

future of fish

Bye, bye bycatch

An interview with Riley Starks, founder of Chefs in Raingear

How did the idea for Chefs in Raingear come about?

The reefnet salmon fishery is kind of a specialized fishery. This is the only place it's done in the world. Whereas with most fisheries you have to go out for multiple days and there's no room for extra people, this fishery lends itself to daytrips.

Why engage chefs?

I wanted to market our salmon to chefs because that's where the best education takes place for consumers: at the restaurant. I knew that once chefs saw what it's like out on the water and how we fish, they would be excited about reefnet salmon. A lot of them are also curious about what it's like to handle a live fish.

What is a day like for the participants?

They stay overnight at the Willows Inn, and in the morning we go to the beach and get our raingear on and give them an overview of the fishery itself. Then we go out in the boat and fish in front of a reef and they get a sense of the power of the current. The chefs have to actually get wet and dirty and participate in catching fish. They can't just lay back and watch. Once we start catching fish, they really get into it. Then we go back to the inn and cook dinner using the day's catch and vegetables harvested from the farm. We crack open the wine and have this amazing meal with the ocean in view. It spawns a wonderful conversation.

What do the chefs do with what they've learned?

The biggest thing is that they talk to their staff and tell them about their experience. If our salmon is on the menu, their staff can relate this story and really involve their customers. Our food system in the US isn't really set up to tell the story of where our food comes from. That's really too bad.

We also host the seafood department heads of three grocery chains in the Puget Sound area. After they spend the day with us, they can go back and really sell our salmon because they can tell their customers about it. Even though it's more expensive than farmed salmon, customers will buy it if the retailer is enthusiastic and can tell them the story behind it. So it's been great for marketing.

(continued)

RILEY STARKS

Riley Starks is the co-founder of Chefs in Raingear, a unique program that gives chefs and seafood department managers the opportunity to participate in catching wild Fraser River salmon using reefnets. Reefnetting is an historical Pacific Northwest salmon fishing method that is highly selective, resulting in almost no bycatch. For more information on Chefs in Raingear, reefnetting, and Lummi Island wild salmon visit: <http://www.LummiIslandWild.com>.

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What do you see as being the underlying causes of the problem you're addressing?

Commodification. I have been fighting commodification most of my life. I think every piece of food on the plate has a story to tell and we have been robbed, as consumers of that story, by our food culture.

What are the barriers to engaging consumers more with the sustainable seafood movement?

There's a lot of confusion. And there can be information overload. And also misinformation, especially outside the local area where the fish is caught.

Where do chefs fit into the puzzle? They are serving a fairly small population. Can they have an impact when it comes to building momentum around sustainability?

Oh yes. Who knows how long it will last, but basically chefs in Europe have had the power to give that information out. They know everything about the food they serve. That's a growing phenomenon here in North America as well. Hopefully it will last.

Is your program something that could be replicated?

Yes, and it doesn't have to be specific to reefnetting. There aren't any other initiatives like ours out there. It could definitely be replicated but there are some problems, such as the remoteness of the location of many sustainable fishing operations. Many of them have boats that are too small to bring chefs on board. So for some fisheries it might not work.

What would you like to do next?

I've already spoken with Chef's Collaborative about seeing our program codified more. I'm just so busy that I'm not improving it in the way it could be improved. It goes along every year and it does fine, but I'd love to have many more chefs and be able to give them an even richer experience—to give them information about bycatch and currents and the many other interesting things that we just don't have the time or staff to explain to them.

Right now we're just touching the surface. We've been doing it for four or five years and I'm kind of a one-man show. Right now we host about 25 chefs a year. We could do a lot more than that.

RILEY STARKS

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