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## Sustainable Seafood and the City

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The rise of the real estate bubble saw the emergence of a devil-may-care meat culture, with every restaurant in New York City rushing to put some new variation of pork belly on the menu. From this sudden meat mania sprung the PC carnivore. In 2006, Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* was released and the already building sustainability movement came to a head, prompting the ubiquity of words like organic and grass-fed in the city's restaurants and markets.

Now, New York City's fickle tastes are once again changing. Where once indulgent temples to meat would have opened, seafood restaurants are popping up. April Bloomfield, the woman behind the wildly popular nose-to-tail gastropub The Spotted Pig, opened the John Dory in November of 2008, where well-to-do diners eat char-grilled striped bass amidst the glow of a massive aquarium. More high-profile seafood projects followed. Harbour. David Burke's Fishtail. The curiously named Flex Mussels. Most recently, a pair of seafood-centric heavy hitters, chef George Mendes' Aldea in the Flatiron District and Marea, from Michael White of Convivio fame, became the darlings of New York's restaurant scene. Not that meat is over, per se (see Minetta Tavern), but it is undeniable that a new trend has caught the fancy of the New York foodie.

But if the city's food culture is shifting, are sustainability practices shifting along with it? Has all the recent focus on organic farming and humanely raised animals extended to the sea? When diners read that Fishtail aims to be "the first sustainable seafood restaurant" on its website, do they even understand what that means?

"It hasn't been easy," says David Burke, the restaurateur behind Fishtail and seven other restaurants across the country, about having a sustainable seafood program. "Consumers say things like 'I want Chilean sea bass,' but we have to stick to our guns."

Fishtail's menu is currently 80 to 85 percent sustainable, although Burke would like to get that number to 100. He mostly sources from Connecticut's Litchfield Farms as well as his company-owned fishing boat. Although he is firmly committed to the cause, he is struck by how customers can care so much about things like grass-fed beef but still remain ambivalent about sustainable seafood.

"You drive past the farms and you can see the cows. You drive past sea and you can't see the fish."

And if the people don't care, then the restaurants don't care.

"You have to work harder (to serve sustainable seafood). You can't just call up your fish guy and ask for whatever you want. You have to ask where it's caught, how it's caught and all of that."

Therein lies the problem. If diners don't care that their cod is overfished or that their halibut was caught by bottom trawling, restaurants certainly won't take the extra effort to ensure their seafood is sustainable. Vox populi, vox Dei, as the old proverb goes, and until the public demands it the industry will not change.

There are glimmers of hope. Rupert Murray's documentary *The End of Line*, with its gloomy prediction that with no change in our fishing practices we will effectively see the end of seafood by 2048, is trying to do for sustainable seafood what *An Inconvenient Truth* did for climate change. The Monterey Bay Aquarium has even released an iPhone app with up-to-date information on which fish are sustainably caught or farmed and which are not. These, along with the willingness of people like David Burke to take hard stances on seafood sustainability, are hopeful portents indeed.

Still, if we New York diners want sustainable seafood, it is ultimately up to us, not the fisherman or the restaurants, to make it happen. The tide has turned and a new crop of exciting restaurants has appeared, reacquainting the city with its love of seafood. Now it is our responsibility to apply the same rigorous ethical standards to our fish as we do to the rest of our food before it's too late.

 

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