

future of fish

Chef's special

An interview with Barton Seaver, chef, writer, and fish advocate

Chef Barton Seaver has helped found several restaurants in Washington, DC that serve exclusively sustainable seafood. His idea is that offering even a few unsustainable options would be a tacit endorsement, and that demonstrating that sustainable offerings are plentiful and delicious presents a model for other chefs and a lure for engaging consumers. He talked to us about his experience as Executive Chef Partner at Hook, a restaurant in Georgetown.

What was missing from the restaurant world that you felt a need to address?

I saw it more as: I just open seafood restaurants, and I'm not going to serve anything but sustainable seafood. It was first and foremost a restaurant, of course, but the idea that certain things would not be served gave me a way to converse with my customers about it.

If a customer asked for Chilean sea bass, I wouldn't just say "No." I'd say, "Have you heard about sablefish? It's delicate and delicious...etc." I never said "No." I never even said "Chilean sea bass."

My goal is to sell them on something they are really going to enjoy, but that they might never have tried before. They might never have thought about sustainability before. But they enjoy the fish and pretty soon they'll go tell their friends and the next time they go to a seafood restaurant they'll say, "Hey remember that great sablefish we had? Let's ask the chef if they have that." It was about entertaining and engaging the customer.

Why not just offer some sustainable choices on the menu and let the customer decide?

Unsustainable fish shouldn't exist, which means we have to create and provide more sustainable products. There's not enough yet, but there will be someday.

What type of power does a chef wield?

Chefs have the power to diversify the offerings. It doesn't have to be the same handful of fish types. In my restaurant I sold 74 different species. You sell people on the positive experience. You sell them the solutions and they'll go forward. And our wait staff was always knowledgeable about the story behind the fish.

So did your wait staff have to study up?

Absolutely. I had them whipped into shape. And they loved it. Once you start talking about the ethics behind all this stuff, it's really hard to argue. The staff



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Chef Barton Seaver has helped found some of the most lauded restaurants in Washington, DC. Trained at the Culinary Institute of America, he sits on the board of directors for DC Central Kitchen, works on educational initiatives with Blue Ocean Institute, and is a nationally recognized chef, writer, speaker, and ocean-issues advocate. Learn more about Barton Seaver at www.bartonseaver.org.

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had a story to tell, they loved that. And their tips went way up! 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.

Why aren't there more restaurants like yours? What are the barriers to engaging more chefs?

Most chefs don't know what to do with fish. Dealing with more obscure species (we can't just rely on the green list) is a big part of sustainability. But people are afraid to try new things. A lot of chefs are not knowledgeable enough or confident enough to go out and sell something unusual to their customers.

Imagine a restaurant offering a menu with tuna, salmon, swordfish, and wreckfish. No one will order the wreckfish, even though it's completely delicious and they would love it. But it looks unusual next to those less sustainable, better known options. And unless a chef is really willing to engage and come out there and sell it, no one will order it.

How do you measure success?

We were making money. That's what we set out to do. We made over 6 million dollars in the first year of business. We did 185 percent of our projected sales.

What is the most important thing that needs to be addressed in order to move consumers toward sustainable seafood choices?

I think it's crucial to get the consumers to increase demand. As chefs get badgered by people carrying the wallet seafood cards, they start listening and making changes. The consumer has real power with the chef.

Still, you are focusing on a pretty small population: people who eat at high-end restaurants.

Yeah. These are the white tablecloth restaurants. You're talking places with chefs, not restaurants that are run by kitchen managers. Chefs represent 3-4 percent of the hospitality industry. Of that, the white tablecloth restaurants are a blip. We don't matter in terms of numbers, but these chefs are tastemakers; they can help guide popular tastes.

Is there a danger of sustainable seafood being seen as way too elite and therefore not reaching a larger audience?

Absolutely. There are 10 million consumers that religiously buy organic. Another 50 million will do it if the organic product is about the same price as the non-organic option (they are regular consumers of organic but they don't seek it out). It's not a huge group. And I question: Can you use the word "sustainable" if it only applies to 3 percent of consumers? That's really not sustainable!

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