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ON THE BAY

BY LESLIE BANKER
PHOTOS BY THAD RUSSELL

SQUID

Rhode Island Fleet Feeds a Nation's Appetite

If you order calamari at a restaurant in some faraway place, such as Colorado or Texas, chances are the squid started its journey from the sea to your plate here in Rhode Island. Approximately 80 percent of the squid that is caught off the East Coast comes in on Rhode Island fishing boats before being shipped out to points all over the United States and abroad. This is good news for Rhode Islanders; it means that delicious—and local—Point Judith calamari is a staple on menus both around the state and around the nation.

Fishing runs in Phil Ruhle Sr.'s family. He's a third-generation fisherman and his son, Phil Ruhle Jr., is fourth generation. They're partners in the F/V Sea Breeze, an 80-foot-long fishing boat based in Newport, which they take fishing for squid both inshore and offshore, as far out as Georges Banks.

"I've been fishing 38 years. I always fished on squid to a certain degree," Ruhle Sr. said. The domestic market for squid increased greatly in the mid-'80s. This was due, in part at least, to a National Marine Fisheries Service initiative in the late '70s to promote alternative fisheries such as squid. And, once the American people got a taste for squid, or what some call calamari, the demand for it never went away.

Many varieties of squid roam the oceans, from monsters 20 meters long to tiny ones just two centimeters in length. All are 10-armed cephalopods with silvery eyes on the sides of their elongated heads. Rhode Island fishermen set their sites, and their nets, on two types of squid: *Loligo pealei*, or longfin squid, which, in turn, become the calamari served in so many restaurants; and *Illex illecebrosus*, or shortfin squid, which are sold mainly as bait and don't keep as long. Squid have a short life span; typically they live just under one year.

For fishermen like the Ruhles, squid season is year-round and the key is knowing where to find them. October through April, the squid are found mostly offshore; commercial fishing boats go as far as Georges Banks and are gone for days at a time. *Illex* squid are only caught offshore. In springtime, usually around April, *Loligo* squid swim inshore;



Above: Phil Ruhle Sr. is a third-generation fisherman and his son, Phil Ruhle Jr., is fourth generation.

Opposite: The work isn't over when F/V Sea Breeze comes into port.

May and June are big inshore squid-fishing months and the boats need only take day trips to catch them. Commercial fishermen aren't the only ones looking for squid; in the spring and summer you'll see plenty of people with a line in hand fishing for them off of bridges and docks along the length of the Rhode Island coast.

"Squid are funny animals," said Ruhle Sr. "They are very skittish, they herd."

Fisherman Chris Brown agrees. "There's no rhyme or reason," he said. "Squid are absolutely schizophrenic by nature, unpredictable. With squid there are no rules." When catching other types of fish, you might be able to predict where you'll find them, according to the temperature of the water or what happened last year or last time. With squid, he said, you just never know.

Brown catches squid when he can, and other fish, such as whiting, fluke or flounder, when the squid aren't cooperating. On his 54-foot boat, the F/V Grandville Davis out of Galilee, Brown fishes inshore and catches *Loligo* squid when they swim to the warmer waters nearer shore in the spring and summer.

"*Loligo* are among the most desirable squid in the world," he said. "They have the best flavor. They can be caught anywhere from Nova Scotia to Florida."

Brown says he started fishing in his early childhood. His grandfather fished and when

Brown was 20 years old, about 30 years ago, he and a partner built the Grandville Davis. Around the time when the boat was built, said Brown, a master boat builder from Maine, Grandville Davis, died and so the boat was named for him.

The F/V Grandville Davis and the Ruhles' F/V Sea Breeze are trawlers, boats that drag a huge net behind them. These are the commercial fishing boats used to catch squid and other ground fish. For squid, a special net is used with 14-foot-long diamond-shaped openings; the size of the holes allows other types of fish to escape. While most ground fish will dart up and out of the sizeable openings when

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they sense the net, squid head right into the nose of it, where they get trapped. When catching other types of fish, a different net will be used.

"Squid fishing over the course of 15 to 20 years has evolved into a very clean fishery," Ruhle Sr. said. Innovative gear is used to minimize the by-catch—the other fish that get scooped up along the way.

Ruhle Sr. and Ruhle Jr. don't fish exclusively for squid either; sometimes they go out for black sea bass, flounder or monkfish. Mixing up the types of fish you're catching is necessary to stay afloat in the fishing business. Under regulations for the squid fishery, there's a total allowable catch for the whole Atlantic region during various periods of the year. When a certain amount of squid has been landed during a given period of time, whether it's landed in Rhode Island, New York or North Carolina, the fishery is closed. When that happens, or if the squid just can't be found, it's time to fish for something else.

Once the squid are caught, some fishing boats are equipped to process and freeze the catch while the boat is still offshore. On other boats, like the Ruhles', the squid will be put on ice until they get into shore. When the squid come into land, they are often sold to processors, who will clean and freeze them. Some squid might go to the Fulton Street Fish Market in New York City; some might be sold frozen in Spain. Some might be sent all the way to China to be processed, and some will go to one of the local processors in Point Judith. It is, clearly, a global game with a local hook.

On the green and white F/V Sea Breeze, there are typically three men working with the Ruhles. Recently, they were unloading a fresh catch from a few days at sea on the dock in Newport off Lower Thames Street. On such a chilly day, when you're standing on the deck, your hands get cold fast. As the last of the fish were being hauled out of the boat, Ruhle Jr. was talking about some fishermen's superstitions that have been handed down from generation to generation along with the knowledge necessary for catching fish.

"You don't leave on a Friday," he said. "No black bags, no hatches turned upside down and no whistling." His grandfather once kicked a guy off the boat for showing up to work with a black bag.

Besides navigating these superstitions, and a host of complicated regulations, there are real financial concerns for today's fisherman. A commercial fishing boat requires thousands of gallons of fuel to run, so filling up the tank is no small expense.

"The cost of business is a huge challenge," Ruhle Sr. said, adding that since 9/11 the cost of insurance has tripled.

There's also some competition among fishermen over finding the squid. "Toughest part of squid fishing," said Brown, "is catching them and not letting everyone else know it."

Despite the challenges, fishermen like Chris Brown and the Ruhles are still out there looking for the skittish creatures in order that we may enjoy fresh calamari for dinner. Fresh calamari is a local treat whether it's prepared in pasta or in the traditional Point Judith style with a little bit of spice and a lot of real Rhode Island flavor. eR

Leslie Banker is a freelance writer and co-author of the books *The Pocket Decorator* and *The Pocket Renovator*. She recently moved from NYC to Jamestown and jumps at the opportunity to explore the many local treats and delicacies of her new home state. lesliebanker.com.