

Trawl to Table connects fishermen to consumers

RYE, NH – What does it take to get fish from the boat to a local restaurant? Right now, it may be a lot easier for most fishermen to stick with the status quo, accept the auction price, and let the fish end up ... well, who knows where?

But growing numbers of consumers are willing to pay more for seafood they can trace back to specific boats and fishermen, and fishermen increasingly need to develop markets that return a better price to the boat. That means conditions may be ripe for restaurants – where 80% of seafood is eaten in this country – to become “go-to” places where consumers can connect with local harvesters and eat local seafood.

To make that happen, we have to forge a bridge between two decidedly different worlds, those of fishermen and restaurateurs.

In many cases, chefs and restaurant managers know little about their local fishing industry and are eager to learn more about fisheries management, fishing practices, environmental impacts, and the lives of fishermen. At the same time, fishermen and others in the fishing business know little about the demands and strains that restaurateurs face each day.

“Chefs, restaurant owners, and wholesale/retail operations have the opportunity to educate the public about seafood choices,” observed Mollie Sanders of the Ipswich Shellfish Group.

By offering seafood that is harvested locally, chefs have the ability to take the lead by presenting menu choices that are flexible and based on what’s fresh and available at any given time.

On Oct. 23, New Hampshire Sea Grant and the Gulf of Maine Research Institute (GMRI) hosted a “Trawl to Table” event at the Seacoast Science Center in Rye, NH. The event was funded by the Saltonstall-Kennedy Grant Program through the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Featuring interactive fishing gear displays, presentations and discussions, and a trip to the Yankee Fishermen’s Cooperative in Seabrook, NH, the daylong forum gave chefs, restaurant

owners, fishermen, and scientists a chance to interact with one another while learning about commercial fishing, how seafood is transported, and the needs of an increasingly discerning marketplace.

Sustainable practices

Much of the day was spent presenting information to chefs who want to support local fishermen and are curious to learn more about the industry.

Steve Eayrs, a research scientist at GMRI, explained that, contrary to popular belief, “fishermen are already using gear that is surprisingly selective.”

He noted that trawl nets used by fishermen in the Gulf of Maine are

made with some of the largest diameter netting fished by the industry, allowing many nontarget species and size-classes to remain unaffected by fishing.

Eayrs also described how fishermen are working with scientists to find new ways to more efficiently select abundant species while avoiding scarcer ones and how some fishermen are using semipelagic doors to reduce fuel consumption and protect the seabed.

“When you look at it more closely, fishing impacts on the environment are, by some measures, quite a bit less than that of farming,” Eayrs said.

GMRI gear technician Adam Baukus and New Hampshire fisherman David Goethel also demonstrated how fishing gear works, using full-sized gillnets and trawl nets.

Maintaining quality

The information did not flow in just one direction. Participating fishermen also learned about the quality standards and consumer demands that people in the restaurant business have to deal with.

Ken La Valley, New Hampshire Sea Grant associate director, explained to fishermen the importance of food safety and quality handling procedures. He offered some simple tips to ensure seafood quality as spelled out in the federal Food and Drug Administration’s “HACCP” standards. The acronym

stands for “hazard analysis and critical control points.”

The bottom line is that temperature is the biggest factor affecting seafood freshness and product must remain between 32°F and 38°F from trawl to table to slow the growth of microorganisms that can spoil seafood quickly.

Fishermen can keep their catch cold by gutting fish and then running seawater over them as quickly as possible.

La Valley said fishermen should layer their gutted fish in plastic totes “like a lasagna – fish, ice, fish, ice – and make sure the totes have holes in them for proper drainage.”

New innovations, including a carbon dioxide pad used to preserve seafood longer in packaging and an ozone generator used to sterilize the boat deck, also could be useful tools both for people in the food service industry and for fishermen, he added.

Making connections

Jared Auerbach of Red’s Best Seafood in Boston discussed strategies he uses to facilitate transactions between fishermen and buyers that focus on traceability and transparency.

“By telling the story behind the seafood and providing information about the fisherman, there is value added to the product,” he said.

Red’s Best software and business model is an example of using technology and innovative marketing to connect fishermen to consumers through restaurants while capturing and directing an important part of that added value to fishermen and their crews. You can learn more about Red’s Best on the company website at <www.redsbest.com>.

Rich Pettigrew, owner and manager of Seaport Fish in Rye, NH, said, “Consumers want more information about the products to make sure they’re choosing seafood that supports good fishing practices.”

He added that resources, such as the website <www.NHseafood.com>, let folks know about the availability of different New England fish species throughout the year so consumers can learn when a species is “in season.”

Carbon footprint

We all know that the term “sustainability” is a hot topic right now. Consumers want to do the right thing

and purchase seafood that is harvested in a manner that ensures healthy future populations. But many fail to consider another aspect of sustainability – the carbon footprint of shipping food from far away, sometimes as far as halfway around the world.

“Some packaging can be misleading,” warned Evan Mallet, chef at the Black Trumpet restaurant in Portsmouth.

He explained that squid harvested in New England might be sent to China for packaging and then shipped back to New England for market distribution because it’s cheaper to package it that way.

Mislabeling on menus also can be an issue.

“I’m often surprised to see ‘fresh’ or ‘local’ on a menu when I know, because I delivered the fish, that it’s not true,” said Mollie Sanders.

It’s increasingly important to both consumers and fishermen that restaurants represent the seafood they offer accurately.

The “Trawl to Table” day provided an important opportunity for fishermen and chefs to learn from each other about their very different and uniquely challenging professions.

As consumers and chefs become more educated about seafood sourcing and sustainability, and as fishermen continue to look for ways to increase the value of their catch in the face of quota reductions, this education could translate into meaningful changes in our coastal communities.

The hope is that the more these two groups understand about each other, the more they will try to increase the amount of locally harvested seafood in restaurants.

And that would be a win-win-win situation for fishermen and related businesses, restaurants, and consumers.

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—Jared Auerbach

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