

Implementing a Sustainable Seafood Program



For those in the restaurant industry, adding yet one more item to your “to-do” list can seem overwhelming if not impossible. Nevertheless, something has prompted you to consider the possibility of offering sustainable seafood. It could be your growing awareness that the marine life in the vastness of the oceans is not as limitless as once perceived. It could also be because of the increasing number of customers who want to know where and how their food is sourced. Newer generations are driven by a desire to live in such a way that supports both the environment as well as the businesses that are “sustainably” conscious.

As you’ll come to realize from the information we share here, offering sustainable seafood is an important part of that equation. Fortunately, implementing such a program is not as hard as it sounds. Many restaurants can begin the transfer to an environmentally conscious menu in as little as two weeks (depending on existing contractual or inventory commitments). The step-by-step process entailed here includes sources, cost, and restaurants that are making their mark as sustainable venues. So let’s take a look at just what it means and why it is important to you and your customers as well as to the generations that will follow.



What is Sustainable Seafood?

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), a federal agency responsible for the safekeeping of America's marine resources, defines sustainable seafood as that which is managed in a way that ensures the population of a species of fish is able to reproduce and is available for future generations.

Other marine conservation organizations go one step further and believe that sustainability requires that the fish be caught in a humane manner and in a way that does not cause “bycatch”—fish and other marine life that are caught unintentionally and then thrown back in the ocean, dead or dying, after being caught up in fishermen's nets or hooks.

In addition, they recognize the sometimes brutal working conditions for fishermen and other laborers in the industry. **In fact, the fishing industry is one of the most hazardous occupations with a fatality rate that is 29 times higher than the average occupation.** With this knowledge comes the need to ensure that they are treated fairly and that the working environment is both safe and healthy.





Why is it Important to You and Your Restaurant?

“Many of us ask what can I, as one person do, but history shows us that everything good and bad starts because somebody does something or does not do something.”—Sylvia Earle, Oceanographer.

And why is this important to you, the restaurateur? The sad truth is that, around the world, **90 percent of the fisheries are either overfished or fully-fished with 31.4 percent of stocks fished at unsustainable levels.** With 80 to 90 million metric tons of wild fish caught every year, the pressure on wild populations is increasing. Not only will this ultimately result in the loss of species and the delicate balance of the ocean’s ecosystems, it also affects the coastal communities that depend on fishing to sustain them economically. And then there are those that rely on seafood as a primary part of their diet—over 3 billion people.

As demand grows, unsustainable fishing practices make it all too feasible that your restaurant may very well lose its long-term supply of seafood.



Species in Danger

According to NOAA, approximately 2,300 species are listed as endangered or threatened. A **threatened species** is one that may become extinct if certain precautions are not taken to protect it while an **endangered species** is one that is at a serious risk for extinction.

Some of the species that are currently threatened or endangered include:

- Blue and White marlin
- Orange roughy
- Skate
- Atlantic cod
- Atlantic halibut
- Atlantic salmon
- Atlantic sea scallop
- Chilean sea bass
- Albacore, Yellowfin, Bluefin, and Bigeye tuna

If you are new to sustainable concepts, it is likely that you have some of these very fish on your menu—fish that could become extinct in the years ahead if we do not take a pro-active stance at conserving one of our most precious resources. The choice you're making now, to create a sustainable seafood program, is an important step in ensuring that your restaurant has a long-term supply of seafood and that your grandchildren get to see the beauty of a Yellowfin. Unfortunately, they will never see the Blue walleye which was last sighted in the 1980s.

This program is not just good for the environment, it's very good for your business as well.

Demand for Sustainable Seafood is on the Rise

If you've been in this crazy industry for a decade or more, you undoubtedly remember a time when questions from customers regarding where you obtained their main entrée and how it was raised were virtually unheard of. Times have definitely changed. A recent survey conducted by Cargill revealed that "88 percent of Americans are willing to pay more for seafood that is certified as sustainably and responsibly sourced." The millennial generation came in even higher than the general population at a whopping 93 percent.

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As consumers become increasingly savvy and environmentally conscious, a growing number want to know if the seafood they are ordering is farmed or wild, where it comes from, or how it was caught. They are turning to businesses that show they care about these issues.

Unfortunately, with the many options and opinions, confusion is not uncommon. Some people believe that local and wild-caught fish is the best because it's more "natural" while others view farm raised as the ultimate environmentally sustainable solution. Neither of these two opposing views is entirely correct. Setting yourself apart from your competitors by not only offering sustainable seafood but also educating your staff and concerned-guests may very well be the key to the long-term sustainability...of your restaurant.



