

Season to Taste Catering in Cambridge, Mass., serves up this crispy-skin striped bass topped with leeks, Wellfleet clams, vermouth and wild mushroom sauce, served family-style.

The **sustainable seafood movement** is catching on with caterers and their clients

BY DEANNE MOSKOWITZ

SEA CHANGE

It isn't only in Pacific Grove, Calif.—where Dory Ford's catering operation, Aqua Terra Culinary Inc., was founded—that interest in sustainable seafood is strong. He says everyone's on board in landlocked Denver, too, where last year he expanded the business and has already hosted four sustainable seafood events.

"It's not a localized movement; it's a worldwide area of concern," says Ford, who observes the growing preoccupation everywhere he travels as a member of the Blue Ribbon Task Force, an advisory group of Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch.

According to the aquarium's website, 90 percent of the world's fisheries are fully exploited, over-exploited or have collapsed, and such detrimental fishing practices as accidental catch of unwanted species (bycatch) and habitat damage from fishing gear are impacting the oceans and the health of sea life.

Motivated by personal principles and business concerns, caterers are joining the movement.



A longtime champion of the cause, Andrew Spurgin, executive chef/owner of the eponymous San Diego-based "event styling and menu design company," says, "If it's not a sound choice, I simply won't serve it."

Alan Ehrich, executive chef at the Audubon Nature Institute in New Orleans, is helping to spearhead the major initiative underway there.

Robert Harris, chef/owner of Season to Taste Catering in Cambridge, Mass., calls sustainability one of his "primary concerns when buying seafood, along with freshness and quality."

And Greg Shapiro, chef/owner of Tastebuds Custom Catering in Naples, Fla., believes "100 percent in the sustainability of everything—seafood or not."

Caterers who uphold strict sustainability standards often draw clients who are similarly committed, but unenlightened ones may need convincing to accept sustainable alternatives or perhaps to pay more.

In addition, being sustainably responsible requires an effort. Chefs must stay current with best choices, bypass endangered or improperly harvested fish, support environmentally conscious local fisheries or fish farms, and maintain a low carbon footprint by shopping locally. But simply asking how the fish was caught and if it is sustainable as well as buying regionally can make "a big impact," Ford suggests.

Serving sustainable seafood is more than just meal-planning for these committed chefs. They regard themselves as "gatekeepers" for the oceans who can make a difference with the stroke of their pens, as Spurgin puts it. Convinced that informed clients are likely to make the right choice, they are proactive about educating sales and wait staff, always ready with reasoning for skeptical clients, and determined to win over holdouts with tastings of delicious alternatives.

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Finicky Eaters

When it comes to finfish, Americans are hooked on salmon and flaky white fish, which generally are available everywhere. But some clients demand them even when they're out of season. Identifying "best fish" choices on menus, listing only available fish and staying flexible regarding the precise species are successful techniques for warding off confrontations, chefs report.

Harris doesn't finalize the fish selection until a week or so before the event, after consulting the Seafood Watch list and seeing what is coming in from small boats locally. Until then the description might read: Crispy Skin Best Fish Available with Foraged Mushrooms, Caramelized Leeks and Wellfleet Clams. "Living in New England means that we usually have one or two great fishes to choose from," he says.

Shapiro's Midwestern "snowbird" clientele expect to eat wild seafood, especially grouper, but it isn't always in season. Another local fish, snapper is a great alternative, he finds, and the two can be prepared in the same way. In a favorite treatment, Shapiro pan-sears it, creating a crispy edge on one side; tops it with white wine, lemon juice and a mix of quartered marinated artichokes, kalamata olives, tomatoes, shallots, garlic and parsley; and then finishes it in a 400-degree oven, sprinkling with feta and broiling. Refusing to serve frozen fish, he sometimes is forced to substitute wild grouper from Mexico. "It's still from the Gulf, but it doesn't support U.S. fisheries," he laments.

