demand and preferences for seafood products. Thus, the goal of this project was to gather market information on changes in how, when, and where consumers purchase seafood in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report summarizes the results of information specific to responses related to seafood purchases at households within the Hampton Roads region of Virginia. Survey respondents were asked about seafood purchases prior to (2019) and during (2020) the COVID-19 pandemic.

There were 105 usable responses from participants living within the Hampton Roads region of Virginia. Respondent location was self-reported via zip code. The greatest percentage of respondents (53%) had completed an advanced college degree (graduate degree) (Figure 1). This was followed by 16% who completed some college, 14% who completed a 4-year college degree, and 10% who completed 2-year Associates/Trade/Technical/Vocational training. The majority of respondents (98%) self-reported as "White", with the remaining respondents (2%) who self-reported as "Hispanic". Female and male genders accounted for 67% and 33% of respondents, respectively. The majority of respondents (74%) reported being 46 to 55 years old. This was followed by 12% who reported being 66 years old or older, and 7% each who reported being 36 to 45 years old and 56 to 65 years old. Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of respondents by income prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The greatest percentage of respondents had annual household incomes of $100,000 to $149,999 (29% in both 2019 and 2020).

When asked about frequency of seafood consumption during the pandemic (2020), the largest percentages of respondents (54%) indicated they ate about the same as they did in 2019 (Figure 3). This was followed by 39% who indicated they ate seafood less frequently in 2020, and 8% who indicated they ate seafood more frequently in 2020.

Between 2019 and 2020, consumers reported increased consumption of seafood products prepared at home, takeout from restaurants, and delivered to home as a prepared meal (Table 1). Conversely, consumers reported decreased consumption of seafood products at restaurants. The percentage of respondents who did not consume seafood products increased between 2019 and 2020.

Regarding method of preparation, respondents indicated they preferred grilled finfish products, fried mollusk products, grilled crustacean products, and raw seaweed products when purchasing as takeout from a restaurant or delivered to home as a prepared meal. This was observed both prior to (2019) and during the pandemic (2020) (Figures 4 & 5). Respondents indicated the same preferences when purchasing seafood at a restaurant in 2019 (Figure 6). However, in 2020, respondents indicated they preferred raw mollusk products and broiled crustacean products when purchasing at a restaurant in 2020 (Figure 7).

Survey participants were asked about the amount spent per shopping trip on seafood products for home preparation in 2019 and 2020 (Figure 8). The majority of respondents in both 2019 (72%) and 2020 (82%) indicated they purchased less than $30 worth of seafood products per shopping trip. Similarly, survey participants were asked about the quantity (in pounds) purchased per shopping trip or home preparation (Figure 9). The majority of participants in both 2019 and 2020 (94% each year) indicated they purchased 10 pounds or less of seafood products per shopping trip.

In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 37% of respondents indicated they ate more seafood during a particular season of the year (Figure 10). Fifty-two percent indicated summer was the preferred season. In 2020, during the pandemic, 21% indicated they ate more seafood during a particular season, indicating a shift away from seasonal consumption.

Regarding advertisement methods, word of mouth and seafood counter clerk or waitstaff were found to be the most important methods of advertisement, as the largest percentage of participants (27% for both methods) indicated this to be a moderately important method (Table 2). Greater percentages of respondents found all other methods (Mailed flyer, E-mail, text message, social media posting, etc.) to be not important at all.

Respondents were asked to identify establishments from which they purchased seafood products for home preparation in 2019 and 2020 (Figures 11 & 12). Seventy-one percent of respondents in 2019 and 69% in 2020 indicated they purchased more than 50% of seafood products for home preparation at supermarkets or grocery stores. This was followed by 18% in 2019 and 24% in 2020 that purchased less than 10% of seafood products for home preparation at supermarkets or grocery stores. Eleven percent of respondents in 2019 and 7% in 2020 indicated they purchased between 11% and 50% of seafood products for home preparation at supermarkets or grocery stores. Purchases from all other establishments were uncommon in 2019 and 2020, with 76% or more of respondents in 2019 and 81% or more of respondents in 2020 indicating 10% or less of seafood purchases being made at all other establishments (seafood market, farmer's market, food hub, online seafood distributor or producer, etc.). Overall, supermarkets or grocery stores were the most common establishment from which to purchase of seafood products for home consumption in 2019 and 2020. Regarding preferred establishments from which purchase seafood products for home preparation, minimal change was observed between 2019 and 2020 (pre-pandemic vs. pandemic).

References

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United States Department of Agriculture. 2019. 2018 Census of Aquaculture. Volume 3. Special Studies. Part 2. AC-17-SS-2. Available at: https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Online_Resources/Aquaculture/Aqua.pdf

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Appendix

Changes in consumer preferences for seafood products due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

Summary of Hampton Roads, VA results

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Jonathan van Senten, Virginia Tech

