

Sushi chef charged with serving illegal whale

By RAQUEL MARIA DILLON
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

Federal prosecutors filed charges Wednesday against a sushi chef and a Santa Monica restaurant on allegations that they served illegal and endangered whale meat.

Typhoon Restaurant Inc., which owns The Hump restaurant, and sushi chef Kiyoshiro Yamamoto, 45, were charged with illegally selling an endangered species product, a misdemeanor.

According to a search warrant, marine mammal activists were served whale during three separate visits to the restaurant. Federal labs confirmed the meat came from a Sei whale, an endangered species protected by international treaties, documents said.

Agents also seized some suspected whale meat during a search of the restaurant Friday but are awaiting test results to confirm it was Sei whale, U.S. attorney spokesman Thom Mrozak said.

In October, two activists posing as customers went to The Hump and ordered "omakase," which means they let the chef choose the choicest fresh fish. They also requested whale and pocketed a sample.

The young women worked with Louie Psihoyos, director of the Oscar-winning documentary "The Cove," to record the meal with a hidden camera and microphone.

"These are endangered animals being cut up for dinner," Psihoyos said. "It's an abuse of science."

Psihoyos took their findings to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which started an investigation.

Activists claim the whale meat came from Japan's scientific whaling program and was illegally exported, but the U.S. attorney's office is still investigating the source of the meat.

Japan kills hundreds of whales in Antarctic waters each year under its research whaling program, which has triggered violent protests by conservationists and caused strong objections by diplomats in recent years.

An attorney for Typhoon, Gary Lincenberg, said the restaurant accepts responsibility for serving whale and will agree to pay a fine. If convicted, the company could be fined up to \$200,000.

Court records say agents interviewed Yamamoto, a Culver City resident and a chef at The Hump for the past seven years, and he admitted serving whale to two young women.

Yamamoto's attorney, Mark Byrne, declined to comment on the charges, saying he hadn't had time to review them. If convicted, Yamamoto could face a year in prison and a fine of up to \$100,000.

During the October restaurant visit, animal rights activist Crystal Galbraith, 27, and a friend who spoke fluent Japanese racked up a bill of \$600, feasting on increasingly exotic dishes to gain the confidence of the waiters and chef.

"It was heartbreaking to eat an endangered animal, but I knew that I was doing it to save" the whales, said Galbraith, a vegan. "We were there eating for four hours. I felt so full and sick."

The waitress brought out a dish of whale sushi, identifying the whale in English and Japanese, court documents said. The dish was listed as whale on the check and cost \$85.

The team sent samples to Scott Baker, a professor and cetacean specialist at Oregon State University's Marine Mammal Institute, for genetic testing. The results showed the meat was from a Sei whale, court records said.

The Sei whale is a baleen whale found throughout the world's oceans, and known for its graceful and quick swimming and its long, low vocalizations, Baker said. Fully grown, the mammal is longer than a bus.

Eating Sei whale meat is common in Japan, Korea and Norway and among native peoples in Alaska and Canada, but it is illegal to export the meat because of the Sei whale's endangered status.

In late February, when Psihoyos and the rest of his team were in Los Angeles for the Academy Awards, Galbraith and another friend returned to The Hump twice more.

This time, agents from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration sat at the bar and watched Yamamoto at work, court records said. During the third visit, another agent watched the chef go to his car and retrieve a package wrapped in clear plastic.

Underwood flying high as "Play On Tour" starts

By CHRIS TALBOTT
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After selling more than a million tickets to her last concert tour, Carrie Underwood is aiming higher this time.

Really high. She plans to fly over the audience, for starters.

"We're kind of going for broke on this one just because I feel like it's time," Underwood said in an interview this week. "At this point, the only thing it's about is putting on a great show and we're going out with that in mind. I definitely think we have delivered."

Underwood's "Play On Tour" opens Thursday in Reading, Pa., with more than 50 dates in the United States and Canada planned through June.

The former "American Idol" winner, who turned 27 on Wednesday, wanted to follow the success of her third platinum-selling album, "Play On," with something dynamite for her fans. She's set a record with 11 straight No. 1 country singles and now feels she has a set list meaty enough to support something spectacular.

