

The Best Fish Is Also the Most Local. Why Is It So Hard to Find?

Seafood caught in nearby waters has long been left out of the farm-to-table movement. But these people have set out to get it into stores and restaurants.



By Melissa Clark

Melissa Clark, a columnist for the Food section, has reported extensively on the environmental impact of seafood. She reported from Montauk, N.Y.

April 23, 2024

On a cold, windy February morning on Shinnecock Bay, on the South Fork of Long Island, N.Y., Ricky Sea Smoke fished for clams from the back of his 24-foot boat. The fisherman, whose real name is Rick Stevens, expertly sorted through haul after haul as they were dumped onto the sorting rack.

Among the usual littlenecks and cherrystones were delicacies that would make chefs swoon: sweet, plump razor clams; vermilion-fleshed blood clams; and dainty limpets (also known as slipper snails) with their inimitable saline, buttery flavor. Depending on the season, fishers like Mr. Stevens can bring in even more treasures, like scallops, squid, blue crabs, striped bass, mackerel and skate.

But almost none of them are available locally.

Recipe: Creamy Fish With Mushrooms and Bacon



You can use any mild, white-fleshed fish you like in this recipe, finished with bacon, tomatoes and mushrooms. Kerri Brewer for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Spencer Richards.

Instead, at restaurants in nearby East Hampton, you'll find pasta topped with Manila clams from the West Coast and shrimp cocktail with red shrimp from Argentina. At fish counters across Long Island, imported salmon fillets glisten in greater profusion than local mackerel and black sea bass.

Just a year ago, Mr. Stevens would have thrown those pristine blood clams and limpets into the sea. "No one wanted them," he said.

The more popular parts of this catch (littlenecks, cherrystones, black sea bass) would be trucked to dealers at the Hunts Point wholesale market in the Bronx, then sent for processing (often overseas) and sold all over the world. Maybe — a week or more later — an even smaller portion, far less fresh, could make its way back to Long Island stores and restaurants. (Or so one hopes. What's labeled Long Island seafood might come from any number of places. Seafood from big dealers like the ones at Hunts Point is notoriously hard to trace.)

This startlingly inefficient path seems as if it should be an aberration, but it's standard in

the United States, where seafood is routinely trucked hundreds of miles to centralized dealers, changing hands four or five times before ending up at a local fish counter or restaurant, in far worse shape for the commute.



K.C. Boyle, left, an owner of Dock to Dish with seven fishing families from Montauk, sorting through clams with Rick Stevens. Last year, Mr. Stevens began sending his clams to Dock to Dish. Lindsay Morris for The New York Times

But late last year, Mr. Stevens found a workaround by sending his clams to Dock to Dish, one of a growing number of small businesses across the country — including restaurant suppliers, shops, farmers' markets and community-supported fisheries — that are dedicated to helping fishing communities sell their catch directly to local markets.

For chefs and home cooks, this means that finding truly fresh, local wild seafood is getting a little easier — at least for anyone willing to wade past the deluge of imported farmed salmon to find it.

Dock to Dish is committed to buying whatever seafood fishing boats bring in, limpets and all, then selling it directly to nearby customers, often within 24 to 48 hours. Chefs at New York City restaurants, including ILIS, M. Wells and Houseman, get to offer local

specialties like exceptionally fresh royal red shrimp and blood clams.

“We want to wage war on branzino and Chilean sea bass,” said K.C. Boyle, who owns Dock to Dish with seven fishing families from Montauk. “We have fluke and black sea bass,” he said, “which are infinitely better and more sustainable.”



For the proprietors of Mermaid’s Garden in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, persuading customers to choose lesser-known species, like pompano and porgies, is a daily challenge. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Shoppers at fish markets like Mermaid’s Garden in Brooklyn can buy sustainable, easy-to-cook fillets like hake and golden tilefish. And by cutting out the middlemen, fishers get more money — an average of about 20 percent more — for their catch, which supports their community.

“Every year, we lose more fishing families because of economics,” Mr. Boyle said. “The kids feel like they have to leave because they can’t make a living.”

Some 65 percent to 80 percent of the seafood consumed in the United States is imported,

while the country exports much of its seafood (worth about \$5 billion in 2023), said Joshua Stoll, an associate professor of marine policy at the University of Maine and a founder of the Local Catch Network. Sending seafood overseas shifts a significant portion of profits away from fishing communities that desperately need it.