Michael Ciaramella, Cornell Cooperative Extension

Matt Parker, Maryland Sea Grant Extension

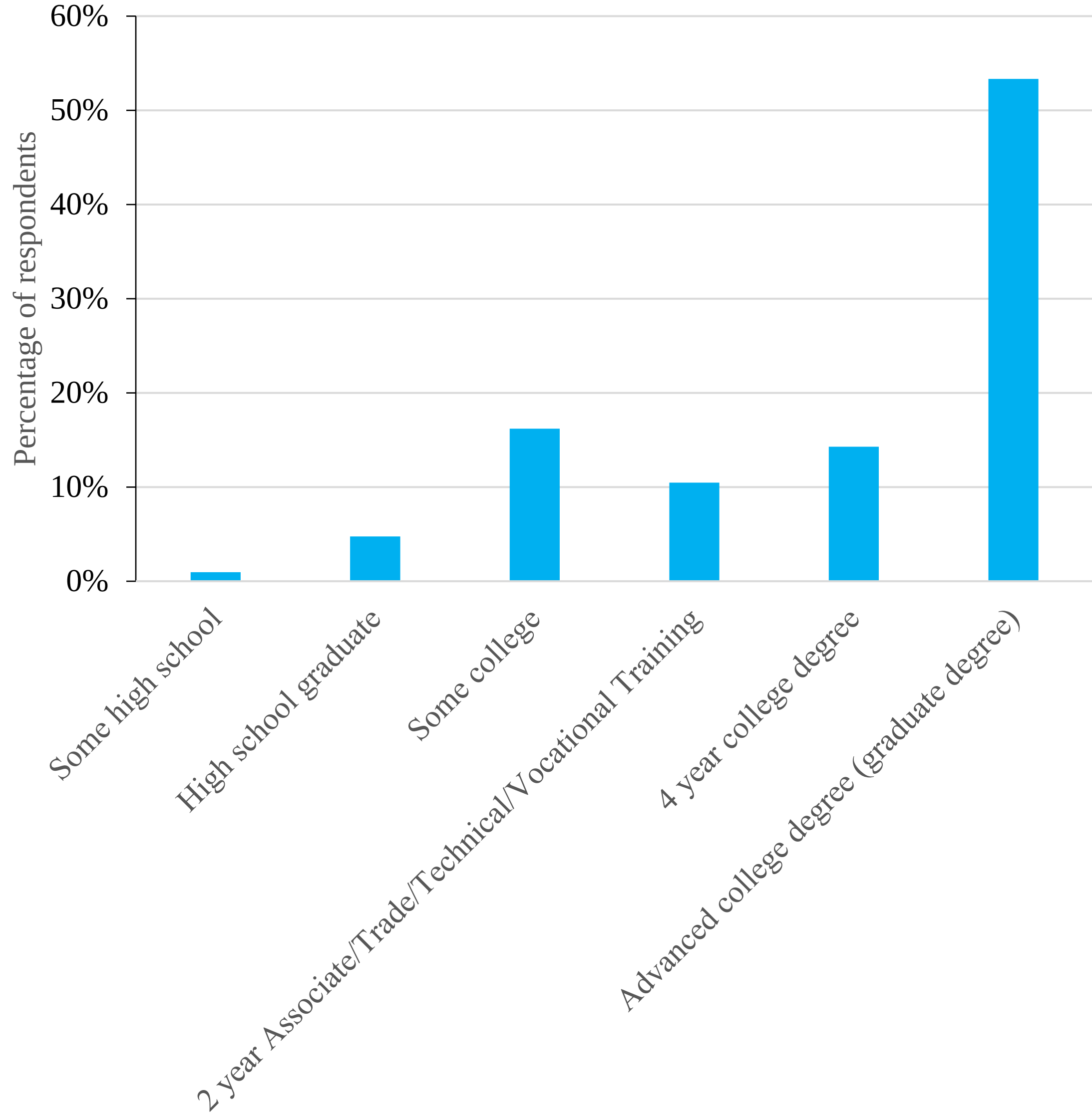

Figure 1. Level of education completed by survey respondents.

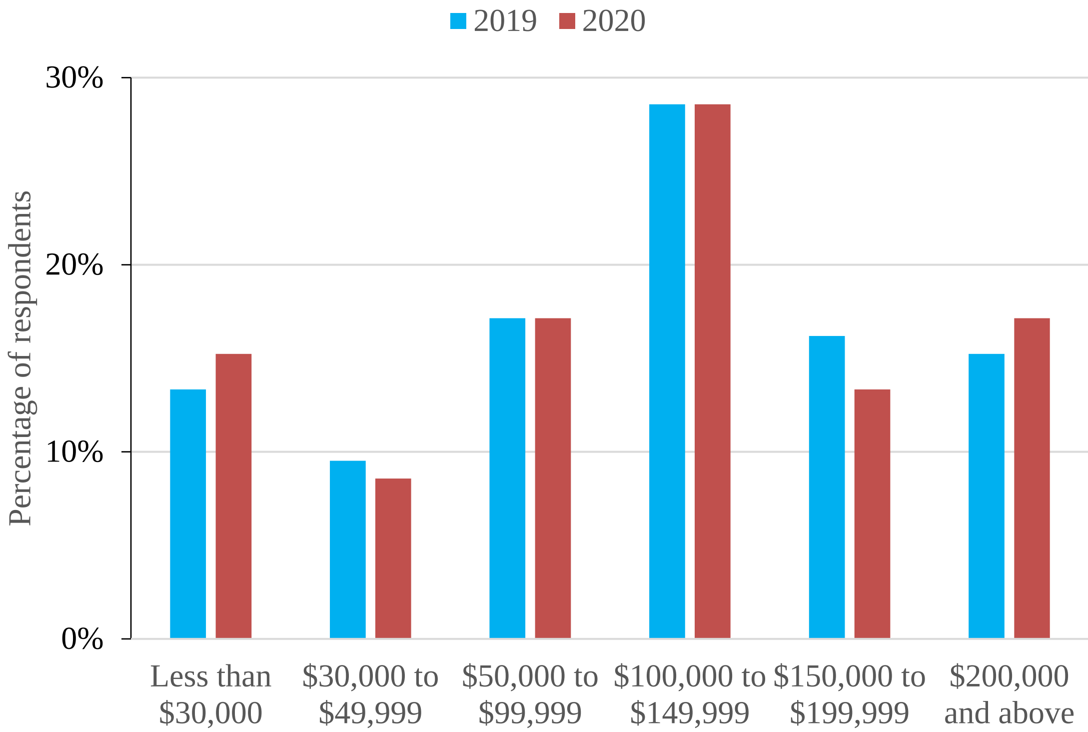

Figure 2. Household income of survey respondents in 2019 and 2020.

