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Changes in consumer preferences for seafood products due to the COVID-19 pandemic: Summary of Richmond, 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 Richmond area of Virginia. Survey respondents were asked about seafood purchases prior to (2019) and during (2020) the COVID-19 pandemic.

There were 114 usable responses from participants living within the Richmond area of Virginia. Respondent location was self-reported via zip code. The greatest percentage of respondents (31) were high school graduates (Figure 1). This was followed by 24% who had completed an advanced college degree (graduate degree), 20% who completed a 4-year college degree, 18% who completed some college, and 7% who completed 2-year Associate/Trade/Technical/Vocational training. The majority of respondents (98%) self-reported as “White”, with the remaining respondents (2%) who self-reported as “Hispanic”. Male and female genders accounted for 40% of respondents each, with 19% of respondents self-reporting as Other. The majority of respondents (52%) reported being 46 to 55 years old. This was followed by 32% who reported being 36 to 45 years old, 11% being 56 to 65 years old, 4% being 66 years old or older, and 2% being 35 years old or younger. Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of respondents by income prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic (2019), the greatest percentage of respondents (29%) had household incomes of $200,000 and above, followed by 23% who reported $100,000 to $149,999, and 19% who reported $50,000 to $99,999. During the pandemic (2020) the greatest percentage of respondents (22%) had household incomes of $150,000 to $199,999, followed by 21% who reported $50,000 to $99,999, 18% who reported $100,000 to $149,999, and 17% who reported $200,000 and above.

When asked about frequency of seafood consumption during the pandemic (2020), the largest percentages of respondents (52%) 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 9% who indicated they ate seafood more frequently in 2020.

Between 2019 and 2020, consumers reported increased consumption of seafood products prepared at home and delivered to home as a prepared meal (Table 1). Conversely, consumers reported decreased consumption of seafood products as takeout from restaurants and 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 fried finfish products, fried mollusk products, fried crustacean products, and grilled seaweed products when purchasing as takeout from a restaurant or delivered to home as a prepared meal in 2019 (Figure 4). Fried finfish products were also preferred in 2020, however respondents indicated they preferred raw mollusk products, raw crustacean products, and raw seaweed products when purchasing as takeout or delivery in 2020 (Figure 5). When asked about preferences regarding seafood purchased at a restaurant, respondents in 2019 indicated they preferred grilled finfish products, fried mollusk products, grilled crustacean products, and raw seaweed products (Figure 6). Preferences for finfish products and seaweed products remained the same in 2020, however respondents indicated they equally preferred fried or raw mollusk products, and fried 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 (71%) and 2020 (69%) 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 (81%) and 2020 (80%) indicated they purchased 10 pounds or less of seafood products per shopping trip.

In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of respondents (59%) indicated they ate more seafood during a particular season of the year (Figure 10). In 2020, during the pandemic, 43% indicated they ate more seafood during a particular season, indicating a shift away from seasonal consumption with the majority of respondents in 2020 (57%) not eating more seafood during a particular season of the year.

Regarding advertisement methods, in-store cards/tabletops, word of mouth, and seafood counter clerk or waitstaff were found to be the most important methods of advertisement, as the greatest percentages of participants indicated these to be very important methods (Table 2). Text message was found to be moderately important, as indicated by the greatest percentage of respondents (28%). Greater percentages of respondents found all other methods (mailed flyer, E-mail, 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). Sixty-four percent of respondents in 2019 and 51% in 2020 indicated they purchased more than 50% of seafood products for home preparation at supermarkets or grocery stores. This was followed by 25% in 2019 and 33% 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 16% 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).

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Appendix

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

Summary of Richmond, VA results

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Jonathan van Senten, Virginia Tech

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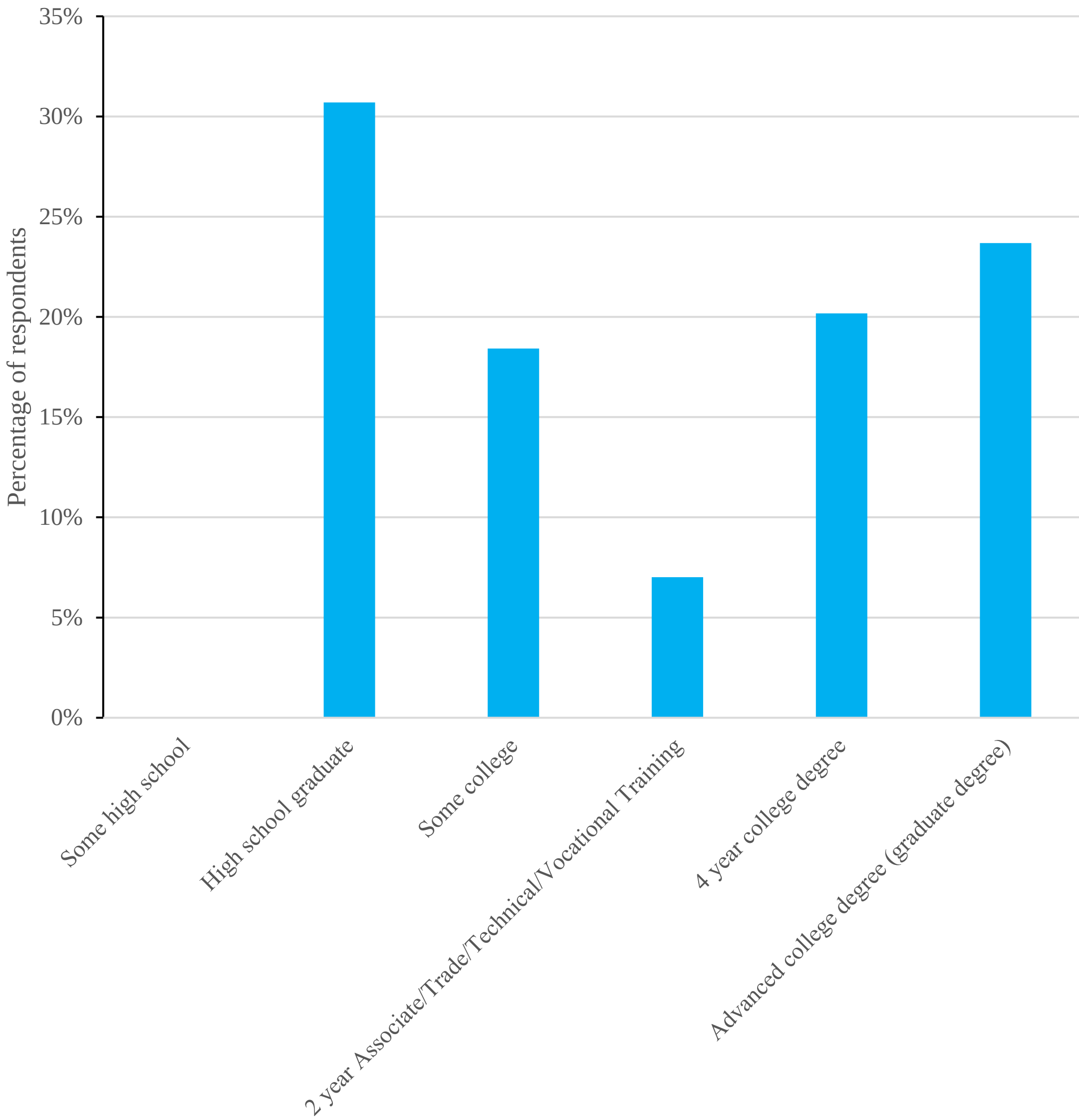