Since Ford only "menus" fish that are acceptable, he is free to focus on whatever is in season, and "there's a lot out there," he says. When salmon isn't available, he often turns to Arctic char, pan-searing or grilling



Chef Alan Ehrich is a key figure in the Audubon Institute's G.U.L.F. (Gulf United for Lasting Fisheries) Seafood Initiative, which focuses on supporting sustainable local fisheries and restaurants. Pictured above is a G.U.L.F. sustainability dinner in front of the Gulf exhibit at the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans. Opposite left, Andrew Spurgin's Tide Pool in a Bowl features red ogo and kelps; San Diego sea urchin, spot prawn and mussel; sea beans and sea grass; Marcona almonds; black pebble roll; and Gusano butter.

either one. Other "meaty, not too oily, flaky white fish" options from the green list include California white sea bass, halibut and rockfish.

Among Ehrich's go-to favorites from the Gulf are grouper, amberjack, black drum, cobia and red snapper. Recently, he has been experimenting with paiche, similar in flavor and texture to sea bass. He sears it as you would a scallop, in a mixture of olive oil and butter, and serves it with champagne cream sauce or lime beurre blanc.

Though ranked third in popularity among finfish at events, tuna is eschewed by some caterers. Except when he can get pole-caught albacore from a family of local fishermen, Ford shuns tuna, because "we've almost fished them to extinction" and he doesn't understand "why a fish that's caught in Indonesia belongs on a plate in California or Colorado." Harris adds that the longline method used to capture them results in excessive bycatch, and there's no way to guarantee that you're getting one of the few non-endangered species. And though Spurgin is okay with pole-caught albacore, he refuses to serve large pelagic sea life, such as bluefin or octopus, claiming they're too intelligent.

Shell Game

Crab may be king in Louisiana and lobster in Massachusetts, but shrimp is the number-one shellfish choice at catered events everywhere, these chefs agree. Each one touts a regional or farmed favorite, but all of them avoid Asian imports, due to quality and safety concerns.

Sensitive to the common problem of bycatch, Spurgin likes spot prawns, which are trap-caught and, therefore, "sustainable as sustainable can get."

Ford buys Mexican whites, a sweet-tasting Gulf variety, which come from a fishery employing turtle exclusion devices designed to prevent bycatch.

Shapiro calls Key West pinks "the best shrimp in the world," but when they're out of season he tries to substitute another wild-caught, U.S.-harvested variety. However, if that's impossible or if the transportation cost is too high, he's "obliged" to resort to farm-raised, since his clients "want shrimp, no matter what."

Aqua Terra's Ford buys Mexican white shrimp, a sweet-tasting Gulf variety, which come from a fishery employing turtle exclusion devices designed to prevent bycatch.





Clockwise from above: Andrew Spurgin's yellowtail push-ups feature Meiwa kumquat, avocado, Baja yellowtail, tobiko, wasabi crema and micro cilantro. Season to Taste serves lobster salad in a cucumber shot glass with frisée; and crispy fresh-caught Jonah crab cakes with cucumber batons and remoulade.

Aside from small pink Maine shrimp, which are eaten out of their shells, the only wild shrimp available to Harris are either Asian imports or too-distant domestic ones. Instead, he prefers farm-raised shrimp from Sky 8 Shrimp Farm in Stoughton, Mass., which come from landlocked tanks and are nourished on organic feed.

Whether fresh or farmed, bivalves are unanimously beloved as the most sustainable of sustainable seafood.

"They're probably one of the greenest items on the green list," observes Ford, pointing out that they are easy to raise, don't need to be fed and "grow aplenty."

Harris, who buys farmed oysters, calls them "one of the best choices you can make."

