

## **April/May 2007: Communiqué**

### **Lists v. Local: The Complexities of Sourcing Sustainable Seafood**

**The seafood industry's impact on marine ecosystems** forces many chefs to make tough decisions about the types of seafood they serve in their restaurants. With over half of all meals eaten outside the home, diners have an increasing awareness of both the nutritional profile and environmental impact of the food they order and eat in restaurants. 70% of seafood in the U.S. is eaten in restaurants, and consumer demand for seafood shows no signs of slowing. But a majority of fish stocks have reached their maximum fishery potential and some are in decline. We are swiftly approaching a point where we will have exploited our oceans.

Today, responsible seafood sourcing hinges on the question of sustainability. To continue serving high-quality seafood in restaurants in the coming years, learning about and sourcing seafood from sustainably managed fisheries and aquaculture operations is essential. But as chefs look closely at sustainable seafood issues, the picture becomes increasingly complex.

#### **Watch lists as starting points**

In response to the seafood dilemma, the conservation community has introduced many initiatives, including the development of seafood watch lists. Generally targeted to consumers, these lists are often too abbreviated to provide chefs with the information needed to make informed seafood purchasing decisions. Lists cannot always address complex issues, such as how to support local fishing communities, decrease the miles that food travels, and other issues that contribute to the idea of sustainability. Seafood watch lists can be a great tool for educating customers and staff, and for keeping up with general seafood recommendations. To make knowledgeable purchasing decisions, however, chefs need to take a broader and deeper approach, by talking with each other, as well as with conservationists, fishermen, and purveyors. And while watch lists can act as a springboard to further inquiry, an important step for chefs is to define sustainability—for the ecosystems, for the fishing communities, and for the restaurants.

#### **In the Ocean: Marine ecosystems**

All of the watch lists generated by different conservation groups are based on similar criteria. Fish rated "green" or "best choice" on these lists have healthy stocks, are soundly managed, and are caught or raised in a way that reduces bycatch and habitat destruction. The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is the only organization with a strict program to certify sustainable seafood according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's standards. There are only 22 MSC certified fisheries, perhaps due to a voluntary and expensive certification process, as well as lack of demand by American consumers.

Species diversity and the sheer size of our oceans make monitoring and managing fish stocks a tricky prospect, and sustainability issues also shift from fishery to fishery. In the case of US swordfish, mahi-mahi, and some tunas, for example, the longlines used to catch these species also catch and can kill endangered sea turtles, sharks, and seabirds.

#### **Casting a wider net**

Per capita, Americans eat 4.1 pounds of shrimp, 3.1 pounds of canned tuna, and 2.4 pounds of salmon annually. These three species have the highest consumption rates in the U.S., so responsible sourcing of the big three is paramount. But, says Sheila Bowman, Seafood Watch outreach manager at the Monterey Bay Aquarium., "it's not enough for us to all eat shrimp, salmon, and tuna to our hearts' content."

Chefs can be sure that shrimp and salmon will sell, but working with lesser known species benefits marine ecosystems and allows chefs to learn new techniques while exposing diners to new tastes. Species like bluefish, sardines, mackerel, skate, and octopus—all once overlooked by American chefs—now often show up on restaurant menus across the country. Lesser-known species also keep food cost down for both the kitchen and the customer—another step towards sustainability.

Purveyors often have a role in introducing chefs to fish they've never heard of. Wahoo, for example, is an early-maturing member of the mackerel family that can produce up to 450 million eggs during its lifetime and is thus resistant to fishing pressures; and ocean perch, a little-known but abundant species from the Gulf of Maine is available year-round. Ask your fish people.

Hand-lines and harpoons, on the other hand, only target the desired fish. Knowing what to ask for in this case, hand-lined or harpooned sword, mahi, or tuna-helps eliminate some uncertainty chefs might have when deciding what to buy.

### ***On the Pier: Fishing communities and purveyors***

Understanding the ecological impact of catch methods can help chefs make decisions, but so can learning about the social and economic impact that dwindling seafood supplies have on fishing communities. Singling out troubled species for boycotts, for example, affects humans as well as fish. "If we turn our backs on a species, we turn our backs on fishermen," says Kim Marden of Captain Marden's Seafood in Massachusetts.