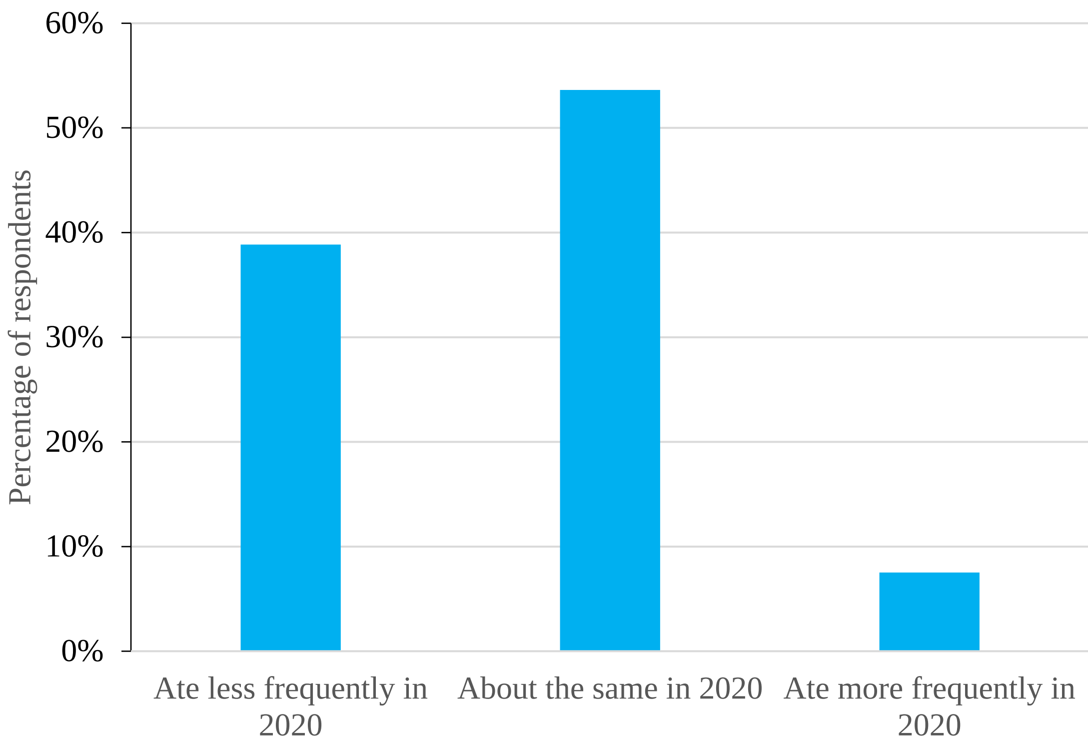

Figure 3. Frequency of seafood consumption of seafood products in 2020, with respect to seafood consumption in 2019.

Table 1. Methods of consumption of seafood products reported in 2019 and 2020.

Methods of consumption	**2019**	**2020**
Prepared at home	29%	36%
Takeout from a restaurant	9%	17%
Delivered to home as a prepared meal	3%	7%
At a restaurant	38%	15%
Other	1%	1%
Did not consume	21%	25%

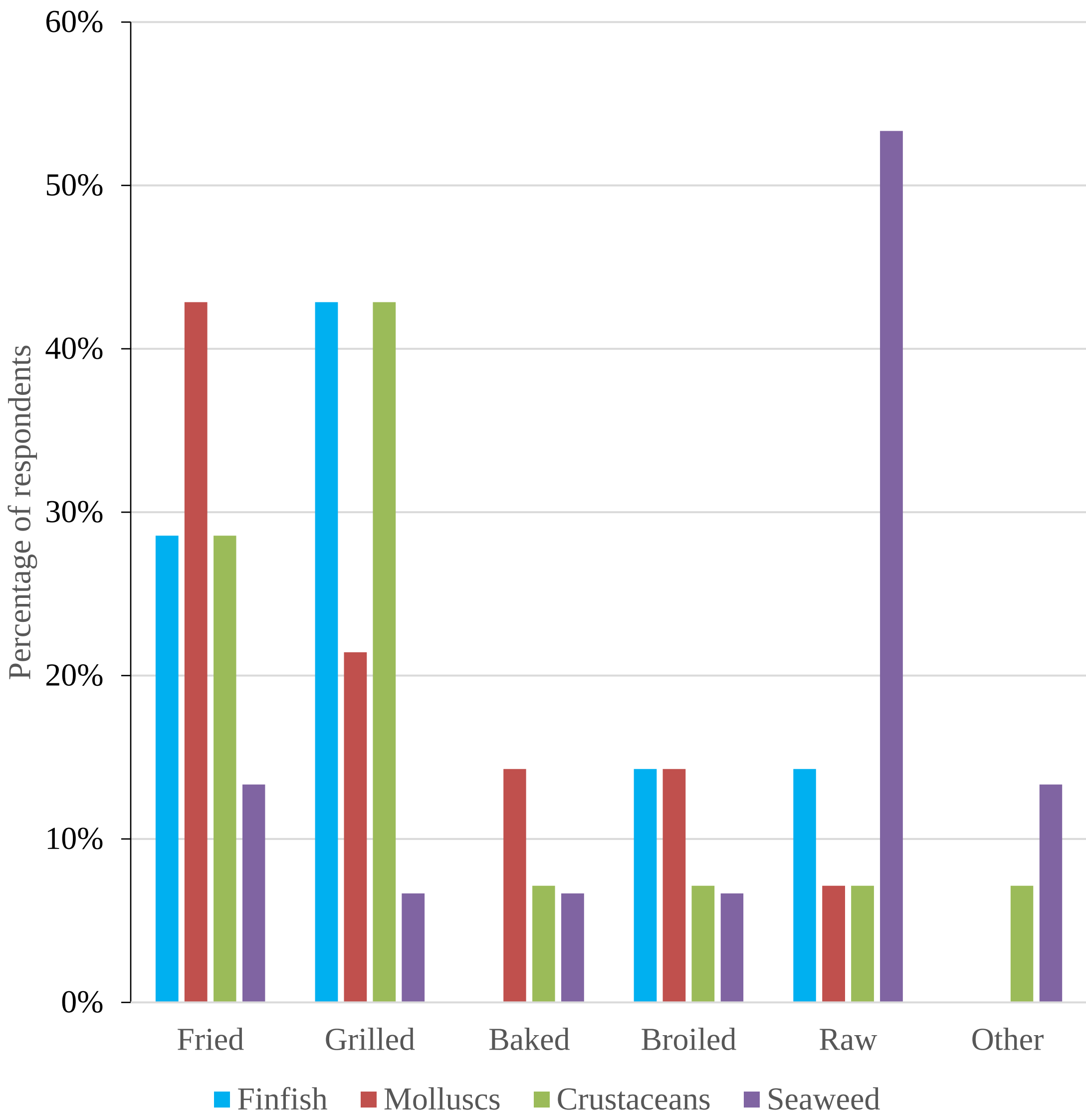

Figure 4. Preferred method of preparation of seafood products purchased as takeout from a restaurant or delivered to home as a prepared meal reported in 2019.