All this means that the supply chains needed to support local seafood have been long neglected. But there are people working to rebuild them. And because of their work, finding local seafood is getting easier. The website Local Catch Network, which supports community-based seafood systems, allows consumers to search for local sources. And even some large retailers like Whole Foods Market have started programs in coastal areas, where they buy a portion of their seafood directly from fishing boats without going through middle men.



Marcus Jacobs, a co-owner of Porgy's Seafood Market in New Orleans, attending to some customers. Porgy's buys all its seafood from local fishing boats. Emily Kask for The New York Times

In New Orleans, Porgy's Seafood Market buys all its seafood — to sell at its retail counter and serve at an adjacent restaurant — from local fishing boats. In a city surrounded by water, Porgy's is one of the only shops devoted to buying direct from local fishers.

Porgy's commitment to local catch is inherent in its very name. Although porgies are plentiful and sweetly flavored, they are small and hard to fillet, so most fishing boats consider them unmarketable.

"There's a lot of great fish that are underutilized because customers aren't familiar with them, like blackfin tuna and rainbow runners," said Dana Honn, a founder of Porgy's. "But the fishers know we'll take whatever they have."

For those who are leery about unfamiliar fish, the restaurant's deep-fryer comes in handy, said Marcus Jacobs, a co-owner. "People will try anything on a po' boy," he said.



"People will try anything on a po' boy," said Mr. Jacobs about those who may be leery of new kinds of fish. Here, a B-liner snapper po' boy, left, and a blackened porgy po' boy. Emily Kask for The New York Times

Yet while that may work for restaurants, getting home cooks to try something new is another thing entirely.

At Mermaid's Garden, which gets its seafood from small-boat, domestic fisheries, persuading customers to choose lesser-known species, like pompano and porgies, is a daily challenge, said Bianca Piccillo, who owns the shop in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, with her husband, Mark Usewicz.

“People are already terrified to cook fish at home, so they don’t want to deviate from the recipe,” Mr. Usewicz said.

After being in business for a decade, the couple have educated their customers, shifting them away, for example, from farmed salmon (which they don’t even carry) to locally farmed steelhead trout, a more sustainable substitute.

“It would be so much easier just to sell farmed salmon, and we’d be financially rewarded for it,” Ms. Piccillo said. “But I wouldn’t eat it, and I’m not going to sell something I wouldn’t eat.”

Finding reliable sources took Ms. Piccillo and Mr. Usewicz several years, and it can be even harder for a restaurant just starting out, even one as on-trend as Place des Fêtes in nearby Clinton Hill.



Bianca Piccillo and her husband, Mark Usewicz, own Mermaid’s Garden, which gets its seafood from small-boat, domestic fisheries. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

“We didn’t want to be dependent on the distributors, so spent a lot of time banging our heads against the wall, asking people where to get stuff,” said the chef and co-owner Nico Russell.

Because of its small size and flexible menu, the restaurant can hand-sell supremely fresh seafood that’s delicious but traditionally overlooked, such as mackerel and skate.

Like many high-end New York restaurants, Place des Fêtes gets much of its fish from small dealers who work outside the usual system, like Sue Buxton of Day Boat Fresh in Stonington, Maine.

Ms. Buxton has been supplying chefs like Jean-Georges Vongerichten and Thomas Keller for more than 25 years, buying peekytoe crab, scallops and lobsters directly from local fishing boats, and shipping it to restaurants overnight. For decades, Day Boat Fresh was one of only a handful of options for chefs around the country who wanted this kind of rarefied seafood. But, working largely alone, Ms. Buxton could supply only a few dozen chefs, and even they had to know someone to get on her list. Home cooks looking for the same quality had nowhere to turn.

Much has changed since then. Ms. Buxton recently expanded by starting Buxton Boats Home Edition, which sells directly to the public.

Togue Brawn, who also sells fresh Maine seafood direct to consumers through two companies, Dayboat Blue and Downeast Dayboat, likens the increasing demand to the growth of farm-to-table movement.

Thirty years ago, you had to ask a lot of questions if you wanted to know where your vegetables came from, she said. Now, menus regularly list farm partners.

Ms. Brawn is following the same playbook with her scallops, labeling catches with their points of origin so her customers can learn about their merroir (the ocean analogue to terroir).

Empowered by this information, increasingly knowledgeable seafood lovers are helping to create change in the system.

“Chefs know their farms but not their fishermen,” Ms. Brawn said. “Seafood is finally starting to catch up.”

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Melissa Clark has been writing her column, A Good Appetite, for The Times's Food section since 2007. She creates recipes for New York Times Cooking, makes videos and reports on food trends. She is the author of 45 cookbooks, and counting. [More about Melissa Clark](#)