fish Pride and Prejudice

How your choices make a difference

words *Carolyn Swartz*

As Mainers in spirit or in residence, we hold an emotional attachment to the sea. Those are *our* waters that stretch from craggy shores to beyond the distant horizon. We want them to remain vibrant, resilient and rich in bounty for generations to come.

Where personal emotions meet scientific realities, the conversation about sustainability comes into play. By now, we realize the ocean is a collection of ecosystems, interrelated but distinct. We may also know its long-term health, or sustainability, depends on balance across the diversity of aquatic life.

Where we tumble into the drink, however, is in not knowing what *we* can do to promote it.

Sure, we can lay off the party glitter and tote our trash from the boat to the dock. But what else? Should we buy only seafood labeled "sustainably fished"? Avoid all farmed fish, like salmon? Never buy overfished species? That's cod, right? Or was that halibut, too? The fact is we're confused.

"Around land-based sustainability, there's been a lot of education," says Ben Martens, executive director of the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, a not-for-profit that seeks to promote stewardship-minded policies in the Gulf of Maine. But while science has driven more enlightened seafood industry standards and practices, public awareness lags behind. "With the sea," he notes, "we're just getting started. We still have a long way to go."

“If we insist on telling the fishing industry which two or three or five species we’re willing to eat, we’ll never have a sustainable system,” he [Seaver] warns.

Chef, author and sustainability expert Barton Seaver not only agrees, but has a theory about why that’s so. “The fruited plain, the amber waves of grain, autumn’s sun setting over a red barn” —he describes these images as core to American iconography. But ask people to describe a fishery and they can’t. Because fishing is “something that happens *out there*.” By that he means “beyond the horizon of our attention.”

A man of many talents, much curiosity and a prodigious work ethic, Seaver is on a mission to bring “out there” into focus by educating the public about the relationship between healthy waters and fish, and healthy communities and people.

It all started with an epiphany about a decade ago, when he was planning the menu for his restaurant, Hook, in D.C.’s Georgetown neighborhood. Seaver was looking forward to serving the seafood he’d loved as a child in summers on the Chesapeake Bay: bluefish, striped bass, crabs and oysters. But when he talked with his suppliers, he learned these species were no longer to be found.

“They hadn’t simply disappeared,” he says with more than an ounce of regret. “They’d been eaten. As in eaten *up*.”

Since then, he notes, with improved management they’ve been brought back to commercial levels. But at the time, this revelation would ignite a passion and ultimately shape the trajectory of his career from chef/restaurateur to leader of the seafood sustainability movement.

Today Seaver is a National Geographic Explorer, one of a select global group of innovative scientists, conservationists and storytellers committed to improving the planet. He is also the director of Harvard’s Sustainable Seafood and Health Initiative. A three-year resident of South Freeport, Seaver uses his “spare” time to lecture, educate and write. Over the span of seven years, he has published seven books on seafood around health, cooking and sustainability.

Seaver and Martens both believe that consumer participation in the sustainability movement is easier and more enjoyable than we may think. And we can do our part while standing at a fish counter or sitting in a restaurant —simply by the choices we make.

Recently, as part of a larger traceability study, the Maine Coast Fishermen’s Association observed activity at the fish counter of a Mid-Coast supermarket. Almost without exception, shoppers were asking for salmon, haddock or cod. But haddock and cod are not the only flaky white fish in the sea.

“In the Gulf of Maine,” says Martens, “we have an abundance of ground fish like cusk, pollock, hake (fishermen’s take-home favorite), dogfish, shark and grey sole.” While each has a slightly different flavor profile, all can be prepared in similar ways. He says the fishing industry is targeting only stocks that are doing well environmentally. “So if fishermen are out there catching the fish, you can feel good about eating it.” But first you have to take it home.

Seaver allows it’s fine to have our favorites. But he warns against knee-jerk defaults to certain white fish and über-popularized top-of-the-seafood-chain species like swordfish, tuna and striped bass.

