

FISH STORY

Barton Seaver and the quest for sustainable seafood

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It's a busy Tuesday morning, and in the open kitchen at Hook restaurant in Georgetown, the cold cardboard boxes are stacking up. With practiced hands, Chef Barton Seaver tears open a box and pulls out an amazing thing: a beautiful fish, three feet long, shining with silvery scales and so flexible and muscular that it almost seems alive. Seaver identifies it as "Bluefish, from Maryland," and quickly slices the beast in half. He deftly carves it into perfect filets and stacks them in a pan. There's no need for thawing, because this fish was caught just a day ago and never frozen. "Why freeze it?" Seaver asks scornfully. "We're going to use it tonight and we'll get more tomorrow."

Even more important than where and when the fish was caught, Seaver knows the way it was caught and the state of the species worldwide. Seaver is a leading local proponent of the sustainable seafood movement, and in the quest to help Washingtonians dine deliciously but responsibly, his kitchen takes in as much information as it does finny flesh.

There are thousands of edible fish species — hundreds in the U.S. alone. "But I'd be surprised if the average American can name ten," Seaver says. "Even chefs would be hard pressed to come up with twenty. And when school kids in the city are asked to draw fish, they draw fish sticks!" Far from looking down on such cultural fish-illiteracy, Seaver and some like-minded chefs have set out to correct it. Teaching diners to go beyond a few familiar favorites is called "diversifying demand", and it keeps trendy flavor-of-the-month species from getting fished out of existence. "Serving, say, tautog takes the pressure off someplace else, like cod."

Chef de Cuisine Josh Whigham picks up another box and pours out an avalanche of small, bright-colored red snappers. "Those are from Trinidad-Tobago," says Seaver, pointing with his blade. "You have to go overseas for the tropical species." Even as he works, a handful of Tobago fishermen are out in their boat catching more — with fishing poles. "Good luck emptying the ocean that way!" Their catch will arrive at Hook by FedEx tomorrow morning.

"This is how sustainability will work in the future: by supporting small, local, artisanal fisheries that don't have a damaging impact on the environment."

Bluefish chopped and ready for brining, Seaver hauls up a thick slab of striped wild bass, also a Maryland catch and a sustainability success story. Local bass fisheries were on the verge of collapse before Maryland and Virginia cooperated to bring the species back. "This is one of the best fish in the ocean," Seaver says; a raw slice is delicate, translucent, firm and sweet. "If I won't eat it raw," says Seaver, "I won't serve it to you cooked."

Tonight, after soaking in a sugar brine, the bass will end up wood-grilled and served over a stew of squash and onions. Whigham makes a lot of the menu decisions, freeing Seaver for his larger mission. The two put almost as much thought into their produce as their fish, patronizing local farmer's markets and knowing who grows each vegetable and how.

"The role of the chef is to convince people through taste," Seaver continues, slicing up some gold-spotted mackerel from Spain. "It's not about saying no. When someone comes in and asks for Chilean sea bass, you can explain that you have sablefish, and how it's similar and very good." Then the meal has to actually be good. "Then, hopefully, that person will be going into other restaurants and asking for sablefish."

Seaver gets very intense as he explains: "The really big users, like Red Lobster, will always buy in bulk and without variety. That's why chefs who can vary their menus, who can cook well, have to learn to use what's available." In his vision, white tablecloth restaurants like Hook can start the trend, and gradually people will learn to eat what's good at each moment, instead of simply demanding more of the same old thing until it's gone.

-- Joel Sparks