

Sustainable Seafood On Campus



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SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD STRATEGIES IN FOOD SERVICE: A CHEF'S JOURNEY

Little in our food world is more confusing than seafood and its serpentine path to our plates. The globalized seafood trade has fed billions, employed millions, enriched thousands and yet has also impoverished our oceans.

Worldwide the volume of wild-caught fish has remained stable, but the effort needed to catch this amount of fish has increased. Currently 85% of global fish stocks are fully exploited, over-exploited or depleted – and demand for seafood is expected to triple in the coming decades.

Even as we consider the diminished capacity of fisheries around the planet, we are encouraged to eat more seafood for its health benefits. We are at a defining moment.

Food service operators at schools, hospitals and institutions can have a significant impact. These operators provide respite from busy and stressful days. They constantly strive to improve their guests' quality of life. Sustainability is the sum of our choices, and the ones made at the table represent an enormous opportunity.

The food service operators who collaborated with us told me that they felt they had empowered themselves to serve seafood more often. Here, I've distilled our combined insights from that work into a short guide for any operator looking to embrace sustainability through the lens of building a successful business. I expect you'll have great success along your journey to discovering what sustainability means to you and your business.

CORE CONCEPTS:

How to Dig In and Simplify a Complex Process

Different definitions of "sustainable" abound. Using third party information and messaging to frame our sustainability efforts can result in an impersonal decision-making process. Instead of relying solely on external organizations' information, first connect your definition to the values that have the most meaning to you. We discovered that incorporating a diverse set of principles (including jobs, health, economy, heritage and cultural preservation) was a powerful approach.

Then turn to research and science-based measurements to make sure your actions are in keeping with these goals. In doing so we do not diminish the role of science-based sustainability but rather we frame that science through the lens of personal values and stories.

KEY FACTORS AFFECTING SEAFOOD DECISIONS

- Price
- Volume available for order scale
- Customer taste and choice
- Ease of preparation
- Species' importance to the local culture
- Guest advocacy or third party groups
- Campus or institutional initiatives

GETTING STARTED:

Shifting your thinking on seafood and what's possible

Why matters more than what

Stories sell. Use the “catch of the day” as an opening to sell your dish and highlight how serving this fish reflects your operation’s values. Guests don’t usually care what you know about sustainability until they know why you care about sustainability.

When you share the story, guests feel like participants in a solution. Storied seafood also creates a direct link to the community that provides our ingredients. Much as farmers markets have reconnected consumers to agriculture, storied seafood humanizes a commodity whose provenance is not often considered.

It doesn’t have to cost more. Get creative.

Price neutrality tops the list of roadblocks for institutions working on new food service policies. However, it’s possible to succeed in maintaining cost-neutral purchasing while increasing the sustainable seafood served.

Thinking creatively about seafood products means serving the finest and freshest seafood at a fraction of the regular cost. Opportunities with purveyors abound. Fresh scallop meat set aside for cosmetic reasons following the shucking process can sell at a competitive price. Salmon tail pieces can be poached and flaked over salads. Chowder fish, the trim, are perfect for a green curry.

Fresh isn’t always best.

Many chefs distrust frozen fish. The bias was earned decades ago, when technology was limited and unscrupulous fishmongers froze on Saturday what didn’t sell on Friday. However, technological advances have emerged to deliver frozen product that has the same quality as fresh – sometimes it’s even better, and at a lower cost. Frozen product is often processed within hours, capturing freshness and eliminating spoilage and loss. The product is shipped by container, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and eliminating the high cost of air-freight.

Canned seafood is another underutilized category. Canned pink salmon can be used to make salmon and quinoa cakes. It’s an alternative to tuna for the salad bar, and it can be tossed with warm buttered noodles and herbs for a light entrée. It’s also an easy to inventory and manage.

Aquaculture

Farmed fish now accounts for roughly half of all the seafood people eat on this planet. The overwhelming scientific and industry consensus regards aquaculture as a positive and vital part of the global food supply.

