

Sustainable Whaa?

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ed.note: this photo is just too wicked to leave out.

“Where can I go for sustainable sushi?” One of the top questions for [Ocean Wise](#) involves the quest for an ocean-friendly salmon roll. Mike McDermid, Ocean Wise coordinator, would also love to have a sushi joint sport the Ocean Wise logo on its menu. His solution is to continue to raise awareness about the program among both consumers and restaurants.

Scan the list of participating restaurants on the Ocean Wise website and you will notice that the majority of restaurants are high profile establishments. “That is definitely something that a lot of people have asked about. The first thing is that not everyone realises that we don’t solicit restaurants. I think that the reason that Ocean Wise has grown so much in the higher-end restaurants is because a lot of the chefs collaborate and are part of the same societies and initiatives,” he argues. He adds that Ocean Wise doesn’t solicit due to limited resources and a reluctance to have to police half-hearted members.

What you will also notice is that there is an overall absence of lower-end, family-run, and Asian restaurants. It’s not about pointing fingers or assigning blame, but rather about probing the factors that cause this lack and considering how they can be overcome. “A lot of family restaurants and lower-end restaurants are using things that are very readily available and very low priced. Initially, there are concerns about sustainable seafood being more expensive. And in many cases, this is true. However, with sustainable seafood, they will be getting a much higher quality seafood that their customers will be willing to pay extra for,” says McDermid.

Although this cost increase is currently a reality, McDermid points out that sustainable options are becoming more readily available as the market for them grows. “The increased competition is starting to bring prices down,” he says. He predicts that as the cost disincentive diminishes, more small restaurateurs will start to consider Ocean Wise as a viable sourcing option. Already, with the addition of Vancouver Island and the Okanagan, Ocean Wise is seeing an increase in the number of smaller establishments.

He also explains that one of the biggest misconceptions is that restaurants have to go entirely sustainable in order to join: "Originally, we thought, 'Let's get people to go completely sustainable.' We quickly realised that it wasn't realistic. To have a business go completely sustainable and go out of business because of it, is not going to help anybody. The point is to make it easier for consumers to choose ocean-friendly seafood options." Instead of total change, new restaurants need to remove at least one unsustainable seafood species from their current menu and place the Ocean Wise logo next to sustainable items. They also have to demonstrate a long term commitment to the program.

In terms of Asian restaurants, McDermid feels that the main obstacle is a lack of awareness. "The one thing that is so great about Vancouver is its multicultural food scene. It is not a matter that restaurants don't want to be a part of Ocean Wise. They just don't know about it," he says. He continues, "I think that there is a disconnect between the Asian market and the mainstream culinary world. There are perhaps language barrier issues. The customers frequenting these establishments are not the ones reading mainstream English media so there is a disconnect."

McDermid is combating these issues by raising consumer awareness and brand recognition. He is wanting to make material available in a variety of languages, and to form partnerships with media that have access to other readerships. Ocean Wise is also working to establish educational programs for school children, in addition to the post-secondary presentations that it already does. Currently, the Vancouver Aquarium is incorporating Ocean Wise lessons in their summer camps and revamping their exhibits in order to make them more interactive and enjoyable. "Seafood is not the most exciting thing for children to talk about! We need to create something fun that makes sense to kids. We need a good take-home message because kids don't often have a say in the purchasing decision," he says.

Meanwhile, consumers can also do their part by giving their neighbourhood restaurants a gentle nudge. He recommends, "If you have a favourite local family restaurant, just mention Ocean Wise to them. A lot of the chefs have just not heard about the program. Sometimes it is just a matter of bringing it to their attention."