“If we insist on telling the fishing industry which two or three or five species we’re willing to eat, we’ll never have a sustainable system,” he warns. “We need to be curious about flavors and textures and open to the diversity the ocean is willing to supply.”

Encouraging curiosity is the focus his newest hardcover, *American Seafood: Heritage, Culture & Cookery from Sea to Shining Sea.* An engaging compendium of wisdom and science, history and culture, recipes and reference, it’s making a splash in the market.

In the book, Seaver expresses his affection for “unloved” species like herring and mackerel, sardines and smelts—once-popular fish that have long fallen out of favor. Through his own excitement, he delivers a sustainability message that replaces “pans of guilt and quinoa” with the thrill of culinary adventure. In the answer to “What’s the catch of the day?” he says we find delicious diversity “while empowering the industries that sustain us.”

Chef, author and sustainability expert Barton Seaver.

Atlantic Char served at Gather in Yarmouth.

Happily, change is in the air. Just as chefs set off a consumer groundswell of demand for heirloom fruits and vegetables simply by putting them on their menus, they are creating parallel motion around seafood.

After conversations with Geoffrey Smith of the Maine Nature Conservancy, Matt Chappell, owner of Gather in Yarmouth, began to use lesser-known species like Acadian redfish and hake in his main dishes. The restaurant's popular Casco Bay fish taco, which features a local kelp slaw topped with a buttermilk-avocado crema, relies on pollock and other diverse regional ground fish.

On Portland's Munjoy Hill, Guy Hernandez, chef and co-owner of Lolita, says he has always served dishes he and his family enjoy. These include small whole fish with "a point of view," such as smelts, herring and mackerel. "Trawl to Table" workshops at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute have only reinforced the thread between his culinary instincts and commitment to sustainability. Through his choices, Hernandez knows he's driving demand for underutilized, locally plentiful fish. His preferred cooking method: Toss them whole onto the wood-fired grill, then finish simply with a fresh herb salsa—inviting the flavor of the fish to speak for itself.

Early on, chef-owners Karl Deuben and Bill Leavy of Portland's East Ender chose plentiful hake for several menu offerings. They make fish and chips from the filet portion, and use the loin for their fish sandwich. Instead of discarding the rest, they brine and smoke the remaining meat over local wood, placing a pan underneath to collect juices released in the process. They use the liquid and the pieces of firm-but-flaky fish for East Ender's seductively delicious smoked hake chowder.

Anticipating a rise in more eclectic consumer demand, the owners of Harbor Fish, Portland's high-standards, no-nonsense seafood market on Customs House Wharf, are making an investment in what's next.

"We've always offered local whole fish like smelts, perch, mackerel—even before chefs began to feature them," says co-owner Mike Alfieri. Today, Harbor is getting ready to install a 20-foot showcase designed exclusively for whole fish. Along with Maine species, it will feature mullet, rouget, striped bass and other species from across the country and around the world. Alfieri expects consumer education to be key to promotional efforts.

Seaver's two word message to consumers: "Be curious." What's good for our waters is also good for our economy and our health. "So we should never let our fondness for one species trump our curiosity about others."

Clearly, the historical pursuit of just a few popular fish has unduly burdened the ocean's ecosystem, leaving much of its bounty unvalued and ignored. In addition, the amount of meat we pack away each year contributes heavily to our national epidemic of obesity, heart disease and other lifestyle-related illnesses. Increasing the amount of fish we eat—even by a small amount—can have positive impact on our health. And by making choices that sustain our health, we also sustain the health of fishing communities and the oceans that provide.

Through science, technology and education the fishing industry has both pioneered and adopted sustainable practices. And with healthy waters yielding greater numbers of healthy fish, the aquaculture industry has made great strides as well. Seaver believes it's now our turn—as consumers—to catch on and catch up.

"The guiding hand of natural selection is ours," he reminds us. "And it is firmly holding a fork."