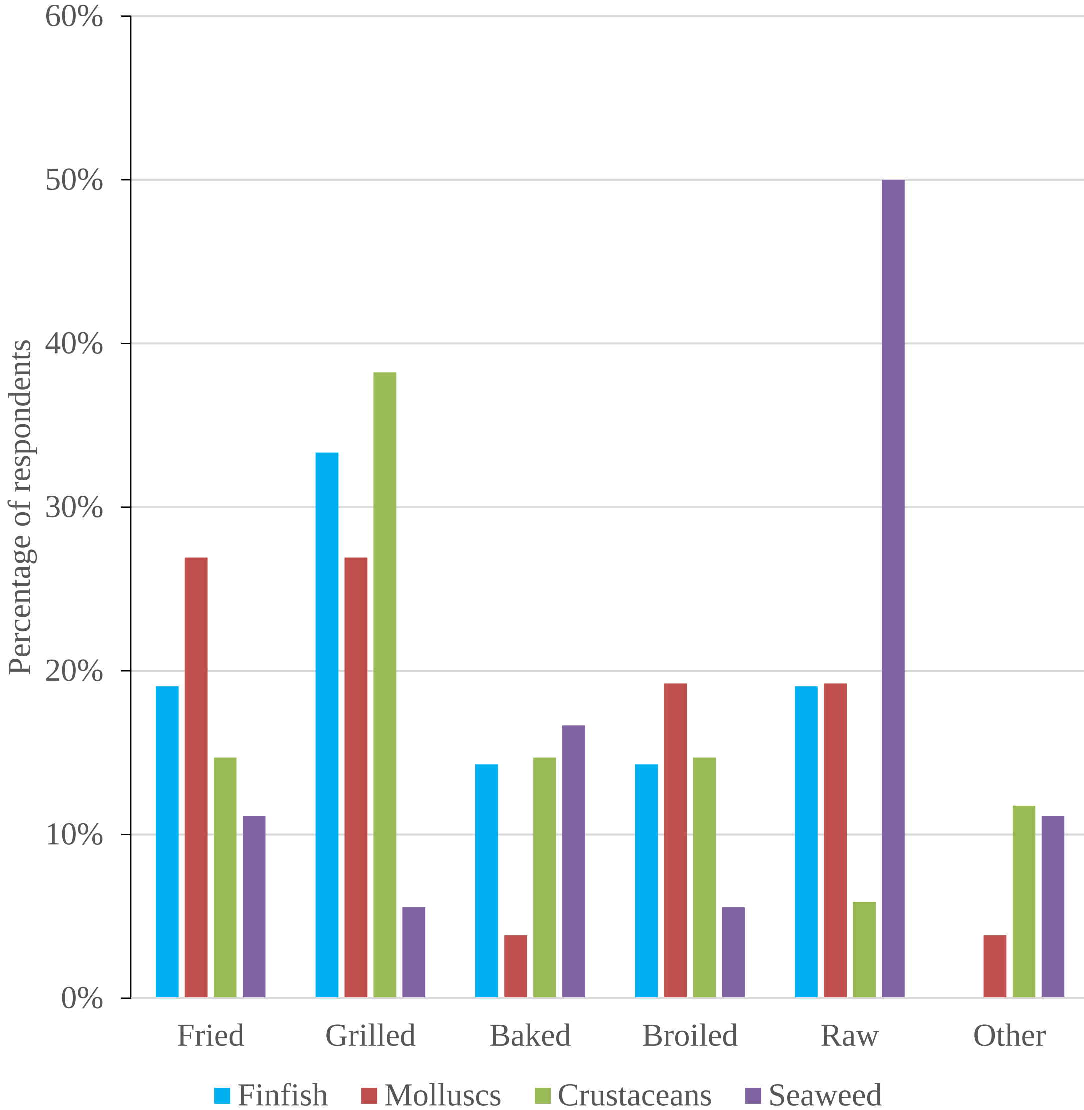

Figure 5. Preferred method of preparation of seafood products purchased as takeout from a restaurant or delivered to home as a prepared meal reported in 2020.

