

SEA

WEEKEND
EXTRA

change

The tastiest seafood is increasingly local and sustainable

BY MIA STAINSBY
VANCOUVER SUN

In the past few weeks, I've had exciting times. They've invariably involved hurriedly courting spot prawns during their short local season. Each time I buy some I think about how to eat them. It always comes down to this: I like 'em naked. The prawns, that is.

I steam them, whole, in my bamboo steamer and that's it. Okay, sometimes I've added a little something. Once I had some pesto on the side to dip the delicate flesh in once I'd ripped off the head and peeled back the orange carapace. But spot prawns are perfect as is. They require nothing to mask or make up for flavour deficiencies.

And that is the kind of astonishingly good flavour that Rob Clark began discovering when he became executive chef at C restaurant 10 years ago. He found the more local the seafood and the more sustainable the species, the more deliciousness he found.

"We were trying to source quality and what we found when we came across great, high-quality product was, it also happened to be sustainably produced," he says. And thus, he found himself leading the charge for a sea change in Vancouver's attitude to seafood. He sourced from sustainable fisheries and C became a maverick restaurant, launching a new attitude, new ideas and seafood species to its tables.

"It wasn't purposeful. We were making choices as a business. It wasn't a statement," he says. "But we'd seen the decline in the quality of Chilean sea bass. It had been overfished and a large percentage may or may not even have been sea bass. Upon further investigation, we found there were poaching issues at high sea because of how poorly the fisheries were run. We didn't want to be participating in that."

With that, he set about researching seafood, "to understand some of the problems with distribution, harvesting and the crisis in the oceans."

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STEVE BOSCH/VANCOUVER SUN

Chef Rob Clark of C restaurant brought a new attitude, new ideas and new species to his tables.

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For more entrée, go online to www.vancouversun.com

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MIA STAINSBY

Wise choices, healthy oceans

WEEKEND EXTRA FROM F1

"It was all coming to a head," he says. He was a nettlesome customer to suppliers and distributors. "You know what, Robert? You're a pain," they'd tell him. "Go away! You're not going to change anything."

No pain, no gain, as the saying goes. And things did change. In fact, Toronto's been calling, wanting help in making changes, too. About 68 per cent of seafood eaten in North America is in restaurants so chefs set the stage and jumpstart trends.

The Vancouver Aquarium enlisted Clark in 2005 to help launch a program called Ocean Wise. It's become the engine that could, helping chefs and restaurants get on board with sustainability, and it's trickled down to customers who are making environmentally friendly seafood choices. Currently, some 300 restaurants are on board with Ocean Wise. The idea is to move away from overfished species and fishing methods that harm the ocean environment. It doesn't have to apply to 100 per cent of the seafood on the menu, but that's the goal.

Mike McDermid, Ocean Wise coordinator, says restaurants have been amazingly eager to join. Three years ago, there were 16 restaurants; the next year, it grew to 47; and this year, it took a flying leap to 300 participating restaurants. When I catch up with him, he is in Toronto, ramping up to take the program national, the next big step. He and Clark were in the city with thoughts of launching the program in Toronto in September.

While there they snagged a big one — Compass Group Canada, a national food service group serving 1,700 food service locations across the country with revenues of \$1.2 billion. Clients include universities, colleges, hospitals, sporting venues and even some high-end locations. The company signed on with Ocean Wise and had hired its own director of sustainability. "They're looking at all aspects," says McDermid. Compass's first move was to replace unsustainable Atlantic cod with the more sustainable Alaskan pollack.

Three years ago, when McDermid and Clark talked to seafood distributors and supply companies, they were ignored. "They didn't phone us back. Now, literally, we get calls daily from supply companies, importers, exporters, wholesalers, fishers. Rob and I have had interest from across North America but we wanted to make sure we had a solid foundation before growing too fast and jeopardizing that foundation. We've told them to hold on."

One of the top issues is the abundance and resilience of various fish species. Resilience, he says, refers to the ability of a species to reproduce. "The 'live hard and fast' species like squid have a one-year cycle and reproduce in high numbers but a Pacific red snapper lives to 150 years but doesn't mature sexually for 20, 30 years. They take a long time to reproduce and populations can plummet quickly." Salmon, he



MARK VAN MANEN/VANCOUVER SUN

Chef Frank Pabst of Vancouver's Blue Water Cafe + Raw Bar prepares octopus, one of the restaurant's Ocean Wise seafood varieties.

says, live hard and fast but are tricky because they are terminal spawners. "You have to catch them before they reproduce because they die after they reproduce."