Figure 1. Level of education completed by survey respondents.

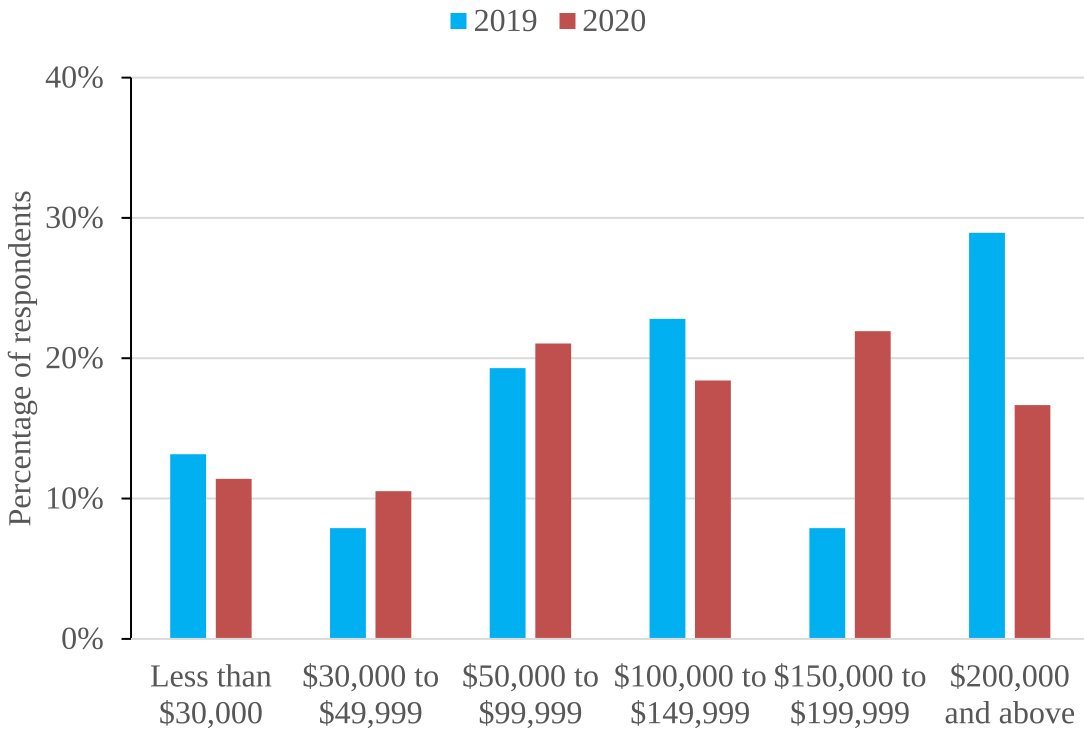

Figure 2. Household income of survey respondents in 2019 and 2020.