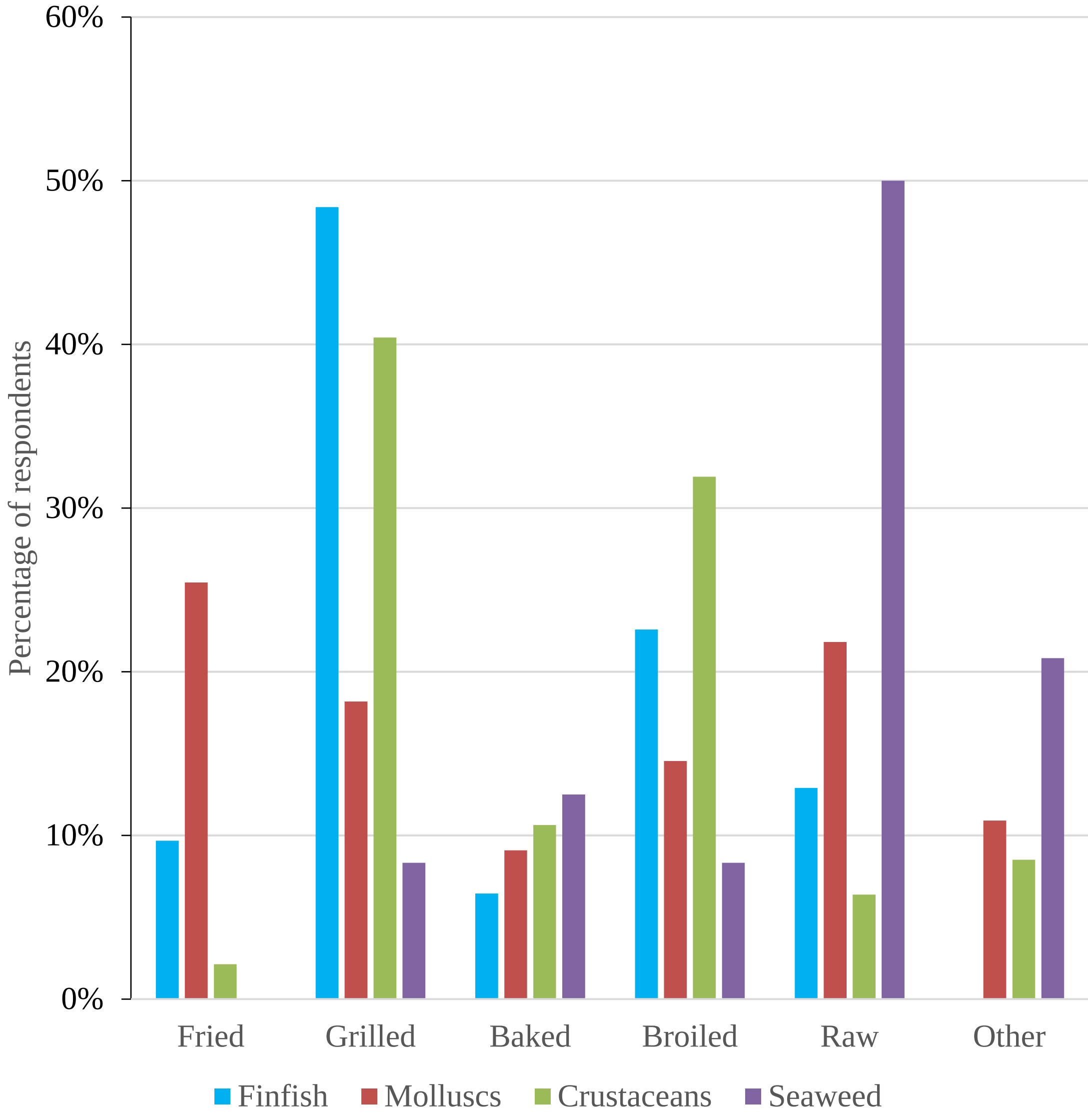

Figure 6. Preferred method of preparation of seafood products purchased at a restaurant reported in 2019.

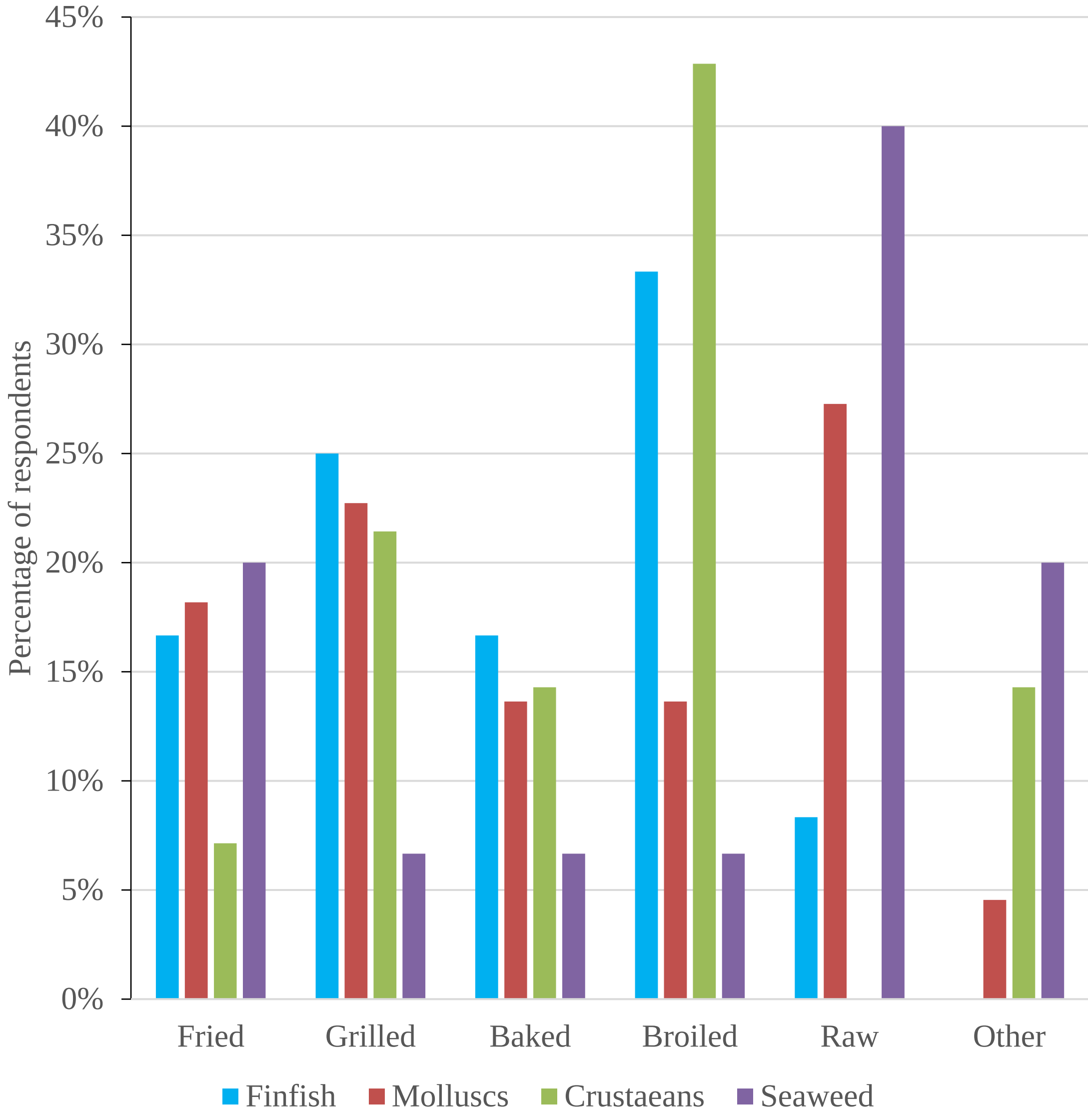

Figure 7. Preferred method of preparation of seafood products purchased at a restaurant reported in 2020.