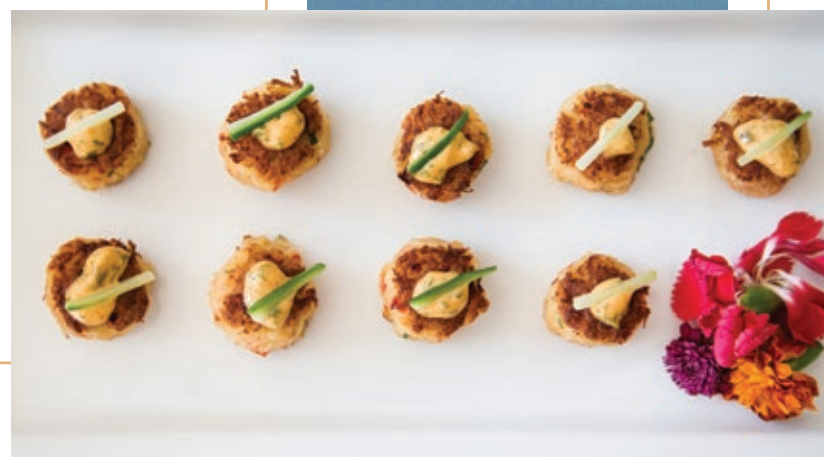
Advocating eating as low as possible on the food chain, Spurgin serves a lot of oysters and San Diego sea urchins. He likes the uni in pasta dishes, does a sea urchin panna cotta in an eggshell and sometimes brings them to events alive, simply cracking them open and serving as shooters.

Digging Farmed Fish

Despite major advances in farming methods and the fact that 50 percent of the fish Americans eat already is farmed, ambivalence exists concerning aquaculture.

Spurgin calls aquaculture "the future," since it is no longer sustainable to continue taking so much protein out of the water. But all aquaculture is not created equal. He views oysters as "a perfect form," along with farmed mussels and clams; and approves of the method in which yellowtail tuna are ranches by

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fattening young fish in nets off the coast.

Ehrich hails farming as "another way to help ease the burden on how much fish is fresh-caught." He commends farmed catfish as "much cleaner than harvested" and extols a farm-raised red snapper out of Texas.

There have been "some great developments," Ford admits, but not enough to win his unmitigated support. He'll buy farmed Arctic char, which is raised in land-based tanks that don't contaminate the ocean and are vegetarians; but not salmon, which are penned in areas of open current and fed meal made from fresh fish.

The only farm-raised finfish that Harris sells are salmon and Arctic char, and then only those he sources from farms with the best reputations for having healthy feed and not overcrowding.

Shapiro stays as far away as possible from farmed finfish, mainly because it contradicts everyone's romanticized notion of wild seafood from Florida. When necessary, he'll serve farmed shrimp and salmon, researching extensively to find the best-rated farm.

New Waves

Striving to spare overly burdened populations, chefs are bringing unfamiliar, ocean-friendly varieties to the table, and finding that even the less adventurous often take the bait. Engendering trust, the white jackets they wear can be persuasive, and, if necessary, a tasting usually does the trick.

A lover of bluefish, Harris corrects misconceptions that it is oily and overpowering, explaining that its high fat content causes it to spoil quickly but that it is delicious when fresh. Bluefish works well in the company's Best Choice pan-seared recipe and also is popular as a fish cake hors d'oeuvre.

To convert reluctant clients to such off-the-radar species as skate, Spurgin says that it helps to describe a few dishes he's done with the fish and tell the client what a success it has been in the past.

Shapiro has been experimenting with upscale preparations for mullet loin, which is usually smoked and not considered white tablecloth cuisine, but which is "very plentiful, easy, cheap and delicious when correctly prepared," he insists. One black mullet dish he developed is cooked sous vide and then pan-seared.

Unknown to many, sheephead (once considered a trash fish) is a favorite of Ehrich's, because it has the flavor and texture of crab and "you can do just about anything with it."

With its emphasis on freshness and its



underlying conservation mentality, sustainable seafood lends itself naturally to two of the newest seafood dining trends: raw and nose-to-tail.

Crudo was once "very hard to sell," but now people are "very amenable to having it," says Spurgin, at least on the West Coast. A favorite crudo recipe of his features Baja yellowtail combined with citrus, cherries, pistachios, vanilla sea salt, serrano peppers, micro cilantro and olive oil.