"If we boycott instead of working within the quotas and guidelines," he says, "We will lose a generation of fishermen. If we don't work through the [fishery] management process, we'd lose the infrastructure for when the levels do get back up to 100%. There won't be anyone left to fish them, all the way from the fisherman, to the ice house, the fuel, the dock; we're talking about whole communities here. They will disappear. So there's more to it than 'don't use this fish.' We need to work within the quotas and management to get a stronger fishery when it comes back."

Working directly with fishermen can be more challenging than working directly with farmers, so for many chefs, a trusted purveyor is essential. For most, it isn't a matter of finding someone new to work with, says Sheila Bowman of the Monterey Bay Aquarium. A solid chef-purveyor relationship will allow the chef to educate their suppliers and ask for the types of fish they want. "We think this is possible, and extremely important," says Bowman. "If enough chefs do this, there won't be a market for anything but sustainable seafood."

A good purveyor will both educate chefs about sustainable choices that may be less well known, and will support the quality standards a chef sets forth. Jesse Cool, owner of CoolEatz Restaurant and Catering in Palo Alto, CA, works with one point person at her

## **FURTHER RESOURCES**

Chefs Collaborative's **Seafood Solutions** booklet answers many of the questions chefs encounter when trying to source sustainably. Contact the office to request a copy. Seafood Choices Alliance, a program of Seaweb, publishes **Sourcing Seafood: A Professional's Guide to Procuring Ocean-friendly Fish and Shellfish**, a comprehensive directory of suppliers and distributors along with species profiles. Visit [www.seafoodchoices.com](http://www.seafoodchoices.com) to find out more.

### **For further information, visit:**

[www.blueocean.org](http://www.blueocean.org) (Blue Ocean Institute)  
[www.mbayaq.org](http://www.mbayaq.org) (Monterey Bay Aquarium)  
[www.oceansalive.org](http://www.oceansalive.org) (Environmental Defense)  
[www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org) (Marine Stewardship Council)  
[www.cchfa.org](http://www.cchfa.org) (Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association)

seafood company. "He knows exactly how picky we are," she says. "He protects me and my restaurant."

### ***In the Restaurant: Get beyond fresh***

When weighing questions of cost as well as seasonal or regional availability, most chefs must decide where they are willing to stretch the boundaries. Local and regional sourcing, whether for meat and produce or seafood, has its challenges and limitations. And whether you're on a coast or in the center of the country, it's likely that buying only local fish isn't 100% possible.

But whether or not you buy locally, you can still buy from "localized" markets, says Megan Westmeyer, Sustainable Seafood Initiative coordinator at the South Carolina Aquarium. "With the help of a good purveyor, chefs can still access these smaller, well-managed fisheries," says Westmeyer. "Often, a local market cannot absorb the influx of seafood when a fishing boat lands," she says. "After the local market buys what they desire, the product is sold to purveyors and distributors in other parts of the country, sometimes for less of a price than the local market pays."

Discovering the nuances of individual fisheries is not something that seafood watch lists can accomplish. For example, Atlantic cod is severely depleted and turns up red on the watch

lists. But cod still turns up on the menus of restaurants that specialize in sustainable cuisine, because some (not all) fishing fleets are using gear types, such as hook-and-line, that are more environmentally friendly than the common method of harvest--trawling, say chefs and buyers. And other chefs might buy lesser cuts of cod, like the belly and the cheeks, as opposed to the loin or the entire fish, thereby ensuring that these parts of the fish are not wasted.

Whether you choose to serve hook-and-line caught cod or a lesser-known species like sablefish (black cod), educated servers play important roles in conveying information to customers. If a customer pulls a seafood watch list out of his or her wallet while looking at the menu, or if that night's special includes an underutilized species like dogfish, a floor staff who can answer tough questions and sell obscure items is an asset to any restaurant.

Chefs may also decide to educate customers directly. Jesse Cool slips seafood watch lists inside guest checks, and Andy Ayers, chef/owner of Riddle's Penultimate Café in St. Louis, MO, posts his menus online every morning, often with accompanying text that describes the ecological state of certain fish species.

Chefs are in the position to shape public food trends and food preferences. Diners won't stop ordering seafood, but by using seafood watch lists as a starting point to develop a further understanding of sustainable seafood issues, chefs can help shift demand away from over-fished species while developing markets for lesser-known fish and supporting local, sustainable fishing industries. This shift promotes sustainability in both specific and broad ways--ecologically, socially, and economically.

Chefs Collaborative communicates promote sustainable purchasing practices in restaurants.

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