Yet aquaculture has proven to be a divisive issue. Single-species, high-density fish farming has driven many unsustainable practices. Fortunately, forward-thinking fish farmers, entrepreneurs and scientists are working on systems and practices to raise fish without negative impacts. Seaweeds, shellfish, and integrated aquaculture systems can actually be restorative in how they impact ecosystems; making their environment healthier and more resilient.

Chances are sustainable farmed fish already available through your supplier may be delivered alongside a great story that your guests likely want to hear.

HERE ARE SOME SIMPLE STRATEGIES TO BEGIN YOUR JOURNEY:

- 1. Create a working document to track your purchases.** Pull together data for at least one year of your seafood purchases and put the information into a spreadsheet, preferably divided by quarter or menu cycle. Include any details you have about average price per item, volume, country of origin, market form and catch method. Ask your purveyors to help you with this process.
- 2. Rate the sustainability of your purchases.** The Seafood Calculator on FishChoice.com is a great tool that allows you to cross-reference sustainability criteria from credible industry leaders. Color-code the purchases in your spreadsheet by rating. This will show where you are starting so you can begin the process of improving.
- 3. Evaluate your performance.** Calculate the number of products or purchased volume in each color category. If you use volume, you can see how improving a given product will affect the overall percentage of sustainable seafood served. Conduct a quarterly benchmark analysis of purchases to show your progress and reveal seasonal patterns.
- 4. Set sustainable seafood goals.** If your institution or corporate officers have a sustainability policy, see how it could apply to seafood procurement. If a policy doesn't exist, or it does but lacks clear goals for seafood, this is an opportunity for team building. Bring together as many departments, team leaders, purchasing agents and chefs as you can. Set the goals together.
- 5. Establish a reasonable pace of change.** Challenge, but don't overwhelm your team and build in some flexibility. Revist your plan based on feedback from production teams.
- 6. Draft a concise value statement.** Use the criteria you develop to write your statement. Include clear goals presented in a series of progressive steps.
- 7. Look for early wins.** Focus on easier product solutions while you research alternatives to tougher-to-navigate products like shrimp and canned tuna. This creates momentum and helps you achieve a few wins at the start.

RESOURCES

Aquaculture Stewardship Council

asc-aqua.org

Center for Health and the Global Environment

CHGEHarvard.org

Chefs Collaborative

chefscollaborative.com

Fish Choice

FishChoice.com

Future of Fish

FutureofFish.org

Gulf of Maine Research Institute

gmri.org

Gulf Wild

mygulfwild.com

Marine Stewardship Council

msc.org

Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch

seafoodwatch.org

New England Aquarium

neaq.org/sustainableseafood

NOAA's FishWatch Project

FishWatch.gov

Sea2Table

sea2table.com

Shedd Aquarium

Sheddaquarium.org

Trace Register

traceregister.com

UN State of the World's Fisheries

fao.org/3/a-i3720e/index.html

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS:

Troubleshooting the most stuck points for implementing sustainability

Challenge: Make “catch of the day” sexy and appealing

Solution: Work with your supplier to create a scheduled flow of market trends and emerging opportunities. Only by engaging with your salesperson can you find out that today the flounder was “glistening like a diamond.” These anecdotes make for a unique guest experience.

Challenge: Creating a cohesive policy for improvement

Solution: Although there are myriad certifications and rankings, institutions can successfully navigate them. Some choose a single tool and make a full commitment to the Marine Stewardship Council or Seafood Watch. Others use several tools to guide their choices, focusing on the source most relevant to a particular product. Find what works for you.

“SELL THE DISH, NOT THE FISH”

Challenge: Incorporating unfamiliar seafood into the menu

Solution: By pairing unfamiliar fish with comforting and recognizable flavors you can tap into known preferences to shift the focus. You’ll also reduce the risk of waste. For example, guests can easily imagine how a steaming tray of fish baked in a lightly spiced tomato sauce that’s garnished with chopped fresh oregano will taste – even if they haven’t tried the specific fish before.

Challenge: Guests who don’t care about sustainability

Solution: Customer satisfaction and meeting sustainability goals don’t have to be mutually exclusive. Sustainability overlaps with values like health, comfort and hospitality that are central to the institutions serving seafood.