One of Shapiro's most-requested items now is hamachi crudo, given a Moroccan flavor profile, not an Asian accent.

Ceviche is popular in New Orleans, too, where Ehrich makes it from snapper and sheephead. He often serves tuna poke salad as well.

As whole fish gain traction in restaurants, catering chefs are buying in the round, too, more as a waste-reduction technique than with the idea of serving them whole. Exceptions include Spurgin's salt-crusted fish (see recipe on p. 33), filleted tableside, which wins kudos at intimate dinners, and Shapiro's mahi station, where the fish is grilled whole and carved for guests to turn into tacos.

Schools of Fish

Unfortunately, clients don't always succumb to sustainability's allure.

"Quite often... a sustainable product is not recognizable" to Shapiro's clients and they "just want what they want," he says.

Only 45 to 50 percent of people coming to Harris care about sustainability, and the rest "just want the best food in town," he reports.

And even Spurgin occasionally is asked, "Why shouldn't we serve this at our gala?"

Claiming that once most people know the facts, they want to do the right thing, caterers work hard at sustainability education, both through organized programs and on a client-by-client basis.

One of the most far-reaching efforts is the Audubon Institute's G.U.L.F. (Gulf United for Lasting Fisheries) Seafood Initiative, which focuses on



Befriend Your Fishmonger

Checking for bright eyes and a fresh smell may insure that the fish is fresh but not that it's sustainable. Fishmongers are notorious "scoundrels," not above mislabeling a fish from one place as coming from another, Harris asserts. Ford and Spurgin warn that "due diligence" is necessary to ascertain that you're getting what you want. And Ehrich notes the difficulty of distinguishing a sustainable fish from its non-sustainable cousin.

That's why these chefs stress the importance of developing a close relationship with a trustworthy small fishmonger. "The first thing is buying from people who have morals," advises Ehrich, who relies on local seafood houses who know their sources. "Know thy fishmonger" is one of Spurgin's unbreakable shopping rules. Harris has "solid relationships" with vendors he trusts to source in-season species from small boats, "the stewards of the sea." And Ford feels fortunate to still be working with the supplier he used for nine years as executive chef at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

As Shapiro's business grew he realized that he could no longer rely on one of the big distributors to satisfy the more diversified requests he was getting, so he switched to a smaller supplier. Recently, he struck up a relationship with an even smaller vendor, Independent Seafood, whose owner nurtures face-to-face relationships with the boats, and where his sales representative is a former restaurant owner who speaks his language and is as passionate about food as he is.

Small suppliers are invaluable at alerting chefs to interesting new product possibilities, too. Independent Seafood tipped off Shapiro to lionfish, an invasive species, which he plans to add to his menu. It tastes "phenomenal" and is "reasonably inexpensive," and he's excited at the prospect of developing something tasty and presentable...and eliminating a troublesome predator simultaneously.

Spurgin's purveyor, Catalina Offshore, run by a local Portuguese family of fishermen, introduced him to the pectoral fin muscle of opah, previously a throwaway but now a well-priced component in various ground meat dishes, among them Thai fish meatballs and fish kefta.

supporting sustainable local fisheries and restaurants.

The program is financed by Summer of Sustainability, a dinner series hosted at three of Audubon's venues. Boasting cutting-edge menus and starring some of the area's most renowned chefs, the dinners are designed to make diners aware of sustainable seafood local to the region and to support restaurants that serve it.

Ford brings the sustainability message to audiences around the country on behalf of the Blue Ribbon Task Force. And Spurgin lectures about sustainable seafood at various outreach programs, such as the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, as well as acting as a "gentle educator" individually with clients.

Ehrich—who identifies cost as the biggest challenge in upholding sustainability standards, since seafood coming out of Asian countries is often less expensive—trains sales and wait staff to let people know that the Gulf seafood they're getting tastes better and is sustainably harvested. Ford prepares wait staff to respond to questions from clients and guests.

