

Guilt-free fish tastes much yummier

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On Saturday afternoon, I tucked into a plate of polenta-crust ed halibut and contemplated the death of the world's fisheries. If current trends in the global fishery continue, the world's oceans could be depleted by 2050. So says a new study by a group of scientists, led by a biologist from Dalhousie University in Halifax.

What is a fish lover to do?

Scare yourself into abstaining with doomsday drawings of fictional Ratfish Soup, as the artist featured on page R4 seems to suggest?

Hoard tins of Caspian Sea caviar deep in the closet where prying, environmentally correct eyes can't see?

Why not just eat responsibly by consuming or buying only sustainable species of seafood that are abundant, well managed and harvested with methods that don't haul in unwanted dolphins or scrape the ocean floor bare?

Easier said than done, I know, despite all the public-education programs available to help seafood lovers make better choices.

SeaChoice, a new marketing program developed by a Canadian coalition of non-profit groups, offers a searchable seafood database (<http://www.seachoice.org>) and handy colour-coded, wallet-sized cards that highlight which species to choose or avoid. Of course, those pocket cards are a moot tool if your local supermarket can't tell you whether the frozen haddock it's hawking was caught by trawl (bad) or hook-and-line (good).

Ocean Wise, developed by the Vancouver Aquarium, is another conservation program designed to help consumers make environmentally friendly seafood choices when dining out. Participating restaurants (the list is available at <http://www.oceanwisecanada.org>) must commit to cleaning up their menus and highlight sustainable dishes with easily identified Ocean Wise logos. Approved restaurants, mind you, need only weed out one unsustainable dish at a time.

Wouldn't it be marvellously convenient if you could just walk into a restaurant or fish market and know that every single prawn, crab and halibut filet stocked in the freezer or plunked on your plate causes minimal damage to the sea?

Welcome to Finest at Sea Seafood Boutique, a new fish shop and bistro counter where you can buy your sustainable fish and eat it too. The combined retail store and restaurant, only three weeks old, is a joint venture owned by long-time Vancouver restaurateur Bruno Born (previously of Sausi's, Bruno's and Le Coq d'Or), Pacific Salmon Foundation director Ian Angus and Victoria fisherman Bob Fraumeni.

Fraumeni's fleet of eight fishing vessels is the shop's main provider of sustainable salmon, sable fish, ling cod, halibut, albacore tuna and B.C. spot prawns. His fish is all caught with hook or approved trap (no drag netting or bottom fishing). It's all wild, local and flash-frozen at sea. It's also top quality, reasonably priced and highly coveted by local chefs in the know.

In 1977, when Fraumeni began working as a commercial fisherman, he sold his product almost exclusively to the Asian market. Three years ago, he decided to make it available locally and opened a small retail store in Victoria. This second Vancouver store goes one step further with a full kitchen that offers small meals to eat in-house and prepared foods to take home.

When I dropped by last weekend, Angus was at the door greeting customers with cheerful smiles and proud pep talks about the responsible methods used to catch the fish. A short film from the boats, showing the fishermen in action, was playing on a flat-screen TV on the back wall. Brun was behind the counter, frying up ling cod and chips in the industrial-sized kitchen. A typical fish shop, this is obviously not.

"I really believe in the product," Brun explained later by phone, adding that he was tired of the late hours a normal restaurant job entails.

"The fish we have here is superior to anything you can find elsewhere," he said, noting that business has nearly doubled in the three weeks they've been open. "It's such a thrill to work with it."

Brun's bistro serves up beer-battered sable fish, ling cod, halibut and salmon (\$6 to \$12), served with chips, homemade tartar sauce and ginger-nipped coleslaw. Depending on the day, you might find soups, spice-rubbed salmon, shrimp cocktail or steamed Thai mussels. The tender polenta-crusting halibut, served with a spicy salsa, roasted potatoes and small salad, was a steal at only \$14. A bowl of seafood bisque (\$4), made with roasted halibut bones, was so thick and delicious, I took a whole tub home (\$5.99 for 750 millilitres).

In the take-out deli counter, you'll find real tuna salad, oysters Rockefeller, crab shepherd's pie and roasted eggplants. Some of the local seafood -- neon squid, for example -- isn't easily found anywhere else. The wild spot prawns, which are usually exported to Tokyo as fast they're caught, were priced right at only \$17.99 for a one-kilogram box.

As big and lovely as they were, the local prawns didn't impress one shopper very much. She took one look at the unshelled shrimp, known for its sweet delicate flavour, and sniffed. "Do you have any bags of frozen Tiger prawns?" she asked.

You mean those bland, tasteless critters that are either farmed or trawl-caught in Thailand?

I hope that ocean killer stopped in at the Liquidation art show for a bowl of Ratfish Soup before she headed over to Safeway. I guess we still have a long way to go.

Finest at Sea Seafood Boutique is location at 4675 Arbutus St.; 604 266-1904.



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