Chefs Lead the Way to Sustainable Fish Consumption in British Columbia

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Few Many Fish in the Sea
Sustainable dining goes into the mainstream.
By Jamie Maw

Chefs are revolting. And Vancouver chefs are really revolting. But before large men with sharp knives begin chasing me in the streets, let me say that it¹s not their personal hygiene, suspect haberdashery or late night tirades that have led me to declare this inescapable fact.

No, Vancouver chefs are revolting because they¹re uniting in a common voice to change what we eat. And the revolution that they have declared a place of concern, and now conviction seen since I began writing about food 15 years ago.

It¹s the fight to save us from rapaciously denuding our oceans. It's a quite literal sea change that will see new, sustainable ingredients on restaurant menus replacing those that can serve us no more.

And just in case you thought this is a Birkenstock, proselytizing tree-hugger issue, tune in fast. Over the next two years, industry insiders say, the compounding effect of research into the consequences of fish farming, global warming, pollution, massive overfishing and biomass extermination will cut across all political lines. Why? Because the evidence is now so damning as to seem incontestable and has moved from an out-of-sight, out-of-mind issue to a front-page confrontation. Governments that do not provide leadership on the issue will be punished. Restaurateurs and fish distribution companies who won¹t remove unsafe or endangered products from their menus and product lists will be called to task.
Simply put, sustainability issues for our coastal fishery and imported fish fall into two major categories: aquaculture and endangerment.

Aquaculture harvesting of Atlantic salmon and shellfish. Shellfish aquaculture is being studied more intensely right now, but the early evidence on the farming of (mainly non-native) oysters, mussels and clams is that additional fine tuning and enhanced sensitivity to foreshore ecology operations (which require clean water, nonintroduced food and no chemical intervention, and which produce little waste) pass reasonable environmental standards. Shellfish farmers have an enormous vested interest in getting it right. They are mainly smaller operators whose product quality sets a standard that is judged in the marketplace by price.

Much more controversial is the farming of salmon on our coast and the environmental damage the practice has seemingly caused, typically by the fish feces that fall beneath the pens, killing the ocean. Additionally, there are concerns about the potential health issues related to eating farmed salmon provoked by dioxins, antibiotics, therapeutants, sea lice

removal agents, sedatives, pigment additives and antifoulant chemicals. Most of the coastal industry is controlled by offshore companies.

But the most damning evidence of all may have been the study undertaken by University of Alberta research professors earlier this year and published in the influential Proceedings of the Royal Society of London.

The report drew international media attention, including lengthy articles in the Guardian and the New York Times. The researchers monitored 5,500 wild salmon smolts, along a 37-mile-long migration route past a fish farm, to find the juveniles exposed to 30,000 times the normal risk of parasitic infection from sea lice. The smolts particularly at risk. If there are enough of the parasites, sea lice can quite literally eat their host alive. The impact of just one fish farm was far-reaching, with infection of juvenile wild salmon 73 times higher than ambient levels near the farm.

The researchers then found a second danger. The outward bound school of wild juveniles became a moving cloud of contagion, the Guardian reported. Sea lice larvae matured on the young salmon, producing up to 800 eggs each. [3]The lice will attack other species, not only salmon but other fish, such as herring which are the spark plugs of entire ecosystems them, from salmon to seabirds to whales, said John Volpe of the University of Victoria, a member of the team. Every commercially important fish is either directly or indirectly dependent on herring.One person who read the report but refutes it is David Rideout, executive director of the Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance in Ottawa. I haven't seen any evidence that high instances of sea lice around our farms are causing problems in terms of wild salmon, he said. The science has not shown that that[1]s the case.

I won't eat it and I certainly won't serve it in my restaurants, says Gordon Martin, the owner of Bins 941 and 942, and Go Fish!, a nifty seaside trailer near Granville Island that dispenses gossamer halibut and chips. It's a skanky product, Martin says, and why would I, anyway, when I can walk 50 feet down to the fish boats and buy direct from the guys who catch it? Martin was referring to the pod of boats at Fisherman's Wharf, who sell direct to consumers.

Martin is also a big fan of FAS (frozen at sea). Thawed slowly, FAS salmon and other fish, especially out of season, is virtually indistinguishable from fresh. It just makes sense, Martin says, that quickly frozen fish is going to be in better shape than Ofresh fish that takes days week We predict that over this term of the provincial government, fish farming will become an increasingly mainstream, Us versus Them issue. Continued inaction by the Campbell government to convert the industry to closed environment farms will carry a direct political cost. Further, the international media attention fostered by the run-up to the Olympics could mean boycotting of other British Columbia products until appropriate solutions for our coastline mandated.