When clients request something that Ford doesn't serve, he explains that the choice goes against his "dedication to the guidelines of the Seafood Watch program," and he claims that usually people are very understanding. "It's OK to have standards and convictions and stick to them," he insists. Besides, he points out, "Sustainability isn't just about picking out seafood. It's a way of doing business; it's a way of life." ●



Tastebuds Custom Catering's menu includes lion fish ceviche (above left) and hamachi with local strawberry and Thai basil (above).

PACIFIC SALT-CRUSTED FISH WITH GINGER SCALLION SAUCE



From ANDREW SPURGIN *Bespoke event styling & menu design*

YIELD: 3 to 4 servings

INGREDIENTS

3-4 pounds whole fish, such as yellowtail snapper, black grouper or white sea bass
1 fresh kaffir lime, 1/4-inch slices (replace with Key lime if unavailable)
3 kumquats, 1/4-inch slices
4 fresh kaffir lime leaves, slightly crushed
1 stalk peeled lemongrass, 1/4-inch slices, on bias
8 sprigs cilantro
2 garlic cloves, smashed
4 egg whites, lightly beaten
1 1/2 boxes kosher salt (in 3-pound boxes)
Water
1/2 cup scallions, whites and green, thinly sliced
1/2 cup fresh young ginger (different from typical ginger), very finely minced
1/2 teaspoon citrus-flavored soy sauce (kinko ponzu shoyu)
1 tablespoon grapeseed oil
1/2 teaspoon sesame oil
1/2 teaspoon fish sauce*
Sea salt, such as Maldon

Find products at most Asian grocery stores

*Fish sauce Vietnamese nước mắm – Red Boat 40°N or online 50°N (my favorite), or Việt Hu'ong Three Crabs brand are sound choices.

EQUIPMENT

Large bowl, small bowl, spoon, cutting board, large roasting/sheet pan, aluminum foil, heavy kitchen knife, pastry brush, two fish spatulas, large serving platter



METHOD

Pre-heat the oven to 375°. Scale, gut, de-gill and remove all fins from whole sustainable handlined white flaky-fleshed fish.

PREPARATION

Line a sheet pan with aluminum foil (easier cleanup).

Fill the belly and mouth cavity with kaffir lime, kaffir lime leaves, kumquats, lemongrass, four sprigs of cilantro and garlic.

In large bowl, fold in egg whites with kosher salt; add water (mixture should be the consistency of a snowball; too wet and salt will crack when baked, too dry and it won't hold to fish).

Lay down approximately 3/4-inch layer of kosher salt; place the fish on top. Cover the entire fish with the salt mixture, approximately 3/4-inch thick; basically you're making a salt oven.

Bake for approximately 35-40 minutes.

While fish is baking, mix together scallions, young ginger, yuzu-soy sauce, sesame oil, grapeseed oil, fish sauce; sprinkle with sea salt, taste, and adjust seasonings if needed.

Remove fish from oven, rest for several minutes; with a heavy kitchen knife, lightly tap around the bottom edge of the salt crust (near the sheet pan) until cracked all the way around the fish.

Carefully lift off the salt crust; it will easily pull away from the fish. Lightly brush off any remaining salt flakes from the fish with a pastry brush, if necessary.

Slice just behind the head, slice the filet just before the tail. Carefully slice the fish lengthwise to split the top filets in half. Gently lift out the two filets, check for pin bones, place on a warmed serving platter.

Carefully pull out the backbone, from tail end; all, or most, of the other bones will come with it. Lift out the lower filets as you did with the upper ones.

Top with Maldon sea salt (if needed, taste). Serve the scallion-ginger mixture on the side; garnish with remaining cilantro sprigs.

Serve immediately.

SERVING SUGGESTION

Serve with simple cucumber salad with Thai basil, mint, bean shoots and shredded cabbage. Toss in a vinaigrette with rice wine vinegar, nước mắm, sugar and chilies. Serve flash-fried wontons on the side. Great with a dry Riesling wine or Champagne!