



FROM THE FRESH WATERS DOING WHAT'S RIGHT

BY BONNY REICHERT

Photograph: Carole Topalian

“We have made a pretty big mess of things,” Tobey Nemeth announces. It is a beautiful Sunday afternoon and I’m sitting in Jamie Kennedy Wine Bar with a plate of aquatic delights in front of me. There are raw oysters slick with briny liquid, house-smoked whitefish, seared Albacore tuna, lightly pickled white anchovies... Everything is fresh and pristine and gorgeous. As the chef-de-cuisine of JK Wine Bar, Nemeth has prepared these little tastes for the assembled crowd of seafood lovers, and happy murmurs of satisfaction fill the room. Nobody is disappointed. So where’s this big mess?

The answer is under the sea. Slow Food Toronto, SeaChoice and Jamie Kennedy Restaurants have worked together to organize this multi-dimensional event – part tasting, part lecture, part Q and A – held at the Wine Bar on two successive days (the second event featured seafood dishes prepared by environmentally conscious local chefs).

Sampling what’s right is an appealing way to learn about what’s wrong with our approach to fishing, so everything on Nemeth’s plates has been chosen with sustainability in mind. But the take-away message is bigger than a fun event at a chic Toronto restaurant: With the help of partners like JK Restaurants and Slow Food Toronto, SeaChoice, a Vancouver-based national conservation program, is working hard to get the word out. As Taina Uitto, SeaChoice’s program coordinator explains, “From destructive fishing and aquaculture practices (including overfishing) to pollution and climate change, we are putting a lot of pressure on our oceans and endangering the long-term viability of har-

vested populations.” SeaChoice is casting the net wide, addressing not just consumers, but businesses, fishers and government, in an effort to change what, and how, we take from the waters.

Although we Ontarians love fish and seafood as much as anyone, we live a long way from the coast, so the trouble with our oceans can seem a little abstract. That’s where Uitto’s helpful analogy comes in: If we were to trawl the land for meat the way we trawl the ocean for fish, she says, we would not only trap the cow, we’d get the fence, the farmer’s house, the dog, the farmer’s wife... “The fence and the house are like the ocean habitat – corals and other structures that marine life depends on. The dog and the farmer’s wife represent the other species that are often caught inadvertently using unselective and harmful fishing practices,” Uitto explains.

So what should we be eating, and how can we trace its provenance?

Start by taking a good look at Canada’s Seafood Guide, SeaChoice’s carefully researched listing of popular seafood and its sustainability (see sidebar). And whether you’re at the table, the grocery store or the fishmonger, don’t be afraid to ask tons of questions. If you are going to make an educated decision, you will need to know where the fish comes from and how it was caught. For example, longline-caught U.S. Pacific cod is on the green list of best choices, while Atlantic cod is on the red list of fish to avoid. Black cod, or sablefish, which Chef Nemeth used in place of cod in an unforgettable brandade, is green-listed when it comes from Alaska and British Columbia, but yellow (indicating some

concerns) when it comes out of the water near California, Oregon or Washington State. Knowing whether to choose farmed or wild takes some fishing, too. You can embrace and enjoy farmed sturgeon and caviar but should avoid the same products if they are wild. Similarly, farmed oysters and mussels are a go while you should proceed with caution when eating wild oysters, as well as sea scallops.

The situation with salmon is reversed. SeaChoice has wild salmon on the yellow list (depending on the season), while farmed Atlantic salmon is an absolute no-go. It might be counterintuitive – shouldn't fish farming help with sustainability? But Atlantic farmed salmon practices are rife with problems, from open-net cages that allow parasites like sea lice to transfer from farmed to wild fish, to the dyes, antibiotics and pesticides that produce salmon able to survive farm conditions and show up pink and pretty on the plate. Even the low price is not what it seems, says Paul DeCampo of Slow Food Toronto: "Farmed salmon is an example of a food that only appears to be relatively inexpensive, because some of the costs of production are externalized. In the case of open-net salmon farming, the excrement and pathogens associated with production are off-loaded onto the environment, with no cost to the producer." DeCampo and other advocates prefer onshore contained systems, which capture and take responsibility for the materials they use and produce, but they can't really compete with the lower price of the unsustainable product.

Of course, salmon is not the only fish that may pose risks to your health as well as that of the environment. Everyone knows about tuna (B.C. Albacore is better than some others), but SeaChoice's guide shows that red-listed fish such as Chilean sea bass, monkfish and orange roughy can be high in mercury, too. Meanwhile, sole joins farmed salmon as a potential source of PCBs, dioxins and pesticides. In general, eating smaller fish lower on the food chain (sardines, anchovies) is often better than the great big fish we have been conditioned to expect.

For local food keepers like DeCampo and Nemeth, fish from the lakes surrounding Toronto offer exciting possibilities. The silky smoked whitefish Nemeth served at the tasting was wild and trap-net caught in Lake Huron, and DeCampo proudly states that Prince Edward County has local perch twelve months a year. At this point, overfishing is not much of a concern, and the likelihood of a consumer being able to make a direct connection with a producer is far greater, but of course there are caveats: DeCampo says that according to SOLEC (see sidebar), contaminants in the Great Lakes have come down, but they have far from disappeared. So just keep asking those questions: which lake does the fish come from, how was it caught, is it wild or farmed? Once again, the more you know about what you buy, the better off you'll be. □

Bonny Reichert is an award-winning writer and editor. After many years on staff at large consumer magazines, she left to freelance and pursue a deep interest in food. Most recently, Bonny completed a year of full-time chef school and is now focusing on food journalism exclusively.

Photo at left: Impeccably fresh Lake Huron whitefish in the kitchen at Treadwell Farm to Table Cuisine.

RESOURCES

SeaChoice (www.seachoice.org) is a program supported by a coalition of five Canadian conservation organizations including the Living Oceans Society, the David Suzuki Foundation and the Ecology Action Centre. The SeaChoice website features a wealth of research and information on both Pacific and Atlantic fish and seafood. You can also download a handy wallet-sized card of green, yellow and red choices for quick reference.

SOLEC (www.epa.gov/glnpo/solec/sogl2007/S1_Introduction.pdf) This link to research conducted by SOLEC (State of the Lakes Ecosystem Conference) – a joint venture of the Canadian and U.S. governments – will help you sort out the health of the Great Lakes in terms of contaminants, seafood sustainability and other factors.

Ocean Wise (<http://www.vanaqua.org/oceanwise>) is a Vancouver Aquarium conservation program that was created to help restaurants and their patrons make environmentally sound seafood choices. Ocean Wise is currently gauging the Toronto restaurant industry's interest in participating in their program, which could be in place by fall.

The Marine Stewardship Council (www.msc.org) bills itself as "an independent, global, non-profit organization which was set up to find a solution to the problem of overfishing."

The Endangered Fish Alliance (www.endangeredfishalliance.org) is a Toronto-based organization devoted to providing information and resources about sustainable fish choices.

