



UNDER THE SEA: MAKING SMARTER SEAFOOD CHOICES

## Do you know where your fish is from?

**Take a close look at your next menu - chefs are increasingly taking an interest in replacing iffy species with sustainable alternatives**

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Robert Clark has a caveat for people planning an Aussie-style grillfest this summer: Don't throw another farmed tiger shrimp on the barbie.

For one thing they taste bland, says Mr. Clark, executive chef of Vancouver's shrine to seafood, C Restaurant, and its sister establishments Nu and Raincity Grill.

But more important, tiger shrimp - almost all of which come from China, Thailand and Brazil - are destroying ecologically vital tropical mangrove forests because of waste products and chemicals associated with intensive farming.

Mr. Clark has earned an enviable reputation over the past 10 years as one of Vancouver's top toques, but these days he's garnering more widespread acclaim for what's not on his menus: iffy fish.

As the founding chef of Ocean Wise, a Vancouver Aquarium conservation program launched 2½ years ago, Mr. Clark has been working with city restaurateurs to reduce their reliance on products harvested from scarce wild stocks and environmentally questionable ocean farms.

Other pressing examples include cod, halibut and sole from the Atlantic, as well as monkfish, orange roughy, shark and skate. So far, more than 60 Vancouver restaurants have vowed to replace at least one questionable species with a sustainable alternative.

And lately, Mr. Clark has been taking his sustainability gospel on the road, and literally across the ocean.

In March, he flew to Melbourne at the request of the Australian Conservation Foundation to help raise money and awareness for Ocean Wise's first international chapter, slated for launch in October.

And last week Mr. Clark was present at a ceremony to inaugurate the program's first Canadian spinoff in Victoria, where six restaurants have taken the sustainable-seafood pledge. Soon to follow is the Okanagan region in late June and, Mr. Clark hopes, possibly Calgary, a city normally more preoccupied with the quality of its beef.

"To make other cities in Canada or in the world take notice of things that don't affect them on a daily basis, I think it's going to be a great accomplishment," he says.

Mr. Clark is part of a growing network of professional cooks prompted into action by a series of events over the past decade. With the East Coast cod fishery in collapse, chefs began noticing something was wrong with the ocean's bigger fish, such as swordfish and tuna - the fillets and steaks they were preparing seemed to be shrinking almost before their eyes.

In 1998, a group of culinary stars in New York announced they were taking swordfish off their menus as part of a campaign dubbed Give Swordfish a Break. The ripples were felt as far as Washington, where six months later then-president Bill Clinton imposed a ban on the sale and importation of north Atlantic swordfish weighing less than 33 pounds.

In Mr. Clark's case, the wake-up call came about eight years ago in the form of Chilean sea bass - officially but less palatably known as patagonian toothfish - then the darling of upscale restaurant kitchens because of its ability to endure the cardinal sin of haute cuisine, overcooking.

"At some point it didn't even look like Chilean sea bass any more," says Mr. Clark, who had also become worried about reports that up to 75 per cent of sea bass supplies were illegally poached.

Mr. Clark's solution, initially motivated by the more selfish desire to expand his seafood offerings, was to bypass large wholesalers and go straight to local fishermen, who could offer more than just the ubiquitous "farmed salmon, halibut and shrimp," he says.

In a move that remains a milestone of Vancouver's modern fine-dining explosion, he replaced Chilean sea bass with a then-unsung local variety known as sablefish (a.k.a. black cod), now a cornerstone of spring menus around the Lower Mainland.

"Eight years ago, not an ounce was sold locally," Mr. Clark says. "Now every white tablecloth sells it. That was kind of the eye-opener for us, that we needed to go to fishermen directly."

Sablefish's other distinction is that it can be purchased fresh. That's not the case with most other species.

"The majority of seafood consumed in North America is previously frozen, whether they tell you that or not," Mr. Clark says. "Not one ounce of sea bass that reached this country was fresh."

After dropping the inconvenient toothfish, as it were, from his menu, Mr. Clark got the go-ahead from C's owner, Harry Kambolis, to revamp the rest of the menu.

As C - the name is a play on "sea" - began acquiring a reputation for sustainable seafood, conservationists and fresh-fish suppliers came "out of the woodwork" with information and new choices, Mr. Clark says.