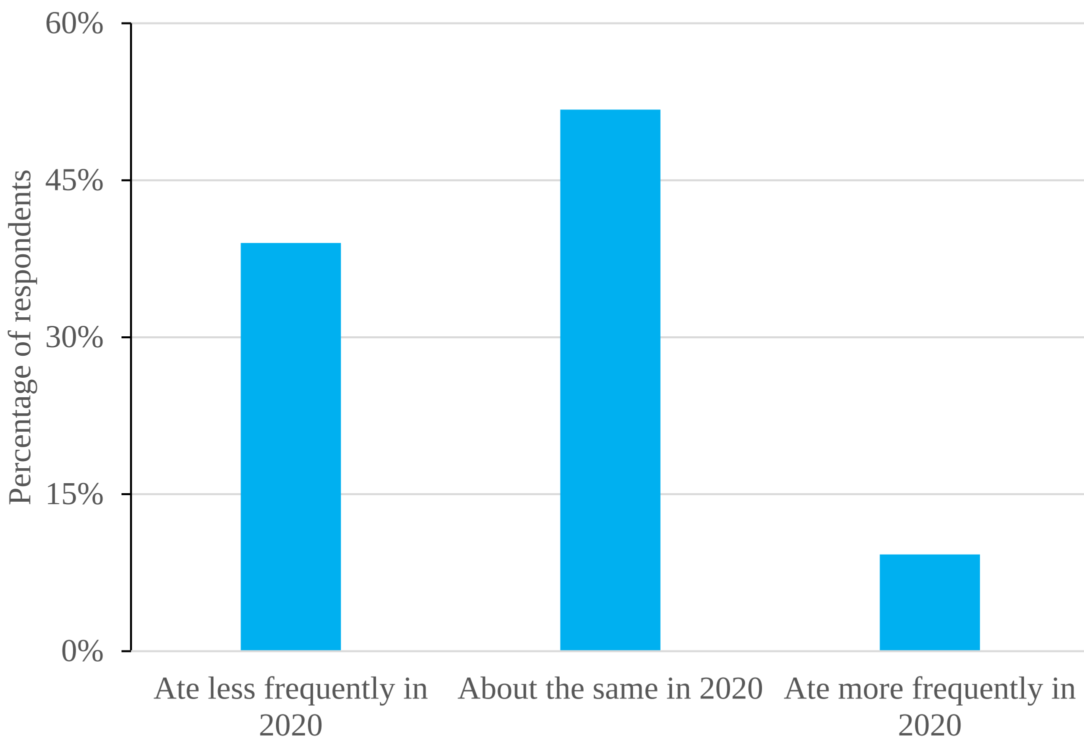

Figure 3. Frequency of seafood consumption of seafood products in 2020, with respect to seafood consumption in 2019.

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

Methods of consumption	**2019**	**2020**
Prepared at home	33%	38%
Takeout from a restaurant	22%	17%
Delivered to home as a prepared meal	5%	11%
At a restaurant	22%	9%
Other	1%	0%
Did not consume	17%	24%

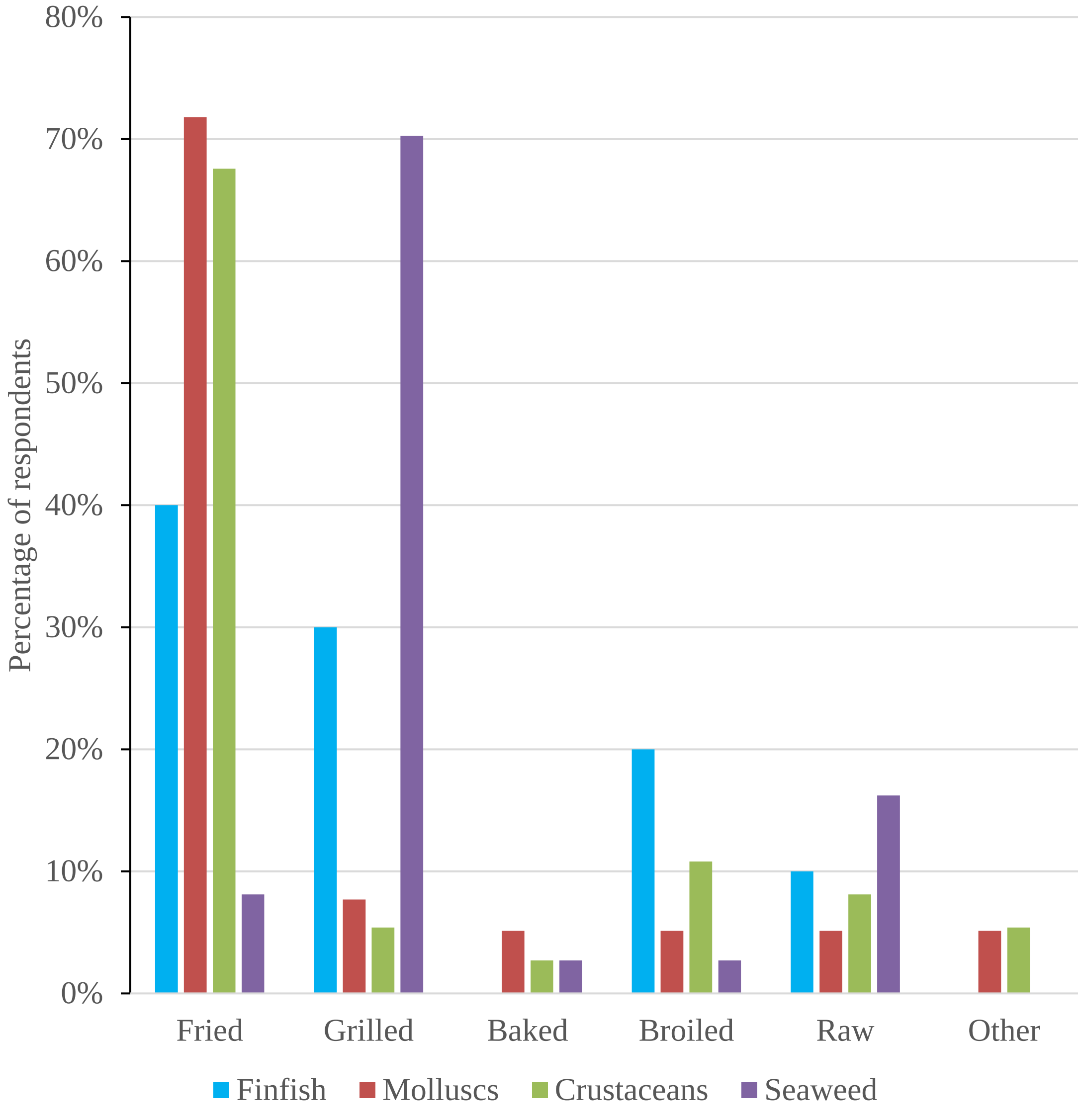

Figure 4. Preferred method of preparation of seafood products purchased as takeout from a restaurant or delivered to home as a prepared meal reported in 2019.

