

IKAN BILIS: SMALL FISH WITH BIG DEMAND IN MALAYSIA

By Fatima Ferdouse

Anchovy (Stolephorus sp), locally known as ikan bilis, is one of the most popular small pelagic sea fish species in Malaysia. Annual landings of anchovy in the country ranged between 15 000 to 24 000 tonnes during 2020-2022. Traditionally, they are steamed/boiled in seawater (with added salt) onboard, and then dried and marketed. Over the last 10-15 years, the price for salted dried anchovies has increased three times from USD 10/per kg to USD 25/kg, along with rising demand in the catering and retail trade. Price-wise, dried anchovy, once considered a “cheap” food, is now comparable to imported fresh salmon in Malaysia’s retail trade. Products in the market range from fresh anchovy to ready-to-cook and ready- to-eat products.



Fresh/chilled ikan bilis in a supermarket

Annual landings of Asian anchovy (*Stolephorus* and *Engraulis* sp) in Malaysia, locally known as *ikan bilis*, were recorded at around 15 000 to 24 000 tonnes during 2020-2022. The main catch areas in Peninsular Malaysia are around Langkawi Island, Pangkor Island, the coastal areas of the States of Kelantan, Terengganu and Sabah, and Labuan in East Malaysia.

Traditionally, almost entire catches of anchovy in Malaysia were processed into salted-dried products with a small quantity made into fish pastes and fish sauce for local consumers. However, with the development of modern retail outlets, fresh/chilled anchovy are seen occasionally these days in urban retail outlets and supermarkets. Expatriates and workers from South Asia are the main home buyers of fresh *ikan bilis*, with the share of fresh anchovy in total domestic sales being trivial at 2-3%.

In recent years, increased demand for dried anchovy and their subsequently high prices, has channelled more fresh fish to the drying yards.

Processing at cottage industry level

At the cottage industry level, the lion’s share of the anchovy landings in Malaysia is processed on-land with a smaller percentage processed on-board.

Fresh anchovy is steamed or boiled in seawater with added salt, a traditional method followed both on-board as well as during on-shore processing, followed by sun-drying on platforms or on some sort of ground covering. The dried head-on anchovy is often reprocessed into head-off, gutted, backbone-out and split forms; and bulk-packed on demand from the wholesale, catering and retail trade. Lately, semi-automated tunnel drying facilities and systems are being used to make dried head-on anchovy.



Dried anchovy (*ikan bilis*): head-on (top); gutted, headless and split (bottom)

The rise of *ikan bilis*

Overall demand for dried anchovy has increased significantly in Malaysia during the last two decades and remains strong both in the retail and the hotel, restaurant and catering (HORECA) trade. One of the common ways of utilising dried anchovy is as a condiment in a very popular rice dish called *nasi lemak* (rice cooked in coconut milk), which can be considered the national breakfast of Malaysia. The anchovy is served crispy fried and/or in a chilli gravy (*sambal*).



Credit: Fatima Ferdouse

Packs of fragrant rice (*nasi lemak*) cooked in coconut milk; this *nasi lemak* pack comes with anchovy (*ikan bilis*) cooked in a chilli gravy. Other packs may contain anchovy in sambal and/or crispy fried

Lately, more coffee shops and eateries (including an increasing number of upscale outlets), are making *nasi lemak* available throughout their business hours, causing demand for anchovy products to rise, against the limited sea catches. This has resulted in a three-fold rise in the prices of dried anchovy during the last 10 to 15 years. Dried *ikan bilis* is also widely utilised in variations of fried rice, noodles, and *sambals* by both home cooks as well as chefs in hotel restaurants.



Demand for *ikan bilis* products has also increased in the retail trade (supermarkets, sundry shops, etc.), from seasoning powders and stock cubes, to crispy-fried and other ready-to-eat products, including snack buns.

Notably, per capita consumption of fish and seafood in Malaysia (including dried *ikan bilis*) is around 50-55 kg, which is much higher than the global average.

No longer a “poor man’s food”

The stable and strong demand for dried *ikan bilis* in Malaysia’s catering and restaurant trade has caused significant price hikes, particularly as sea catches of the species have been on the decline.

Over the last 10-15 years, the price for salted dried anchovy has increased three-fold from USD 10 per kg to USD 25/kg. In fact, price-wise, dried anchovy is now comparable to imported fresh salmon in Malaysia’s retail trade, which would be unthinkable in the 1980s.

In the wholesale trade, the price of dried head-on anchovy ranges from USD 6.5-9.00 /kg depending on their sizes and grades. In the retail trade, prices range from USD 10.00 to USD 26.00/kg depending on the product form and quality.

Average price ranges for dried anchovy in the wholesale and retail trade in Malaysia (USD 1= MYR 4.50)

Product type	MYR per kg	USD per kg	Users
Fresh, chilled	10.00-12.00	2.22-2.66	Vendors in food stalls, cooks in restaurants and catering. Also, home cooks.
Dried, head-on (small-medium)	38.00-70.00	8.45	
Dried, head-on (small/halus)	51.90	11.53	
Dried, head-on (big/kasar)	55.90	12.42	
Headless, gutted and split	80-00-89.00	17.77-19.77	
Japanese anchovy (<i>E. japonicus</i>)	60.00	13.33	

Once regarded as an essential and shelf-stable protein accessible by lower-income groups, *ikan bilis* has moved up to the level of trendy and fusion food in Malaysia, particularly as much-loved staple dishes like *nasi lemak* are increasingly being sold in hotels and other restaurant outlets. 🍴



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