Ocean Wise looks to fisheries management, researchers, non-governmental researchers and Fisheries and Oceans, as well as in-house experts for latest information. "We don't have a solid understanding of fish populations. In fact, we know very little. For example, in 2003, scientists counted 13,000 new marine life species in one year, including a whale which no one saw before. It's like another planet down there. But with new fishing technology improving each year, the boats and nets are so big and sonar is so good, they can fish with less effort. It becomes scary."

The method of harvest is another Ocean Wise consideration. "They should be caught in ways that minimize bycatch. Local spot prawns, for example, take in less than one-per-cent bycatch. But things can get extremely bad, sometimes

with upwards of 97-per-cent bycatch using bottom trawling and drag nets," McDermid says. "Surface onlining for tuna, marlin, shark, mahi mahi in tropical waters endanger sea turtles and sea birds and can be blamed for the albatross being endangered."

Sharkfin soup in Asian restaurants, he says, drives him "bonkers."

(You can find out more about Ocean Wise and names of participating restaurants at www.vanaqua.org/oceanwise.)

Frank Pabst, chef at Blue Water Cafe + Raw Bar, was also an early supporter of sustainable seafood. Blue Water now operates 100 per cent within the recommended guidelines (restaurants participate in varying degrees) even with a sushi bar in the restaurant. "At the beginning we had to work hard with our suppliers to find out where the fish was coming from. It used to be that no one cared. It was a steep learning curve for both the suppliers and us. It was a great help that Ocean Wise took the research-

ing off our shoulders. Suppliers have worked in tandem; as more restaurants came on board, more suppliers did, too. For our tuna, we only use one supplier we know well," he says.

Pabst encourages diners to try new options with his Unsung Heroes menu, which he started four years ago. This special menu promotes local "unsung" sustainable species like geoduck, flying neon squid, sardines, herring, mackerel, jellyfish, octopus and sea urchin. "In Europe and Asia, people appreciate the stronger tastes. Here, we have gotten used to delicate tastes like halibut."

Slowly but surely, palates are learning to appreciate the unsung heroes, he says.

At C restaurant, Clark keeps inventing ways of becoming ever more sustainable. He uses fish "tip to tail" in his kitchen, with nothing going to waste. Heads and tails would go for stock. He's taught his diners to enjoy crispy salmon skin. He makes salmon bone into a calcium-rich salt by boiling, drying, then grinding in a flour mill, then using it as salt for the salmon dish. He's also creating a demand for sablefish collar, a part of the fish that was previously rendered for fish oil, thrown overboard or sent overseas in 25- to 50-pound frozen blocks. "You can do anything with them. It's a really nice piece of meat," he says.

But to show how confusing this whole issue might be to the dining public, a diner might come across pinto abalone on the C menu, which is a huge, huge, no-no. It's illegal to catch, touch, eat, buy or even think about selling the locally endangered pinto abalone. (There are other farmed abalone coming out of Australia and California.)

But the pinto abalone at C is okay. The restaurant is the sole purchaser of pinto abalone grown at the Bamfield Marine Biology Centre in partnership with the Huu-ay-aht First Nation. "The research centre is reseeded the abalone to try to bring them back," he says. The sales helps to fund the hatchery. "Unfortunately, there's organized poaching by the truckload," Clark says, of the reseeded abalone. "We have a very special permit to purchase it and have to follow stringent rules." Rules include serving with shells intact, returning the shells to the hatchery and not taking the abalone off C property.

Clark would like the restaurants who aren't part of Ocean Wise to know that sustainability has been a good bottom-line decision. "People have said it's easy for a high-end restaurant which can charge \$30 to \$35 for a dish. The reality is, that's not true. We've cut out a lot of middlemen and when we do pay higher prices, it's for the highest, freshest product. Comparing local spot prawns to imported tiger prawns is comparing apples and oranges.

"If C, a seafood restaurant, can do it," he says, "restaurants with 25-per-cent seafood can at least begin to make the right choices. That's the beautiful thing about Ocean Wise, you just move forward."

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