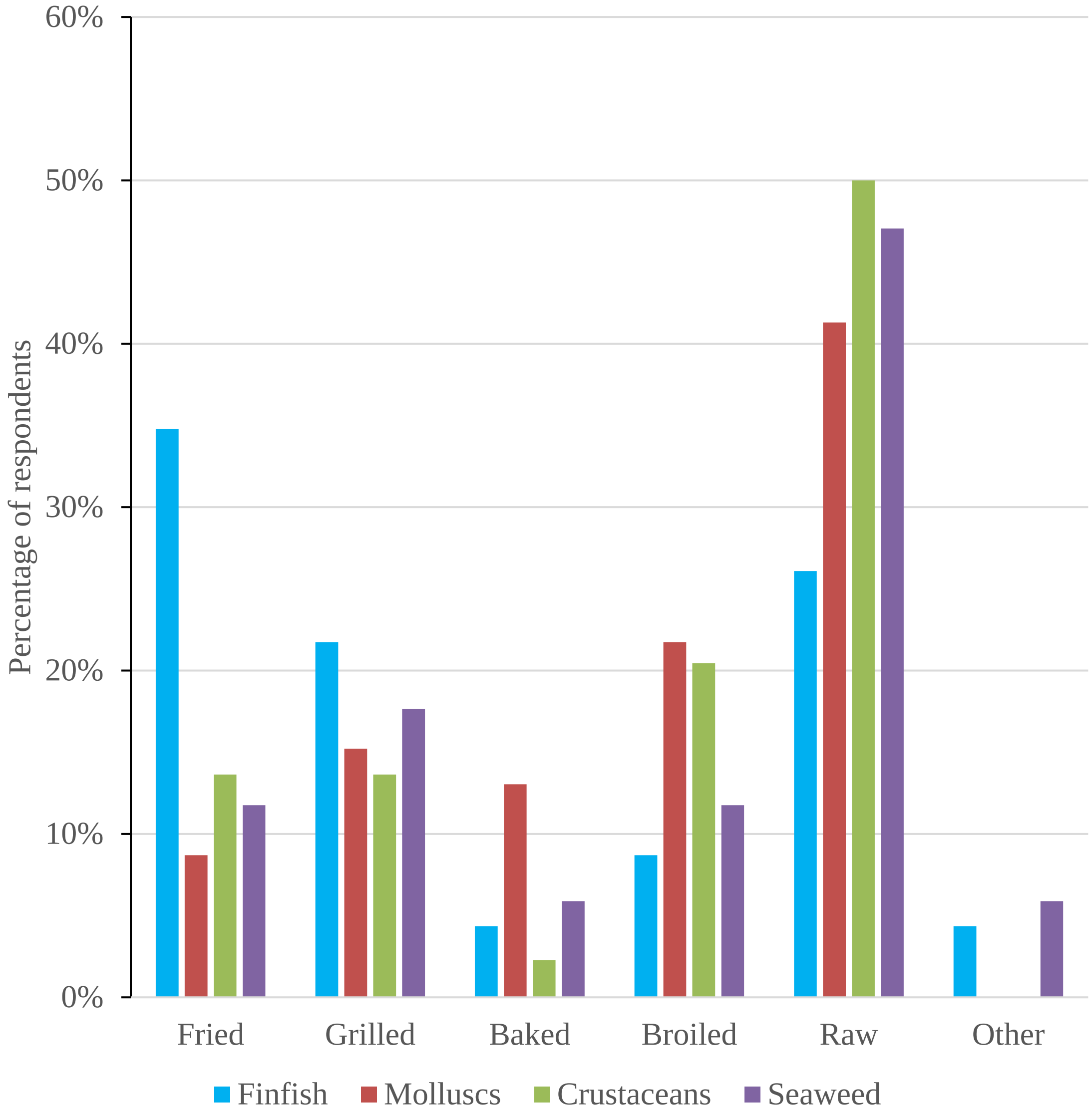

Figure 5. Preferred method of preparation of seafood products purchased as takeout from a restaurant or delivered to home as a prepared meal reported in 2020.