Challenge: Minimizing waste

Solution: Sustainability is not measured strictly by how an ingredient is produced – we also waste food through over-consumption. Programs where seafood is served plated on a dish will give you control over the portion size. Another strategy is to serve popular dishes that call for smaller protein portions. For example, the protein in a fish taco usually weighs around an ounce but the result still satisfies guests.

Challenge: Training kitchen staff to work with new fish species

Solution: When introducing a lesser-known fish species to a menu, your cooks must be confident that it’s delicious. Then they will take pride in serving it. An educational tasting session shows cooks how to think beyond species-specific recipes. (See: Running a Seafood Diversity Training) In taste tests we’ve conducted, despite a price differential of up to \$10 per pound, there was no correlation between price and taste preference rankings.

Challenge: Planning menus around a variable ingredient

Solution: When the item in the center of the plate is a constant variable, how can food service operators develop menus in advance? This is where your relationship with your seafood purveyor becomes crucial. By being adaptive to the market supply, you’ll be in a great position to work with the purveyor to find delicious high quality, sustainable fish at great prices. Working closely with the purveyor means forecasting species that are likely to be available, and coming up with alternate options if needed. Use their expertise to verify that available species meet your criteria. Over time you’ll begin recognizing seasonal availability patterns and market fluctuations that were intimidating at first.

TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL:

You've gotten past the basics. Now here's how to refine your efforts as you go.

- **Connect** with a well-known local chef. A local chef can offer a trusted perspective on a particular product or help you gain a better understanding of seafood-related news. This relationship can even lead to a guest chef appearance showcasing your progress.
- **Create** ways for guests to interact with your team in the cafeteria. Your willingness to openly share successes and failures elevates guests' perception of your sustainability efforts. Use a service area, cooked to order grill, stir-fry stage, a carving station or featured entrée presentation area as an opportunity to share information about a product or initiative. When the kitchen staff engages with guests this way, you can turn potential critics into supporters.
- **Bring** every team member into staff training. Long-term success in achieving sustainability goals requires the participation of every team member, from the receiving dock through the cashier to the dishwashing crew. A team-wide sense of ownership has many benefits.
- **Look** to your seafood suppliers as allies. You don't actually need to find new vendors to make the shift toward purchasing sustainable seafood. Engage your current suppliers in developing your policy and include them as a partner from the start. They spend all day thinking about seafood. Once you clearly identify your seafood program goals, a vendor can help ensure your success.
- **Communicate** the motivation behind sustainability efforts to your guests. Let your guests know what sustainable seafood means to you. Acknowledge the sources of scientific information used to guide your decisions. By being transparent about pursuing a path of constant progress toward sustainability, you are setting realistic expectations, earning trust and building loyalty.

Through these efforts, operators experienced numerous successes:

- Chefs observed improvements in employee satisfaction and efficiency. Working with a range of different fish species introduced excitement and new skills into their routines.
- Operators that conducted regular guest satisfaction surveys received more positive comments, particularly for the additional seafood choices in their menus.
- The increase in seafood options made menus more healthful and allowed operators to cut back on red meat served. Some locations also increased guest participation which, in turn, increased their sales.

SEAFOOD DIVERSITY TASTING

Hosting a staff-wide blind seafood tasting can instill confidence in your culinary team around fish species that might be unfamiliar at first, and changes focus to the culinary characteristics rather than the species. Ask your purveyor to supply as many fish species as possible that share particular characteristics such as "flaky white flesh" (hake, haddock, Pollock, ling, monkfish, dogfish, tra, swai, basa, catfish, flounder and tilapia).

Place the fillets on a single sheet tray lined with lightly oiled parchment paper, segregating by species. Keep each fillet's identity and price per pound in a separate place. Season with salt and cook at 325°F just until the fish will flake easily under gentle pressure.

Ask your team to taste each of the fish in the same order, taking brief notes on each fish as they taste. At the end, invite the staff to share their thoughts about each fish. Once everyone has spoken and favorites have emerged, reveal the species and price per pound.

Tasting the fish this way helps cooks discover which ones are interchangeable in terms of flavor, texture and appearance. Variations in freshness among different fish will also become apparent.