One possible solution: I had my first bite of Agassiz northern coho at a producers dinner recently convened at Raincity Grill. Prepared by chef Andrea Carlson with a grilled oyster mushroom and pea tip salad in a rhubarb broth (also sourced from Agassiz farms), it was delicious the coho had been raised in

land-locked Agassiz by scientist Bruce Swift, who employs closed tanks. And the fish waste, which in open-pen farming degrades the ocean bottom, is collected and used to fertilize other crops. In Swift's case, it's used to grow wasabi, which had been used in an earlier course to brighten the beef.

Closed tanks resolve almost all of the environmental issues associated with farming fin fish. Indeed closed-environment technology represents the only rational way forward for the industry.

Although fish farming along our coast is dangerous, it pales beside the global overfishing that has eradicated a number of species and endangered others.

Consider the near-extinction of the Atlantic cod. Early explorers found the fish so prolific that they simply dropped baskets over the sides of their anchored ships to catch dinner, but a decade ago the fishery had become so depleted and its biomass so damaged that, even with an absolute suspension of the fishery, it now appears doubtful that stocks will recover to commercial viability. Thank greed and bad science, but especially political cowardice.

Around the world, ground harvesting has not only endangered the target fishery species but has also radically disturbed the biomass that supports them and others. The interdependence of an ecology is a fragile thing. Some food fish may not recover.

But the message apparently hasn¹t sunk in just yet, at least not for some of the people making our dinner. I recently interviewed the executive chef of a prominent Vancouver restaurant perched on the shore. Its views of the ocean are stunning, as is the crowd who flocked there to eat bass. His manager sat in on the interview.

I see that you're serving Chilean sea bass, I said to the chef.
It's easy to sell, he replied.
And prepare, I said, referring to the fish's forgiving, buttery flesh, but are you aware that it¹s commercially extinct?
Well, kind of, he said, but our customers demand it. I can't give tilapia away.
I'm not sure that's a reason, I said.
Well, I'm more a meat and potatoes kind of guy anyway, he said, while his manager tried to crawl under the table.

I was dumbfounded that the chef of a modern Vancouver restaurant could be so blithely ignorant. But the fact remains that there is still much ignorance surrounding sustainable seafood in Vancouver restaurants. I¹ve seen Russian caviar, tiger prawns, bluefin tuna, shark and haddock bass
More than half the seafood consumed in British Columbia is eaten in restaurants, said Heather Deal recently. Deal, a marine strategist in the David Suzuki Foundation Marine Conservation Program, was speaking at a Sustainability Lunch fittingly convened at C Restaurant. Fittingly because C¹s chefs, Robert Clark and Robert Belcham, have long championed the cause of sustainability and have freely shared their sources and suppliers with

their peers. Their menus are peppered with local, sustainable ingredients: sardines, live-caught Hawkshaw salmon, octopus, Kagan Bay scallops, Dungeness crab, Pacific squid, albacore tuna and sea urchin, amongst others. Deal made it clear just how important it is that chefs lead this issue. They must demonstrate exactly which seafoods are both sustainable and environmentally safe. But there remains a problem: us. We remain pampered but ignorant consumers who will blithely wolf dominoes of bluefin toro, buttery sea bass or even a wallop of beluga caviar without blinking.

Enter the Vancouver Aquarium's new Ocean Wise program (Oceanwisecanada.org), which offers a menu icon and window decal for restaurants willing to make sustainable choices. Jason Boyce maintains that those choices mean an abundant, resilient and well-managed stock, with minimal habitat degradation or bycatch. Twenty restaurants have already signed on, but our prediction is that many more will follow suit this year. I can't imagine being a seafood restaurant that doesn't or won't qualify, said one downtown seafood restaurant operator who wished to remain anonymous. It may mean dropping some top-selling items and sourcing others, he continued, but I think the consumer will follow our initiative, even at home, and that seafood distributors will get the message, too.

The Aquarium¹s John Nightingale has an additional way to deliver the word. He was recently attending a conference in Boston, a city that contributed mightily to the demise of the Atlantic cod. In each of the four restaurants that he dined in, Chilean sea bass was featured on the menu. But instead of deriding his server, or even the restaurant manager, he made his way into the kitchen to have a chat with the chef. There, calmly, he asked a question or two and then dispassionately explained the science. He felt that he¹d made some new friends, and, just maybe, so had the fish. Just enough, he thought, to let it off the hook.

The Seafood Manifesto

Thou shalt not:

Eat farmed salmon Eat sea bass, blue fin, orange roughy, tiger prawns or any other endangered species (a complete pocket-sized guide is downloadable from the Monterey Bay Aquarium¹s Seafood Watch program at Montereybayaquarium.org).
Covet thy neighbour¹s Russian caviar raised sustainably.
Scream at the server when you see an endangered seafood on the menu. Instead, tell the manager or chef that if they wish your future business, that the offending item should be removed. Direct them to Oceanwisecanada.org and the list of safe and unsafe eating choices at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.