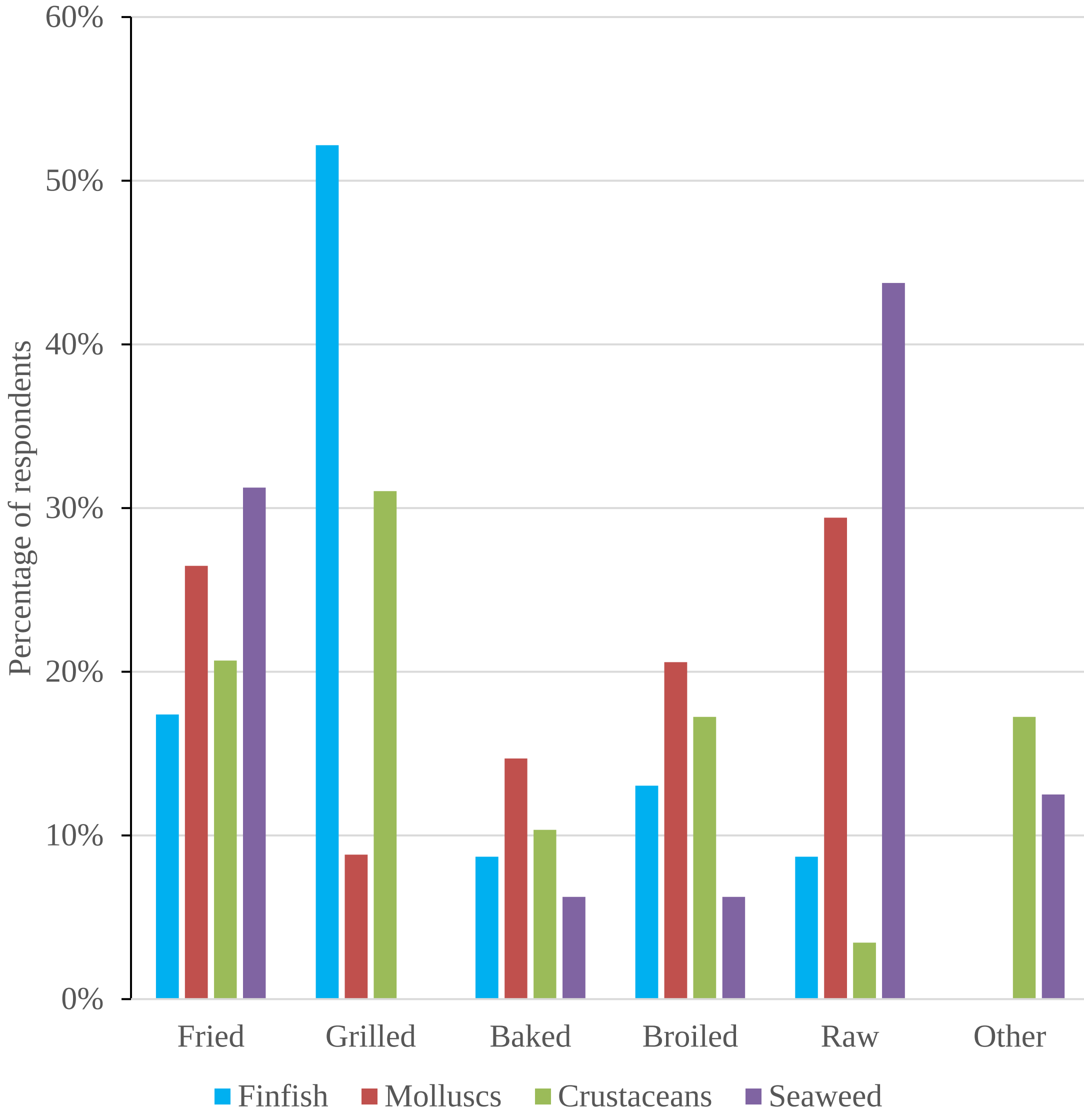

Figure 6. Preferred method of preparation of seafood products purchased at a restaurant reported in 2019.

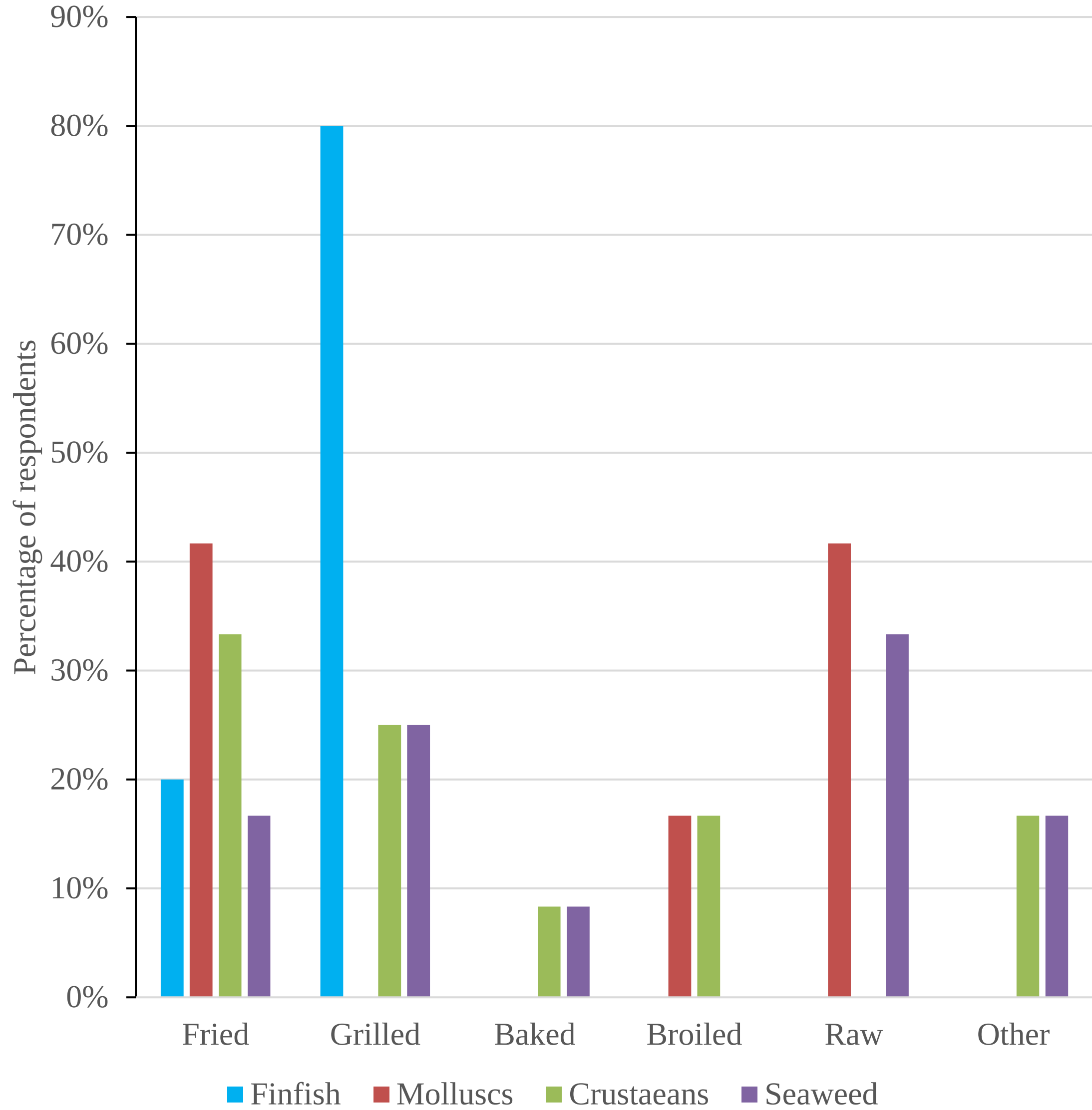

Figure 7. Preferred method of preparation of seafood products purchased at a restaurant reported in 2020.

