

PIONEER PRESS

TwinCities.com

Twin Cities are more savvy about sustainable seafood, but what does that mean? It's complicated

By [JESS FLEMING](#) | jfleming@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press

PUBLISHED: April 3, 2019 at 9:33 am | UPDATED: April 3, 2019 at 6:11 pm

Just 10 years ago, the term “sustainable seafood” was pretty esoteric, and even if a consumer cared about the health of our oceans and seafood populations, it was difficult to determine which fish were safe to eat.

We've come a long way, baby. Particularly in the Twin Cities. Restaurants, retail outlets and consumers are increasingly savvy about which fish to eat, which to avoid, and even best practices in growing and harvesting seafood.



Owner Tim McKee at Octo Fishbar, a new seafood restaurant in Lowertown at 289 E. 5th Street on January, 3, 2018. (Ginger Pinson / Pioneer Press)

Chefs, like Tim McKee of sustainability-focused Octo Fishbar in St. Paul, are leading the charge to change the culture in restaurants, and Twin Cities retail outlets like Coastal Seafoods, Almanac Fish and even grocery stores like Lunds

and Byerlys and Kowalski's are going out of their way to source their fish sustainably.

So how do you know a fish is sustainably caught or raised? What does that even mean?

The answer is incredibly complicated.

A MOVEMENT

The larger movement toward sustainable seafood and cleaner oceans started in 1999 when the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch program was established.

Between exhibits, pamphlets, an app for consumers, partnerships with zoos, aquariums, retail outlets and restaurants, the program has brought awareness of the plight of our over-fished, polluted oceanic systems to millions of people worldwide.

Their list of seafood, listed by green (best choices), yellow (good alternatives) or red (avoid), has offered an easy way for consumers and retailers to navigate the often murky waters of choosing which fish to eat. The way a fish is categorized can change at any time, but currently farmed scallops and U.S. catfish are green choices while bluefin tuna has long been on the list of fish to avoid.

“It’s the most well-recognized consumer guide,” McKee said, noting that a program he’s heavily involved in, Smart Catch, uses those color guides to help chefs make better choices.

Smart Catch is a James Beard Foundation program that encourages chefs to move from red choices to green, but not necessarily all at once.

Restaurants start at the “committed” level, which essentially means they agree to start down the path of making better choices.

“Once you’re a committed member, you go through an assessment, and the foundation looks at all your purchases of seafood, and then they look at the country of origin and the harvest methods. They’re really in depth about finding out about the fish that these restaurants are using,” McKee said.



Urban Organics in St. Paul is raising Arctic char, pictured, and rainbow trout in tanks that also grow greens. (Photo courtesy of Urban Organics)

The ultimate goal is to become a “leader” restaurant, which means you’ve got two or fewer “red” items on your purchase list, and that can comprise less than 8 percent of your total volume of seafood served, and there must not be any items on your menu listed as endangered. You must complete an assessment three times per calendar year.

McKee's Octo Fishbar is the only Minnesota restaurant in the "leader" category right now, but the program, which the foundation took over in 2017, is in its infancy.

Shoreline Wild Salmon specializes in catching wild salmon by line and hook and selling it directly to Midwest retail outlets. (Photo Courtesy of Shoreline Wild Salmon)



McKee, who is well-respected in the Twin Cities chef community, took the idea around to restaurants in October, which was National Seafood Month, and got 75 local eateries to join Smart Catch at the "committed" level. They will have to complete three assessments in a year to become leaders.

McKee said the number of restaurants that immediately jumped on board was heartening, and shows that Twin Cities chefs are committed to ocean conservation.

"In 25 of those restaurants, we've removed all the red items and moved them to more sustainable options," he said.

The Twin Cities are close to Seattle, which is where the program began, in the number of participating restaurants.

"It kind of makes me laugh a little bit that we're in the middle of the country and we're leaders in sustainable seafood," McKee said.

RETAIL CHANGES

The chef is also involved at the retail and wholesale level, as a partner in St. Louis Park's The Fish Guys, which supplies many restaurants with seafood and also runs a retail counter in Market House Collaborative, the food hall where Octo Fishbar resides.

But McKee and The Fish Guys aren't the only purveyors working hard to improve the Twin Cities seafood market.

