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Sustainable Fishing Practices

The world is getting smaller all the time, and no, I'm not just talking about the polar ice caps melting. Not only are people all over the world increasingly linked electronically via the Internet and television, and not only are trade barriers and language barriers becoming less of a factor in both travel and international relations, but people are starting to realize that their actions actually have an impact on the health and well-being of the planet. Over-consumption and the industrialization of our food has pushed us to the brink of an ecological disaster, a situation that few took seriously until recently, and one in which a partisan debate still rages as to whether we should be worried or even bother to change our habits.

To make matters even more troublesome, we are now realizing that the once seemingly boundless seas are also in peril. There are many for whom this is not new news, but the severity of the situation facing our oceans - and specifically the fish and seafood that we take for granted - is finally filtering down to the consumer level, thanks in large part to the companies that are working to avoid an ecological disaster under the sea. For example, at Andronico's Market, my local grocery store, they have installed large signage over the fish case with a color-coded guide to sustainable choices in fish purchases - green for best methods and most environmentally sound choices, yellow for not as good, and red for worst practices, such as trawling and over-fishing of certain breeds. As an example of the last, there is a moratorium on catching the famed *boquerones* of Spain, the sweet white anchovies from the north Atlantic off the coast of the Basque country because of over-fishing (not by the Basques, who still fish in the same type of boats they used while fishing for cod off the coast of North America a century before Columbus sailed, but by other countries who come down there with their trawlers and scrape the sea for whatever they can get).

While retailers can certainly play a part in educating the public about the perils facing the sea and our beloved seafood, it has been from the seafood wholesalers and processors that much of the new awareness stems. At the Winter Fancy Food Show in San Diego in January, I spoke with Cynthia Fisher (what an appropriate name) of Bar Harbor Foods, purveyors of delicious seafood soups and bisques, lobster meat, sauces, and other delicacies from the ocean, which are, as their motto says, fresh off the docks of Maine. Fisher said that Bar Harbor Foods has benefited from investment money from The Sea Change Investment Fund, a group that in turn has been funded through the David and Lucile Packard Foundation (as in Hewlett-Packard), whose mission is "to promote healthy marine ecosystems, make investments in progressive companies that promote market access to seafood from environmentally-preferable sources." Sea Change's objective is to "expand the market for environmentally-preferable seafood by demonstrating that sustainable seafood is good business for the seafood industry and for investors." Sea Change provides capital for the industry to expand the market and ultimately increase consumer choice.

There are many things to consider when talking about the seafood industry, even when it's conducted on a smaller scale. There are issues of sustainability, quality, freshness, food safety and, ultimately, taste. At Bar Harbor, for example, their facility maintains Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification of products they use from fisheries already certified. They use MSC-certified Alaskan salmon, domestically caught and processed, and Alaskan pollack which is managed under the same guidelines. These species are included in their Salmon Chowder, Salmon Bisque and Fish Chowder.

They are also certified by the Food Marketing Institute as an Expert Practitioner for SQFI (Safe, Quality Food Institute). This is not only an effort to create a global standard of safe, quality food practices, but it is increasingly a requirement of a number of major retailers. One such retailer in Augusta, Maine, is Hannaford Brothers that has opened what is considered to be the nation's first 100 percent "green" grocery store; and it will surely not be the last to do so. Many believe that the SQFI certification is "increasingly necessary," says Fisher, "to provide consumers peace of mind with regard to how food is grown, processed, shipped and distributed."

Even the shells and other byproducts of the seafood industry don't have to go to waste. The EPA has laid down mandates to prevent the reintroduction of shell waste into the sea, and with that in mind, Bar Harbor owns a piece of land that serves as a collection site for the shells which eventually break down and make excellent fertilizer. In addition, they work with a local Maine artisan who crushes the shells and uses them in all sorts of designs of custom tableware, table tops, counters, tiles, and so on (www.artfulwares.com/store/).

The earth is changing quickly, and with so much attention paid to issues on land, we too often forget about the state of our oceans. Bar Harbor is not the only seafood company to implement ecological considerations in their everyday business practices, but their commitment to the cause is inspiring, and we hope many others will follow suit. As more foundations and private companies dedicate themselves to marine stewardship and sustainable fishing practices, we'll all be able to enjoy the fresh taste of seafood that is not only delicious but, as we increasingly discover, extremely healthful, too. I for one cannot imagine a world without fish and seafood on my plate on a regular basis. I live near the sea for that reason, and it is an everyday part of our lives. In that regard, I will continue to write about companies that are acting as stewards of the oceans *and* making a profit from it, rather than merely the latter.

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Here are some Web sites for further information. They were all given me by Cynthia Fisher of Bar Harbor Foods.

www.barharborfoods.com

www.msc.org (Marine Stewardship Council)

www.sqfi.com (Safe, Quality Food Institute)

www.seachangefund.com

www.oceanconservancy.org

The following recipes were provided by Bar Harbor Foods. This version of an old-fashioned clambake is a great way to fantasize about summer during the cold winter nights. The tradition of clambakes in New England began when the Native Americans taught the first settlers from Europe how to steam lobster, clams and corn-on-the-cob in seaweed-covered fire pits dug into the sand. For this version, you won't need the sand unless you want to cover your kitchen floor with it for authenticity.

Indoor Maine Clambake

Serves 4

Ingredients

4 (1½ pound) live lobsters
8 ears of shucked corn (or 8 small potatoes, or both)
4 pounds steamer clams (be sure to soak to remove sand)
½ pound unsalted butter, melted
2 to 3 pounds Maine Rockweed (seaweed or fresh spinach)
1 egg in shell

Preparation

Pour 1-inch of water into a large (20-quart) pot with the whole egg in it. Divide the green leafy stuff (Rockweed or spinach) into four equal parts. Place one part in the bottom of the pot and place the live lobsters on top. Then cover the lobsters with another layer of green leaves and put the corncobs (and/or potatoes) on top of that. Put a third layer of greens over the corn and then place the steamer clams over it. Cover the clams with the last layer of greens.

Bring the steamer to a boil over high heat, covered, and steam for 30 to 45 minutes, or until the clam shells are all wide open and the egg is hardboiled. Serve up everything but the leafy stuff on four large plates with plenty of real melted butter. Don't forget the nutcrackers. The egg is for the cook!

One of my fondest memories of living back East is sitting on a Maine dock eating a lobster roll and staring out to sea. It just doesn't get any better. With the high quality of Bar Harbor's canned whole lobster meat, one can enjoy these marvelous sandwiches anytime. You can serve this as is for a salad course, or pile it on to good whole-grain rolls for an extraordinary treat.

Maine Lobster Rolls/Lobster Salad

Ingredients

2 cans Bar Harbor Whole Lobster meat
¼ cup chopped celery
½ cup mayonnaise, more if needed
ýýý cup chopped green onions, white and some of the green parts
Salt & pepper to taste

Preparation

Combine all ingredients. If the salad is to be served within the hour, add the green onions right away. If not, add 30 minutes before serving. Cover the salad with plastic wrap and chill for at least 30 minutes before serving.