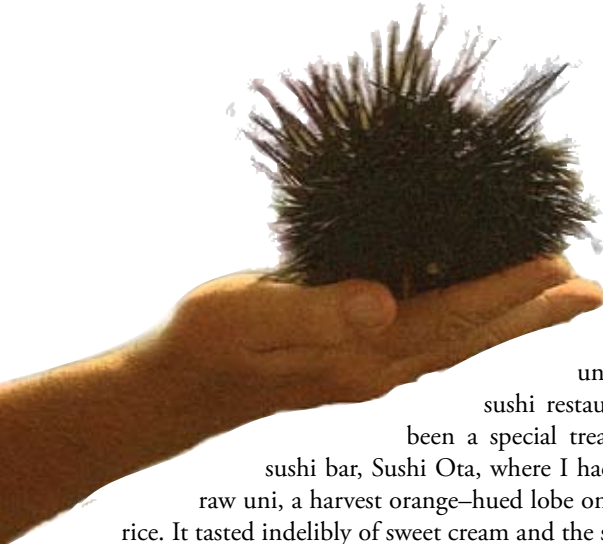


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SEARCHIN' FOR URCHIN

Catalina Offshore Brings the Local Bounty of the Sea to San Diego's Tables

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CANDICE WOO



It all started with sea urchin. For years I've been obsessed with sea urchin, or uni, as it's known in sushi restaurants. It's always been a special treat at my favorite sushi bar, Sushi Ota, where I had my first bite of raw uni, a harvest orange-hued lobe on a perfect oval of rice. It tasted indelibly of sweet cream and the sea; I was hooked immediately. Since then, I've only really dared to eat urchin at Ota because it was always so pristinely fresh. Little did I know that this beautiful sea urchin originated in waters right off our shores and came to the restaurant by way of local seafood company Catalina Offshore Products.

Dave Rudie, Catalina's founder, began his life in seafood as an urchin diver in the late 1970s. Sea urchins were plentiful along the California coast and there was a huge demand for them in the sushi restaurants of Japan. Soon, Dave was selling his locally harvested uni to legendary Japanese seafood auction house Tsukiji Market. When business boomed, he formed Catalina Offshore, collecting urchin from other divers and expanding into other fish and seafood. But the end of the Cold War in the early '90s enabled Japan to start buying cheaper sea urchin from nearby Russian fisheries, effectively ending Catalina's stake in the export trade.

Luckily, America's interest in uni was on the rise and California's sea urchin is now considered to be among the best in the world in terms of taste and quality. Today, about 20 San Diego sushi restaurants get all their sea urchin from Catalina, with some of the finest supplied to my sushi temple, Sushi Ota. Though 1998's El Niño devastated much of the Pacific Ocean's kelp forests, which provide urchins with food, the area has since bounced back and local uni is still Catalina Offshore's biggest product, accounting for a third of its sales.

Nearly 90 percent of what comes through Catalina is local, from the waters off Southern California and Baja, and most of the fish is wild caught, using hand lines to protect the undersea ecosystem and prevent the bycatch of other overfished seafood. Catalina Offshore

picks up the fish daily, either at the harbor or the beach, to ensure the shortest time lapse from the ocean to our plates. Dave, also an accomplished underwater photographer, and Tommy Gomes, Catalina's spokesperson, sales manager and a fisherman himself, are both involved with the Marine Life Protection Act Initiative, a current study that is evaluating all the coastal California fisheries to determine whether new marine conservation areas are needed to maintain sustainable local seafood systems.

My obsession with sea urchin leads me to Catalina Offshore's warehouse, located on a small side street off Morena Boulevard. Though they primarily sell wholesale to restaurants, they also have an increasingly brisk walk-in business; home cooks and seafood lovers drop by for the day's fresh local catch or fixings for at-home sushi dinners. Tommy generously takes me on an edible tour. I taste a tender, sweet chunk of raw scallop, a piece from a just-filletted bluefin tuna from Baja, some yellowfin sashimi and, most exciting of all, a single, perfect section of sea urchin. It's all a seafood dream come true.

Not quite done with my sea urchin odyssey, I return to Catalina Offshore early one morning. The sun has not yet risen but the operation is in full swing, as the day's sea urchin catch has already been retrieved from Catalina's divers, who harvest the fisheries that dot the coastline, though many say that the best-tasting variety come from off the shores of Point Loma. To preserve the urchin population, the number of diving licenses and harvesting days is limited and the size of legal urchin is regulated. Containers full of urchin, piled high like inky-purple pincushions, spill onto a large table where they're cracked and emptied into perforated trays that float in a long trough filled with sea water. I'm eager to jump in, so the ladies who work in the processing area outfit me head to toe in plastic and find a place for me on the line, where a sweet woman patiently shows me how to separate the five lobes of urchin gonads, sometimes mistakenly identified as roe, from the inedible parts of the echinoderm. Conscious of the waste produced in the cleaning process, Tommy repurposes the byproduct into all-natural fish bait called Uni Goop.

As we sort the urchin, I must admit that I'm terribly tempted to slip a few pieces into my mouth but refrain, since I've seen all the hard, hands-on effort that goes into making this delicacy available to us. After a few hours' work, the lobes have been separated and sent

over to the sorting room, where another group grades each piece by quality, determined by color and shape, and nestles them into small rectangular trays that would look familiar to frequent sushi eaters.

California Gold, Catalina's finest sashimi-grade uni, is prized by many sushi bars, including longtime clients Sushi Ota and Zenbu Sushi in La Jolla.

In the more than 25 years since Dave Rudie delivered his first local urchin, Catalina Offshore has helped promote sea urchin and many other seafood in our waters as world-renowned ingredients. Sea Rocket Bistro, a North Park restaurant devoted to featuring all-local seafood, serves local urchin bisque in whole urchin shells and restaurants like The Linkery work with Catalina because of their thoughtful fishing practices. I appreciate that there's a relatively small number of steps between the ocean and what goes on my plate.

Since I started by eating their sea urchin in a restaurant and followed its path backwards, all that remains now is to somehow talk my way onto one of Catalina's sea urchin boats to experience the harvest. And so the uni adventure continues...

Catalina Offshore Products
 5202 Lovelock St., San Diego
 619 297-9797

Walk-in hours 11 a.m.–3 p.m. Monday–Friday, 9 a.m.–noon Saturday

Candice Woo, a San Diego-based food writer, can be reached at candicew@gmail.com



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