At Coastal Seafoods, which is owned by Chicago-based Fortune Fish, they're a part of an organization called Sea Pact, which is helping fisheries and farmers make the often expensive conversion to sustainable methods.

Farms can be incredibly polluting, especially if they are overcrowded and using antibiotics and pesticides.

But newer, more modern farming methods can actually be better for the environment than some methods of catching wild fish. By giving the fish plenty of room to swim and feeding them a cleaner diet, farms can be a greener option than wild catching, which, if done wrong, can result in over-fishing and depletion of a species or large amounts of “by-catch” — catching other (sometimes endangered) species along with those you’re intending to fish for.

“It’s been really, really cool what we continue to do with the relationships that we build with these people,” said Keane Amdahl, marketing director for Coastal Seafoods and Fortune Fish Minnesota. “(We work with fisheries to) make a plan of how to get from point A to point B. We continue sourcing from them so they can get to where they need to go. Because if they can’t sell fish, they can’t afford upgrades.”

For that reason, Coastal might source something that comes up as red on the Monterey Bay list, but “maybe there’s a deeper story,” Amdahl said.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Relationships are at the heart of what both Coastal Seafoods and The Fish Guys do, and Amdahl has a lot of stories about farmers the retailer works closely with, including Nordic Blu, the first green-listed farmed Atlantic salmon, which Coastal was the first market in the U.S. to sell, and Shoreline Wild Salmon, which catches salmon in Alaska via hook and line and sells it to purveyors in the Midwest.

But some of the most interesting stories are coming from innovators who are raising seafood right here in Minnesota.



Paul Damhof raises shrimp on his former dairy farm near Willmar, Minn. (Photo courtesy of Keane Amdahl)

At Urban Organics, the St. Paul company is growing fish and greens in the same facility. They started out with tilapia, but have since begun farming Arctic char and rainbow trout. The fish waste feeds the greens, which

grow above the tanks, and the greens keep the water clean for the fish. It’s a symbiotic relationship that produces delicious fish and greens, both of which are sold locally.

If that wouldn't have seemed strange enough to our ancestors, there are a few farms growing shrimp right here in Minnesota.

Coastal is just starting to work with a farm called Simply Shrimp near Willmar, Minn., where Paul Damhof converted his family dairy farm to a shrimp farm in 2016.

"We had a hailstorm that destroyed everything on July 5, 2016, and we started this project July 6," Damhof said. "I thought that hailstorm was the worst thing that could happen to me, but you know, God's got a plan."

Damhof said shrimp farming started as a joke in the family, but the more he started looking into it the more intrigued he was. And it turns out, the well water beneath his farm is perfect for raising shrimp.

Word got out quickly, and Damhof said that most of the shrimp he grows, he sells to the surrounding community. He's working on expanding the operation, though, and hopes to supply the Twin Cities market in the future.

"As a country, we import 88 percent to 90 percent of the shrimp we eat," Damhof said.

The positive environmental impact of growing more of that shrimp closer to home would be huge, Damhof said. Plus, his operation is clean and efficient.

"I've got zero water discharge," Damhof said. "It's a one-time draw, and once the water is up to temp, and I add salinity, the only water I add is due to evaporation. You constantly re-use the water, and the older the water, the better."

And his methods are producing some tasty results.

"Most farmed shrimp don't have a lot of flavor to them, but this shrimp is really sweet and really unbelievable," Amdahl said.

THE FUTURE



Nordic Blu Salmon is the first green-listed farmed salmon, and Coastal Seafoods is the first retail outlet in the country to carry it. (Photo courtesy of Nordic Blu)

Just because strides have been made doesn't mean that everything is perfect.

There are still plenty of challenges to overcome in getting everyone on board with sustainable seafood practices.

"The seafood industry is technologically challenged," Amdahl said. "In some cases they are decades behind in terms of technology. So our challenge is finding these people and helping them, making that connection with the boat and helping them get there."

In terms of public perception, old ideas can die hard. For instance, many people think farmed fish is dirty, or bad for the environment, even though that's changing.

Amdahl would also like to see consumers diversify their seafood choices.

"You can't just eat the same things all the time," he said. "You have to change it up. Mixing it up is really kind of key. It's not like land-based proteins. Seafood there's all kinds of options, and that's a way to make sure we don't deplete any one kind of seafood."