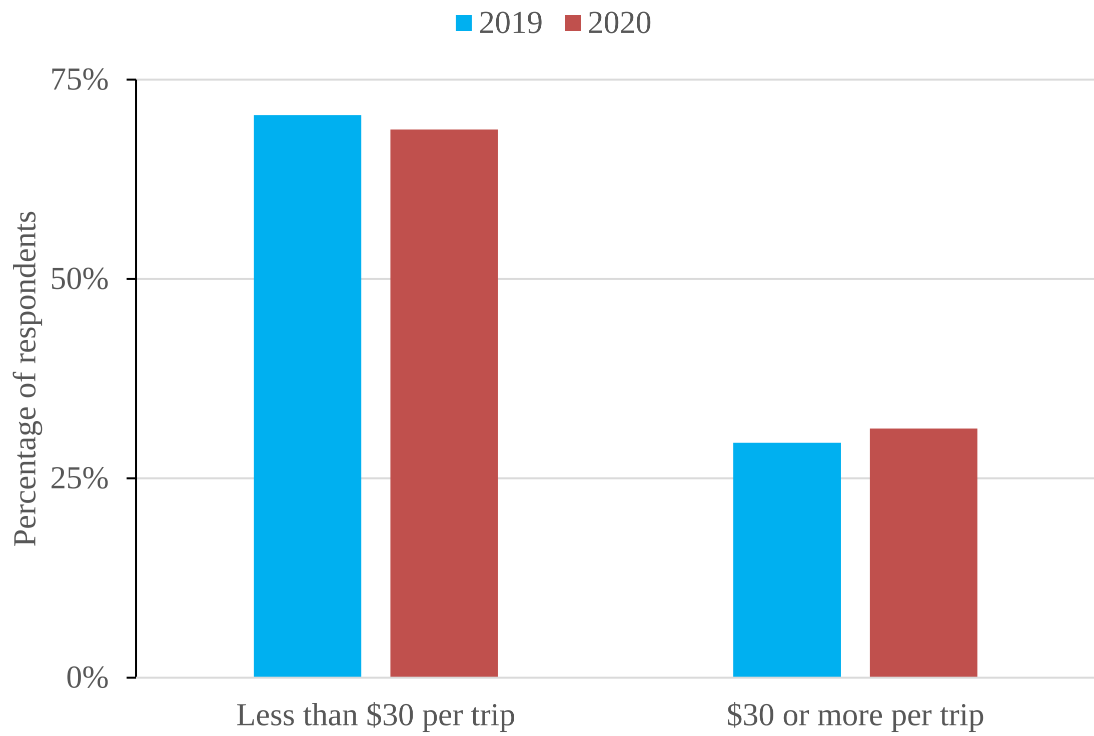

Figure 8. Amounts spent per shopping trip on seafood products for home preparation reported in 2019 and 2020.

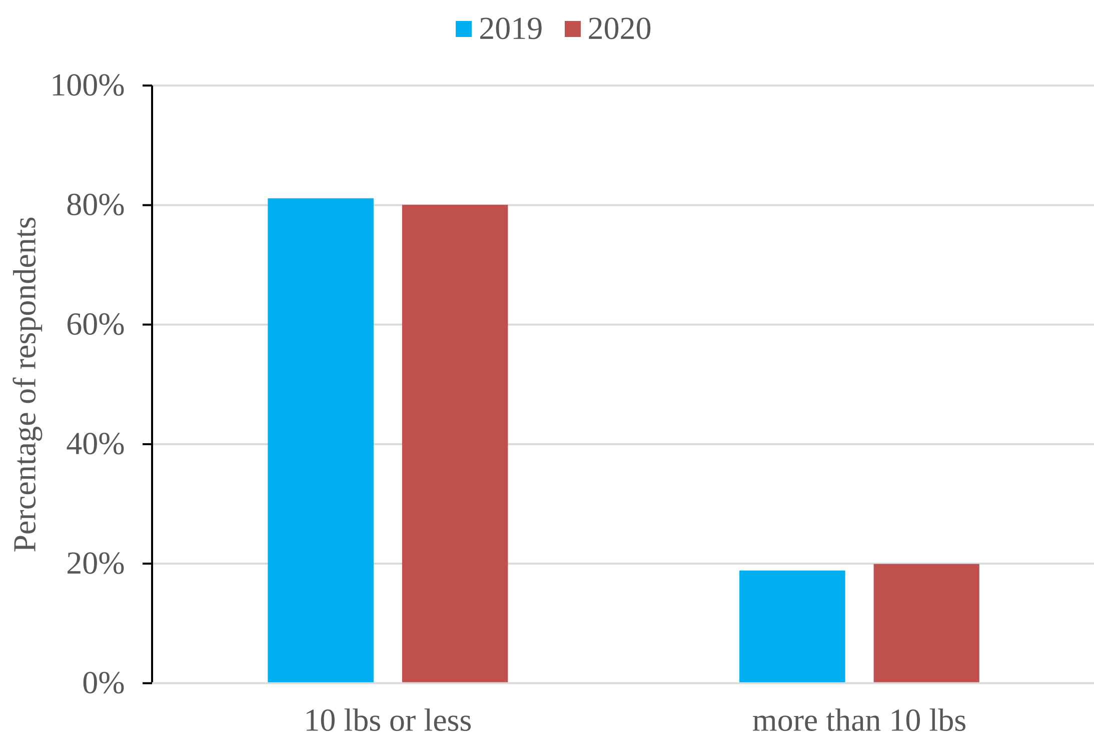

Figure 9. Quantities of seafood products purchased per shopping trip for home preparation reported in 2019 and 2020.