"As far as things getting bigger, it's just that — the stage is bigger, there are more lights, there's more tricks up our sleeve," Underwood said. "We have a lot of moving parts on the stage. I kind of get to fly over the audience. It's really cool. It's just a lot of stuff. My band's great, wardrobe's great. It's just more. It's all of the bells and whistles and sprinkles on the cupcake."

Underwood made 137 stops on her 2008 tour to support "Carnival Ride." More than 1.2 million fans attended, putting her in elite company.

Her "Play On" proves her elite status as well. The album opened at No. 1 and has so far sold more than 1.3 million copies, bringing her to more than 11 million albums sold since 2005.

Those are all heady numbers, but as she's grown more successful Underwood says she's learned to let go of the statistics.

"I remember in the beginning it was like, 'How many did I sell this week? How many people are going to be here?'" Underwood said. "It was all about numbers and to be honest now I don't even look at anything because I'm happy. When I see numbers it either makes me happy or brings me down. I'd rather just be happy and leave it at that."

Underwood is taking a similar Zen-like approach with planning her wedding to Mike Fisher of the NHL's Ottawa Senators. Trying to plan a tour and wedding at the same time could be overwhelming, but Underwood's not stressing. She's more than happy to step aside when it comes to minutiae.

"Have you ever been to a wedding where you thought how awful the tablecloths were? Probably not," Underwood said. "You probably don't even remember the tablecloths."

Why get stressed out about little things like that? But I do have a planner and she knows that she's going to be making a lot of decisions on her own. If you give me choice A, B or C, I can pick one, but I don't care."

The couple got engaged shortly before Christmas and have set a date that they hope to keep private. Underwood says they haven't even told family and friends in an effort to keep unwelcome cameras away.

"Not to say even anybody would care to show up, but just in case," Underwood said. "Like anybody you deserve to get married and have a great day as people. I'm not going to be Carrie Underwood the entertainer walking down the aisle. I'm just Carrie and I'm going to marry Mike. I feel like that's kind of a right everybody deserves to have."

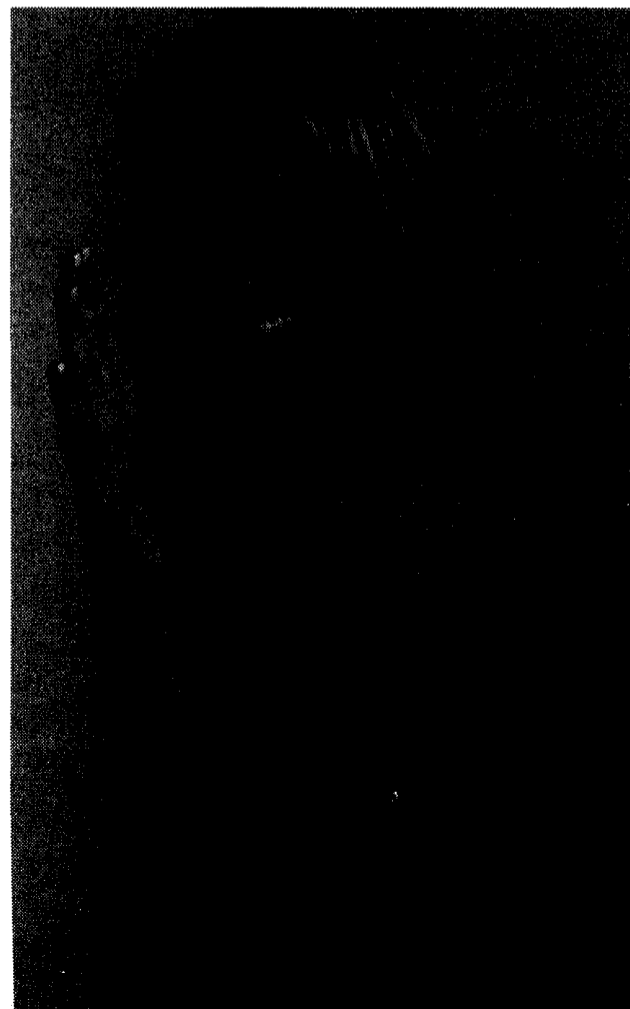


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