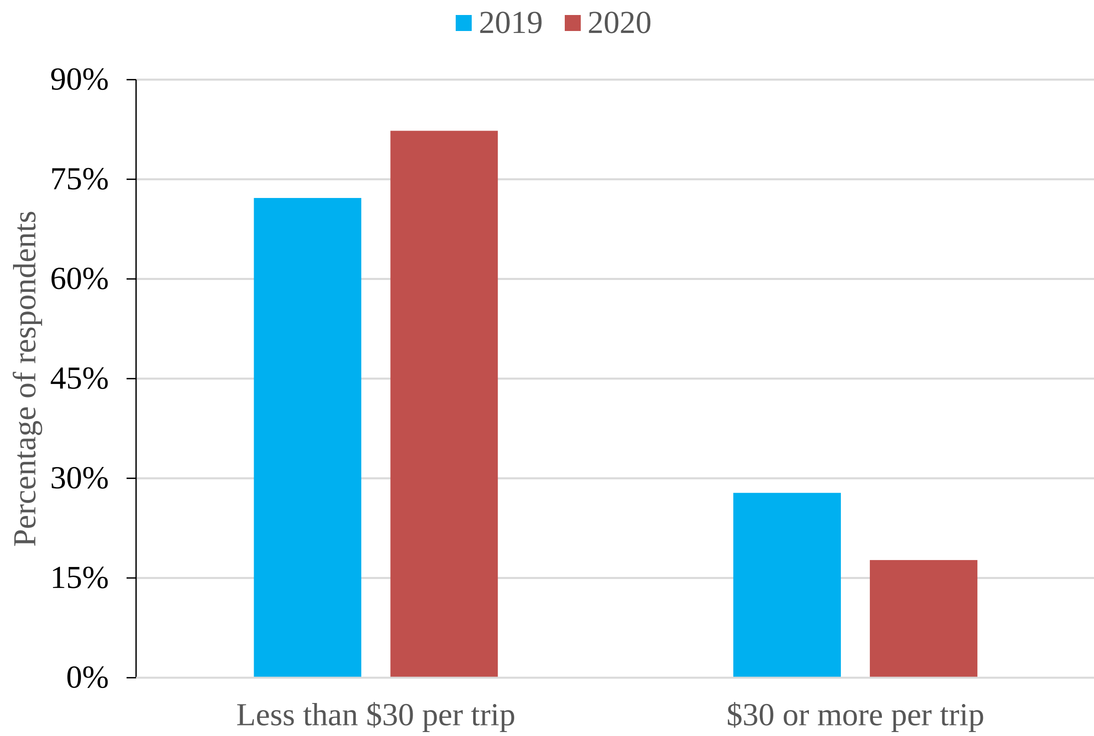

Figure 8. Amounts spent per shopping trip on seafood products for home preparation reported in 2019 and 2020.

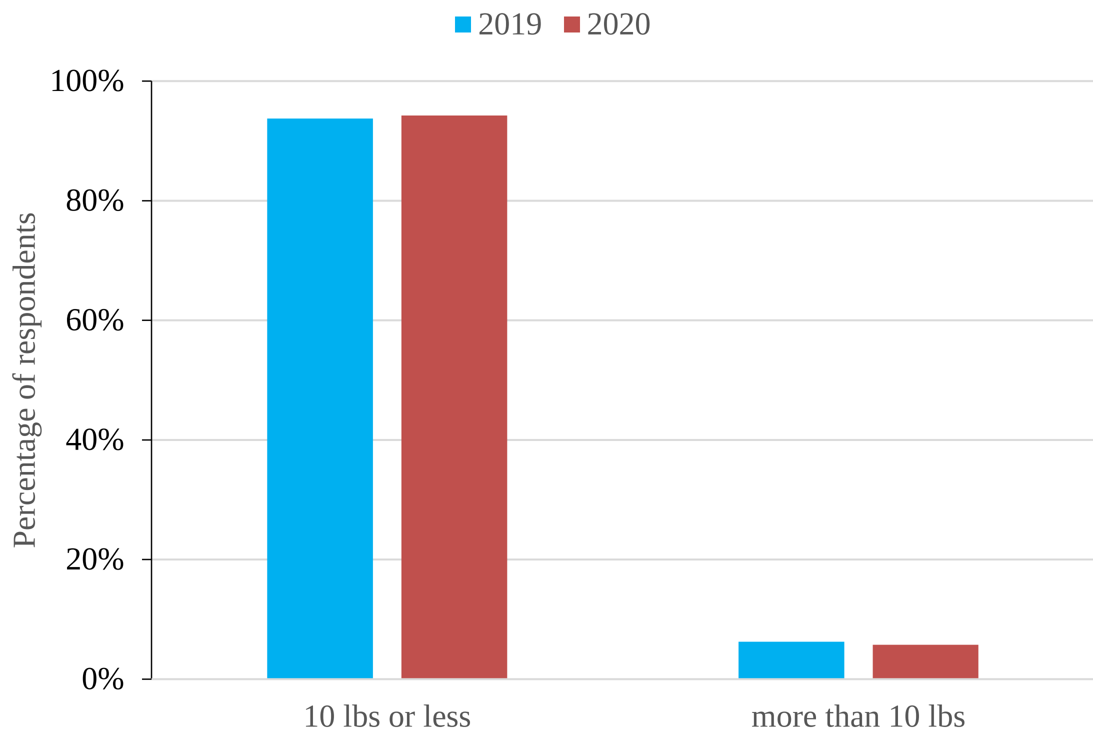

Figure 9. Quantities of seafood products purchased per shopping trip for home preparation reported in 2019 and 2020.