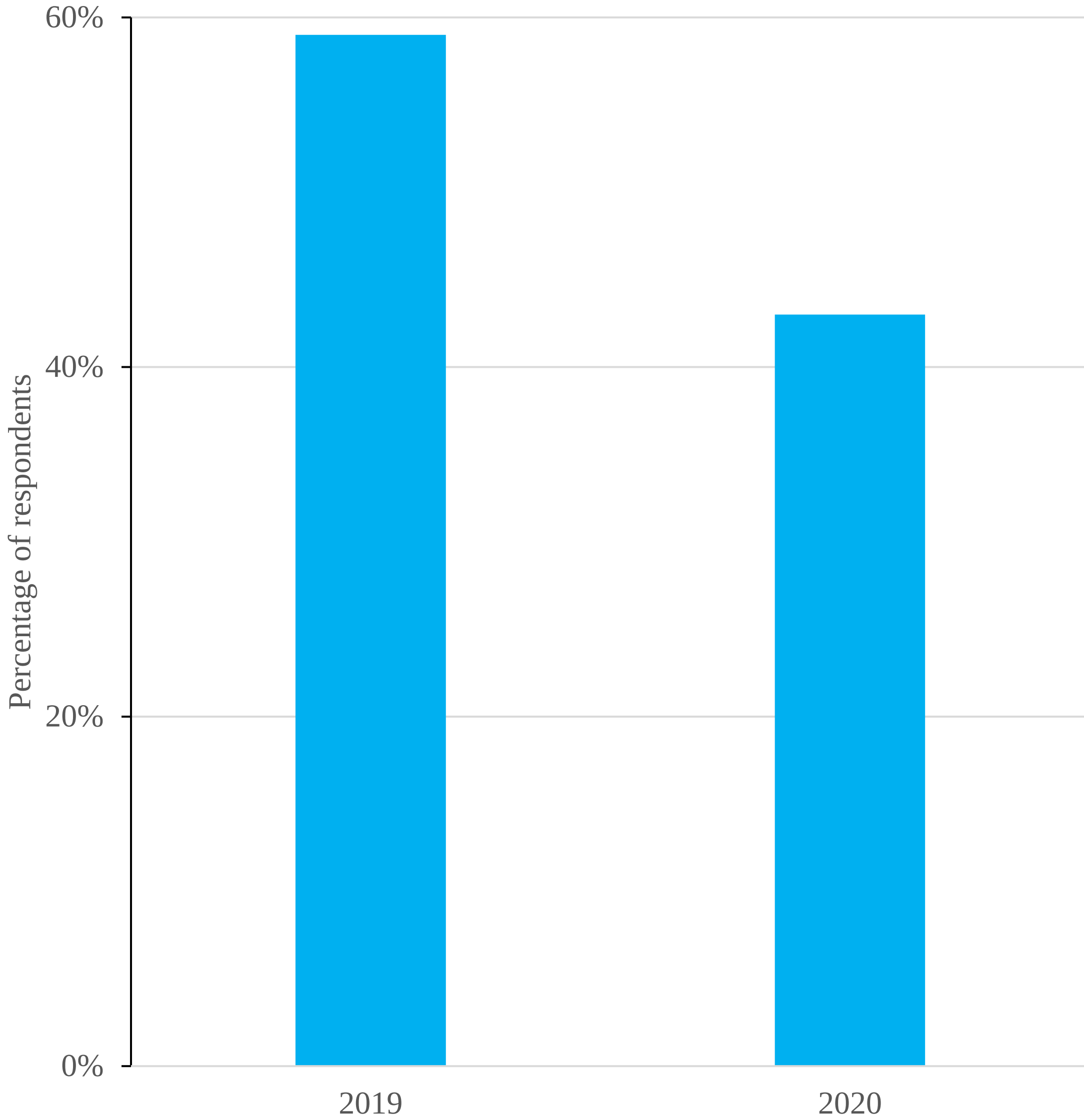

Figure 10. Percentage of respondents who consumed more seafood during a particular season in 2019, prior to the pandemic, and 2020, during the pandemic.

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	32%*	11%	18%	24%	14%
E-mail	28%*	16%	27%	13%	16%
Text message	28%	11%	28%*	11%	12%
Facebook posting	40%*	11%	14%	24%	11%
Twitter posting	46%*	12%	10%	20%	11%
In-store cards, table tops	20%	13%	20%	32%*	14%
In-store notifications, text	32%*	12%	18%	25%	13%
QR code	38%*	12%	11%	26%	12%
Word of mouth	12%	10%	18%	40%*	19%
Seafood counter clerk or waitstaff	10%	7%	25%	42%*	16%
Other	49%*	4%	24%	9%	14%