Understanding Sustainable Seafood

Understanding sustainable seafood really boils down to two questions: *Where does the fish come from and how was it caught or farmed?* Let's take a look at the two most common misconceptions.

Wild-Caught

As you've seen from the numbers and types of declining fish populations, the issues with wild-caught fish are evident. Conserving and managing this wild marine life ensures that future generations get to experience both its beauty and its availability as a food source. Catching fish in the wild impacts not only that species, but depending on how it is caught, affects other marine life as well. Trawling or dredging and the disruption of the environment as well as the casualties associated with bycatch all contribute to declining marine life. For this reason, you'll notice that troll, pole, or line-catch is recommended for many species.

And then there is the growing desire to eat locally sourced food—a definite challenge when it comes to seafood. After all, some of the truly incredible seafood that swims free in the great waters of the Atlantic or the Bering Sea can only be found there. According to an article in QSR Magazine, “Half of domestic wild-caught seafood in the U.S. is pulled from Alaskan waters, including the Pollock and cod commonly used in quick-service seafood items.”

For those in these remote fishing towns and villages, sustainability is defined as protecting the marine ecosystems and the fish stock—important considerations when the fishing industry may be your one and only method of supporting a particular community. Alaska became the largest fishery in the world to get certification for sustainability in 2000 by Marine Stewardship Council. Alaska Pollock makes up 60 percent of the total biomass in the Bering Sea.

Aquaculture

Marine aquaculture, on the other hand, is the breeding, rearing and harvesting of fish and seafood. Farming methods range from nets or open pens in the ocean to manmade ponds. The most commonly farmed fish in the U.S. include tilapia, catfish and salmon. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), aquaculture has grown exponentially—from producing just 7 percent of the fish for human consumption in 1974 to 39 percent in 2004 and over 50 percent in 2016.

Aquaculture produces over 50% of the fish used for human consumption

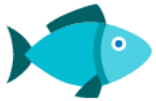
Many individuals are under the mistaken assumption that if a fish is “farmed raised” there is no impact on our natural resources. Ideally, this method of raising fish and shellfish helps restore endangered species, has little impact on the environment, and creates an ecologically sound habitat; however, if not raised in an environmentally conscious way, these fish and the environment they are raised in can be unhealthy. The challenges are where they live and what they eat.

Most fish are carnivorous leading to overfishing of the small fish such as anchovies, herring, sardines and mackerel that make up fish meal. While the U.S. is taking steps to adopt sustainable and environmentally-friendly aquaculture practices—such as creating fish food out of worms, insects, and algae—other countries are slower to implement such standards.

The other consideration is where and how they are farmed. A closed-containment system releases fewer chemicals and waste byproducts into the environment. Where these farms are located, such as away from sensitive coastal mangroves, is also an important consideration. Deep-water aquaculture lessens pollution and disease as well as increases production.

Aquaculture Around the World

Over 91 percent of the seafood consumed in the U.S. comes from foreign countries and half of this comes from aquaculture. China is a leading supplier of farmed fish to the U.S. and accounts for 60 percent of “raised” fish around the world. Four main considerations regarding fish and shrimp that are raised in this part of the globe include the use of antibiotics, fungicides, and pesticides; the lack of wastewater treatment leading to nitrate overload and algae blooms; destruction of natural habitats and higher disease rates. The U.S., on the other hand, has some of the strictest standards in the world. The procedures that polluted the oceans, spread sea lice, depleted the small fish to be used as food, and purported the beneficial use of antibiotics and hormones have changed. A few of the other concerns are as follows:



Nutrition—Some people believe that wild-caught fish are more nutritious. The truth is the difference is not as dramatic as once assumed. In fact, farmed Atlantic salmon is known to provide significantly more omega-3 fatty acids—one of the nutritional components that has been tied to a variety of health benefits and has people reaching for salmon a few days a week.



Toxins—This concern came out in 2004 when a study concluded that farm-raised fish were high in PCBs, a possible carcinogenic chemical. Later studies revealed little to no difference between wild and farmed fish. But what about mercury, one of the most toxic naturally-occurring elements known to man? Fish caught in the wild—shark, swordfish and tuna—are found to have the highest levels of this heavy metal.