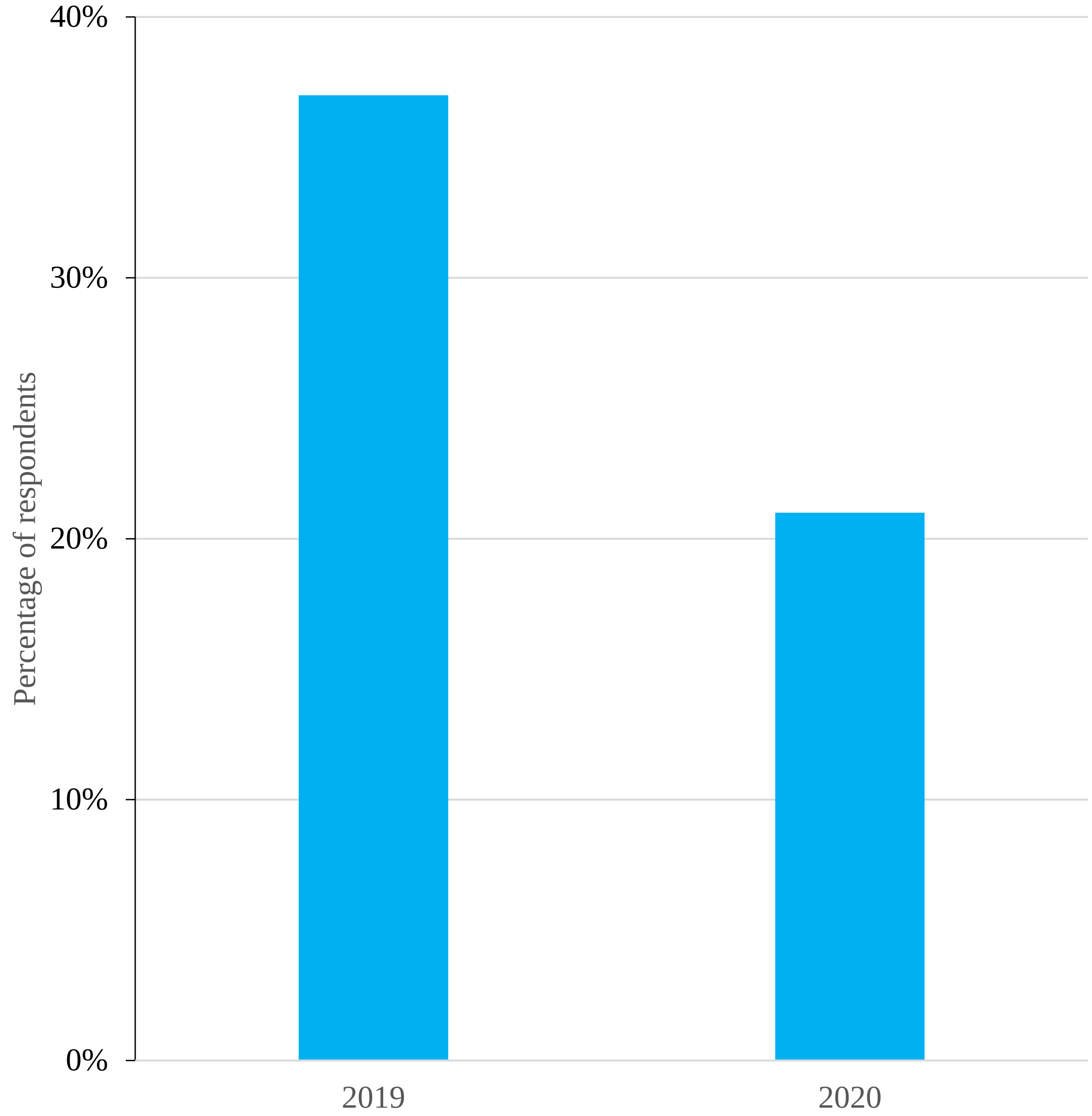

Figure 10. Percentage of respondents who consumed more seafood during a particular season in 2019, prior to the pandemic, and 2020, during the pandemic.

Table 2. Ranked importance of options to receive advertising information about seafood, according to survey responses in 2020 (* indicates greatest percentage).

	1 (not important at all)	2 (slightly important)	3 (moderately important)	4 (very important)	5 (extremely important)
Mailed flyer	50%*	13%	19%	10%	9%
E-mail	46%*	19%	14%	13%	8%
Text message	51%*	15%	18%	10%	6%
Facebook posting	56%*	16%	11%	12%	4%
Twitter posting	74%*	6%	10%	4%	7%
In-store cards, table tops	33%*	18%	21%	18%	10%
In-store notifications, text	44%*	17%	14%	16%	9%
QR code	56%*	13%	12%	12%	6%
Word of mouth	26%	11%	34%*	16%	12%
Seafood counter clerk or waitstaff	16%	18%	30%*	23%	12%
Other	68%*	1%	12%	9%	10%