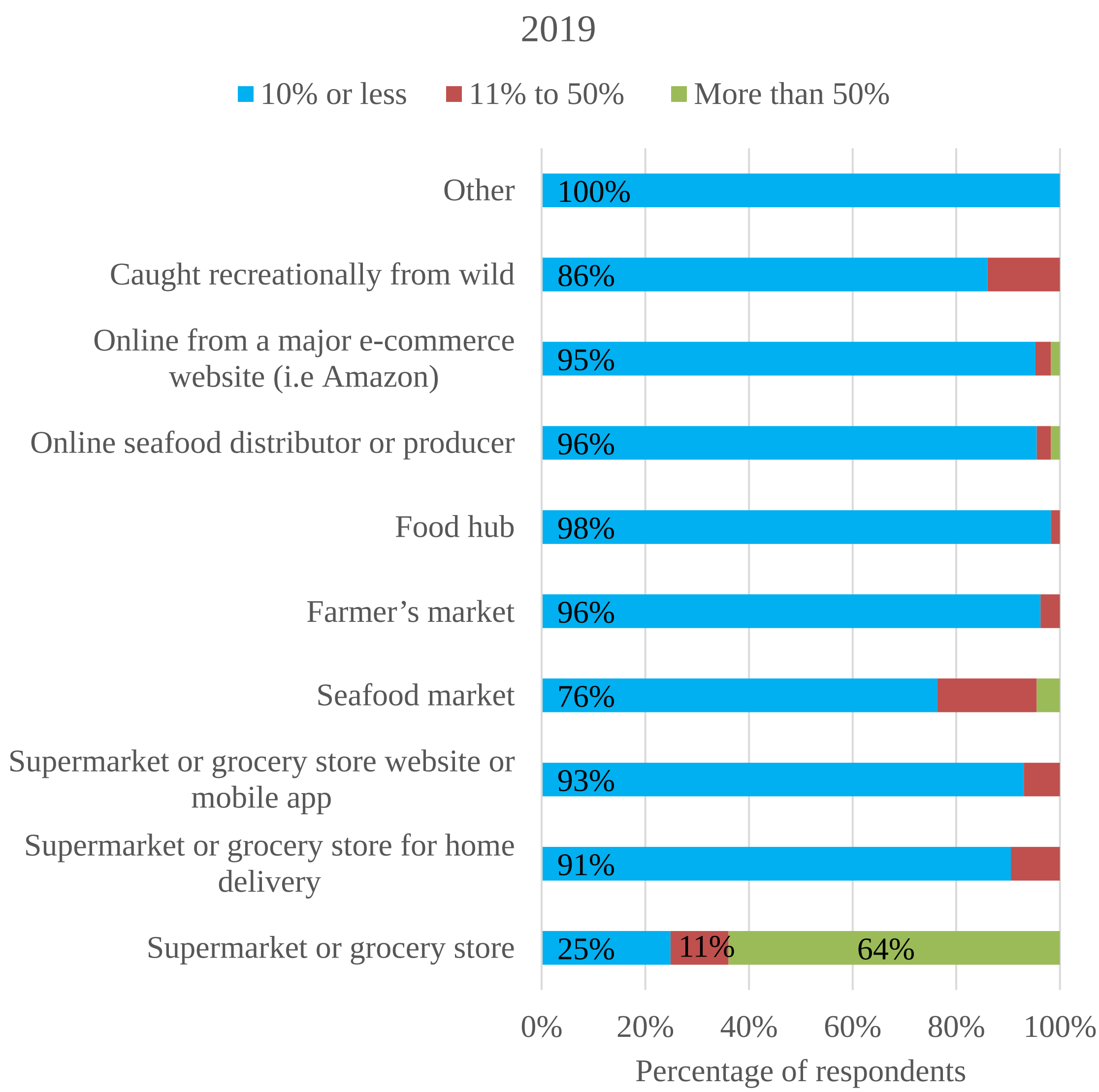

Figure 11. Percentage of seafood products purchased at varying establishments in 2019.

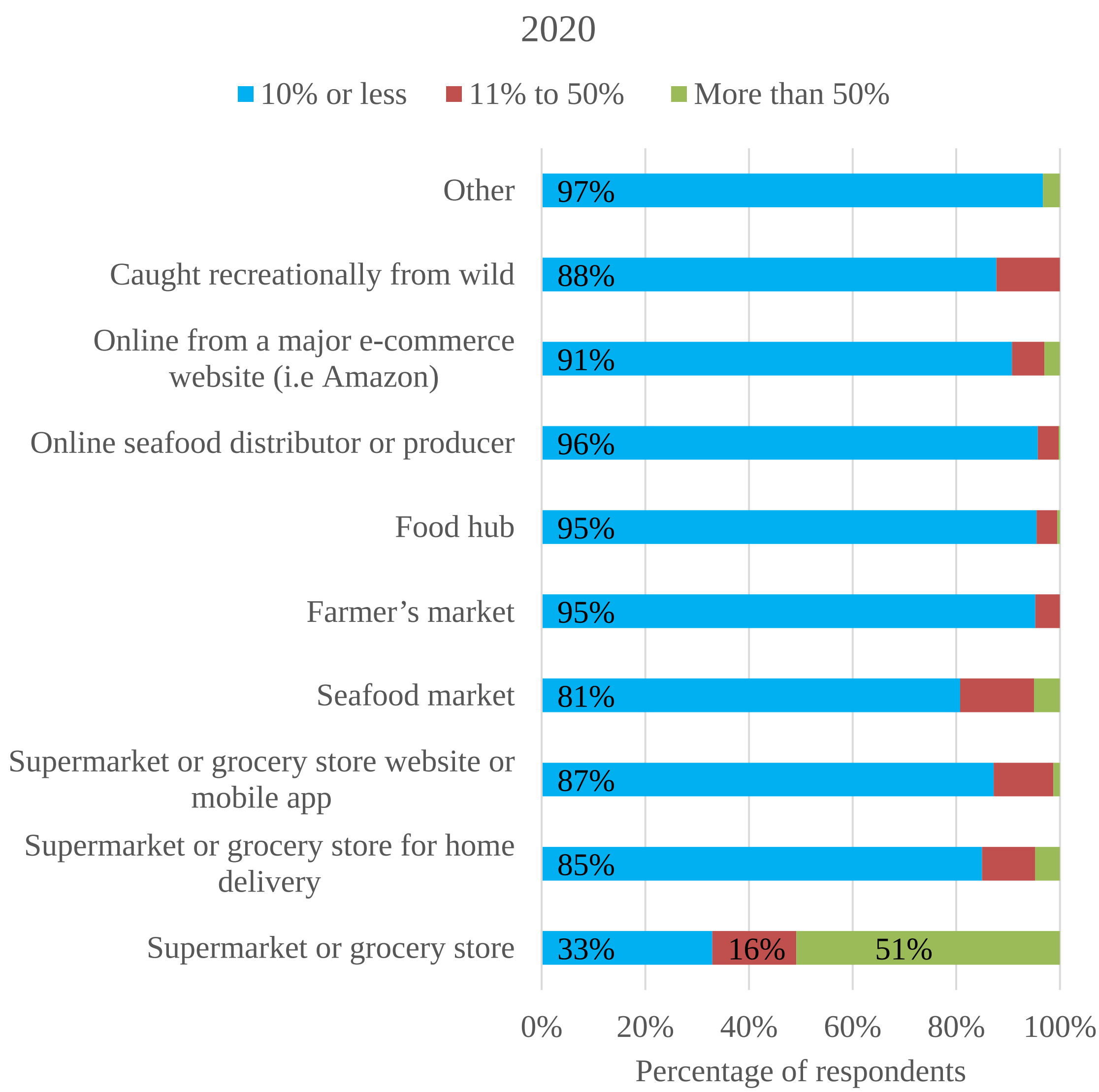

Figure 12. Percentage of seafood products purchased at varying establishments in 2020.