Three years ago, the Vancouver Aquarium came knocking, looking to duplicate a chef-awareness program started a couple of years earlier by the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California. They discovered Mr. Clark had already been practising everything they wanted to preach.

"C Restaurant was the inspiration in many ways," says Jason Boyce, the Aquarium's manager of conservation programs. He notes that industrial fishing has wiped out 90 per cent of large ocean fish, including swordfish, tuna, marlin and halibut.

Working with Mr. Clark, the Vancouver Aquarium set up an audit system whereby restaurants could apply to join Ocean Wise by replacing at least one fish menu item with a sustainable choice and committing to transition away from unsound items. That list today includes orange roughy, monkfish, most tuna, shark and, of course, tiger prawns.

In return, the restaurant earns the right to place the Ocean Wise logo next to the menu item. Plus, there's the not-so-fringe benefit of a more consistent and fresher fish supply.

Other centres that have recently launched chef-outreach programs include the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago and the South Carolina Aquarium.

Why are ocean-conservation advocates spending time educating chefs instead of consumers? Because professional cooks are the gatekeepers of most seafood consumed on the continent. According to a 2004 study, 68 per cent of fish sold by suppliers, on a dollar-value basis, goes to restaurants and caterers, Mr. Boyce says.

"If you want to change the market, you're either going to have to educate a million consumers that are all buying maybe a pound of seafood a week, or you educate a thousand chefs that are buying thousands of pounds of seafood a week."

The sustainability imperative isn't limited to chefs located near aquariums. Two weeks ago Keith Froggett, chef-partner at Scaramouche, one of Toronto's top dining rooms, was named one of six chef-ambassadors of the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program, joining two previous Canadian inductees, Toronto's Jamie Kennedy and Vancouver's Mr. Clark.

For a restaurateur like Mr. Froggett in landlocked Toronto, sourcing fresh, responsibly harvested ocean fish hasn't been easy. Nor are the choices always clear-cut.

Colleagues had nominated him for the Monterey ambassadorship because of his ardent devotion to the cause, but the aquarium, after secretly monitoring his ever-changing menu, called him with a condition before agreeing to bestow the honour.

"The only issue they had was that in fact we were using the West Coast farm-raised salmon, so we took it off," Mr. Froggett says. "We were using it in good faith. It was organically raised and organically certified. We weren't aware that it was on their list. And in fact they said it hadn't been until a couple of months ago."

The search for righteous fish has led him to suppliers from as far away as Scotland. Johnson Sustainable Seafoods in Shetland farms cod Mr. Froggett says is better than the wild variety he ate as a boy growing up in the southern English coastal town of Westgate-On-Sea. "If they could start to rate these farms as well, it would make things easier."

Back in Vancouver, Mr. Clark says he now gets fish so fresh he has to wait a day or more before cooking because of rigor mortis, the postmortem chemical change that causes muscle stiffness.

"The shocker for us was that we'd never even seen fish fresh enough to go into rigor," he says. "You can't flake it or break it. It's like shoe leather."

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### **The good, the bad and the roughy**

Conservationists recommend choosing seafood sources that are abundant and caught or farmed in environmentally responsible ways. Here's a select few from the list.

#### **\*\*\*BEST CHOICES**

- Rainbow trout (farmed)
- Scallops (farmed)
- Halibut (Pacific)
- Mussels and oysters (farmed)
- B.C. sablefish (black cod)

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#### **AVOID**

- Tiger shrimp (farmed)
- Shark
- Chilean sea bass

-Orange roughy

-Skate

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### **Fresh or frozen?**

Sashimi and sushi lovers take note: Most seafood sold in North America has been previously frozen, whether it's labelled that way or not, says Robert Clark, executive chef of Vancouver's C Restaurant.

Not that Mr. Clark is opposed to properly frozen fish, much of which arrives in better condition than "fresh," a retail term simply meaning unfrozen but often confused with "recently caught." The reason: If it's frozen at sea or soon after capture, it hasn't had a chance to decay like fish sitting around for days in a fishmonger's smelly display case.

The real crime is frozen fish that has been thawed and laid out on ice by the retailer to give the appearance of just-caught freshness. Demanding chefs prefer to buy their frozen fish in a frozen state and thaw just before cooking.

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