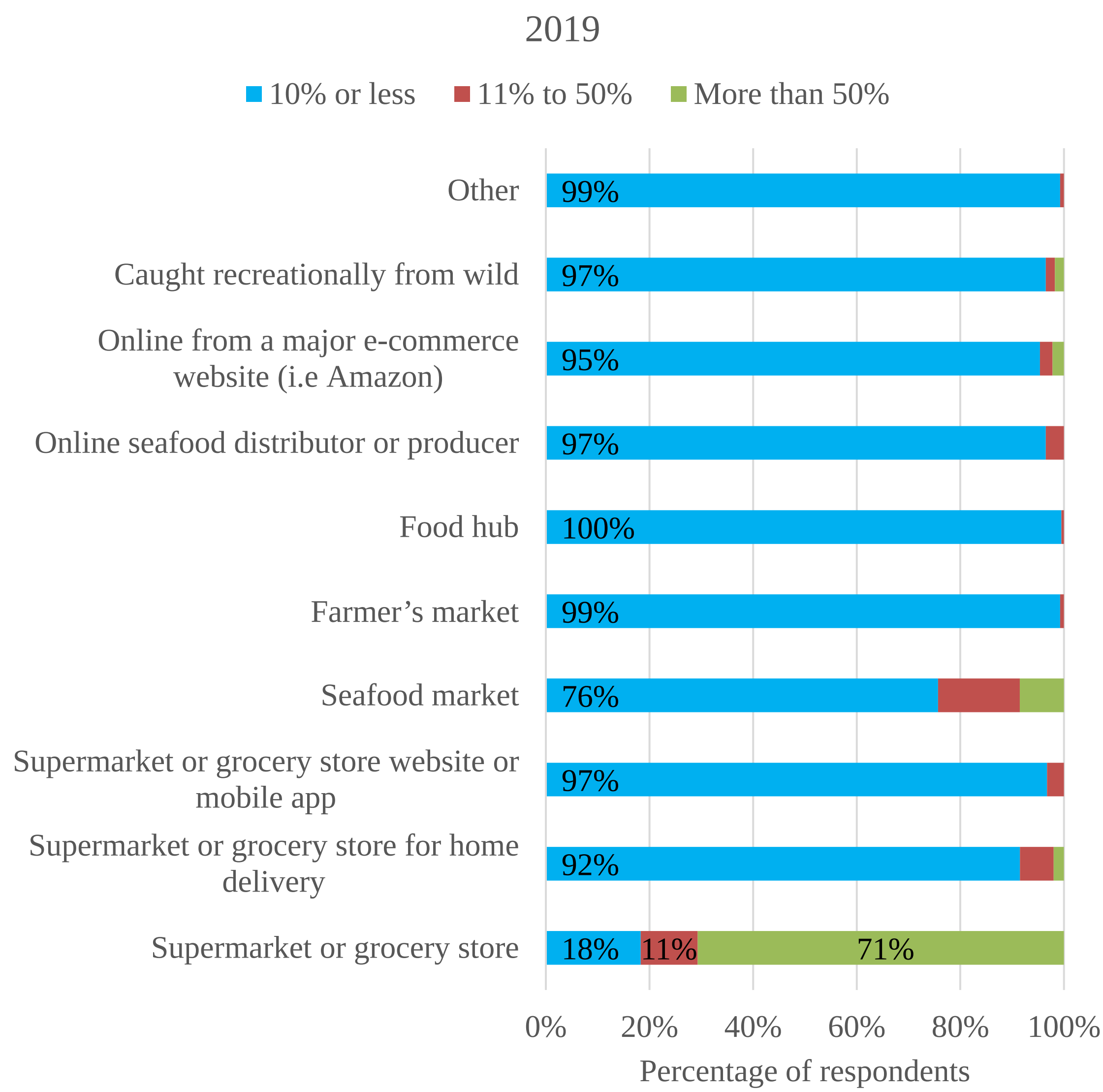

Figure 11. Percentage of seafood products purchased at varying establishments in 2019.

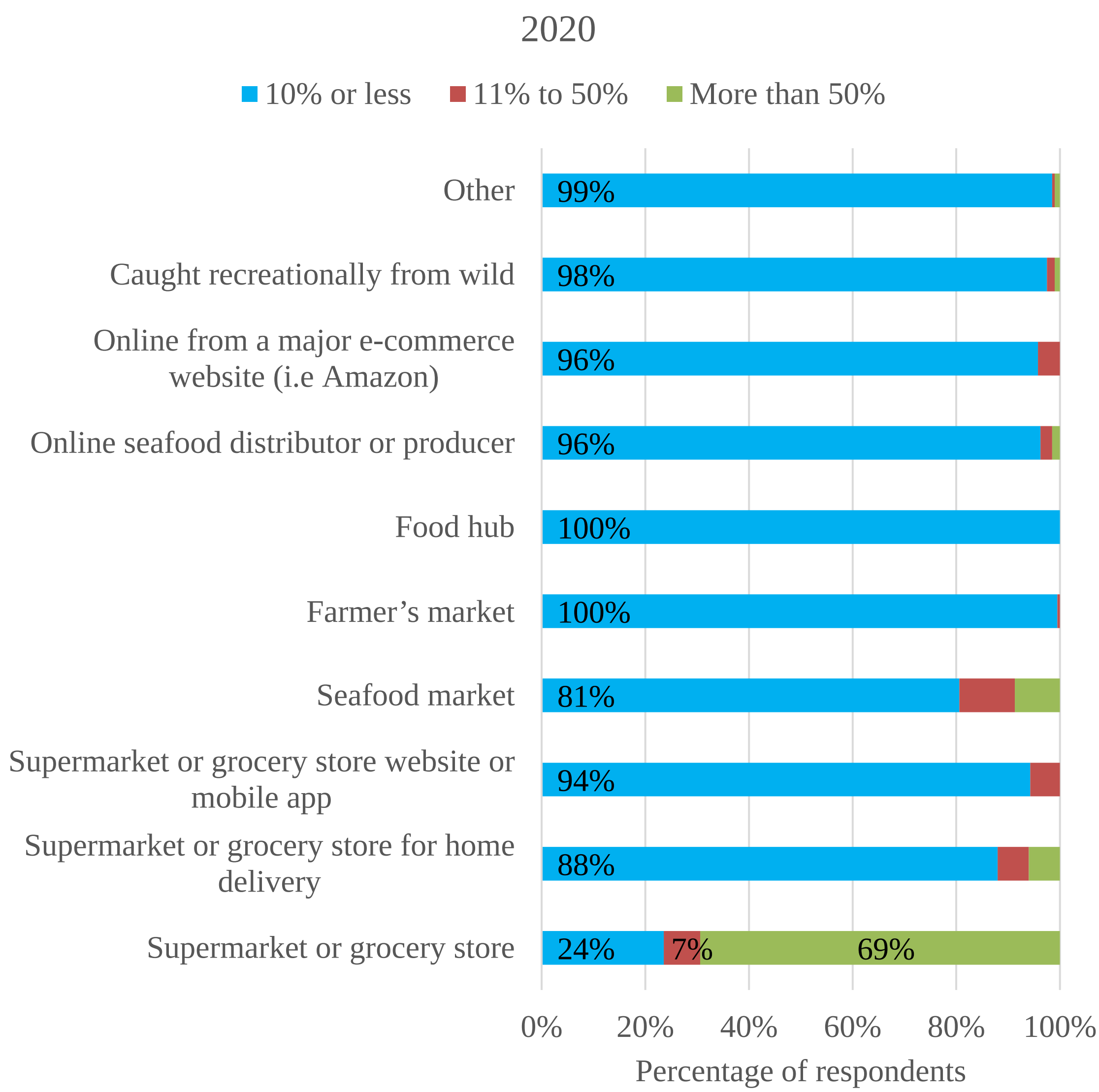

Figure 12. Percentage of seafood products purchased at varying establishments in 2020.