Fortunately, while the information might be incredibly confusing and there may seem to be no “right” answer, there are those agencies that plow through the data and make recommendations based on scientific evidence. We’ll supply you with those resources as we discuss the steps it takes to create a sustainable seafood supply chain.

How to Implement a Sustainable Seafood Program

The key to implementing a successful sustainable seafood plan is to find and work with vendors that understand your commitment. Most will be happy to work with you and even appreciate understanding the process so that they can offer this type of service to their other clients as well.

- **Know your seafood** - Become knowledgeable by obtaining available resources such as the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch Guide (which includes an app) or the Environmental Defense Fund's Seafood Selector. Both of these recommend which fish are best to consume and offer you best selections based on location, farmed or wild, and the impact on the area where it is harvested or caught. Currently, some species are not caught or farmed sustainably. If one of these is a staple on your menu, you may want to consider switching to an alternative.
- **Ask your purveyors** - Ask your vendors where the fish you purchase is from and how it is caught or farmed. They will need to understand your new direction and that if they cannot answer these questions crucial to the supply chain, you will have to go elsewhere for your seafood. Request that they print the answer to these questions on their invoices.
- **Check the source** - Remember that seafood raised in other countries may have varying standards and some have very little regulations. Some fisheries are still by catching endangered species.
- **Tastings** - Once you've uncovered sustainable options from several vendors, schedule multiple tastings in order to make sure that your alternatives are up to your standards. You will often be pleasantly surprised.

As you begin the process of converting to sustainably-sourced seafood, you will run into several certifications that have been adopted by this arena. You'll want to be familiar with these as they relate to the new eco-friendly food on your menu.

Knowing the Varied Certifications



Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC): ASC conforms to the world's leading standard for responsibly farmed fish and seafood.



Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP): The only aquaculture certification that encompasses the entire production chain from farms to processing plants, hatcheries and feed mills. BAP certified products prove that a company is committed to the health of both the animal and the consumer.



Marine Stewardship Council (MSC): Gold standard for sustainable wild-caught fisheries.



Responsible Fisheries Management (RFM): In 2012, the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI) recognized Alaska's RFM Certification Program. Buying seafood from Alaska RFM certified fisheries assures the use of responsibly sourced seafood practices.

Sustainable Sources

Fortunately, there are a wealth of resources available to help you implement a sustainable program. From finding vendors that are knowledgeable in this area to helping you define the standards you are comfortable achieving and then aiding you to reach your goal, here are just a few of the companies willing to lend a hand.



Consolidated Concepts – In addition to performing cost reduction analysis for restaurants, this group of experts in the industry specialize in developing a supply chain, streamlining operations, and helping restaurateurs develop good, sound processes and protocols for inventory and waste management. They can help source your sustainable seafood, and other products, according to your particular standards while maintaining cost effectiveness.



Mazzetta Company – This global enterprise produces and distributes sustainable seafood from 20 countries around the world. They own and operate their own facilities as well as source from trusted partners and suppliers. Mazzetta Company is one of the main suppliers of sustainable seafood to restaurants and other food service organizations. All of their products are fully traceable, and guarantee letters are obtained from all seafood farmers stating that no antibiotics or other illegal drugs were used during the grow-out period. They perform yearly inspections and audits on all their suppliers.

Their goal is to “ensure that future generations have the same resources available to them that exist today.” In addition to ensuring that the fish and shellfish are sustainably sourced, they also maintain guidelines for the companies and farms that they do business with in regard to worker’s rights, health, safety and freedom from exploitation.



Smart Catch Program – This summer, the James Beard Foundation program launched their Smart Catch sustainable seafood program. Its basic mission statement is to “provide training and support to chefs so they can serve seafood fished or farmed in environmentally-responsible ways.” Upon completion, chefs earn the Smart Catch emblem, a way of letting your customers know that you are concerned about the seafood supply chain and that you are an advocate for its management and care. You qualify as a “leader” in the Smart Catch program if you consistently serve 80 percent or more sustainable seafood. A few of the restaurants that have reached this level in the program include Providence in Los Angeles, Cress Restaurant in DeLand, Florida, and The Marketplace in Asheville, North Carolina.



Dock to Dish – This coast-to-coast organization helps local fishermen who catch local sustainable seafood connect with chefs. In June of 2017, the United Nations Foundation deemed Dock to Dish a top breakthrough innovation in the efforts of developing sustainable seafood sourcing.



Sea to Table – This company also provides wild-caught seafood from small-scale traditional American fishing communities. Their goal is to make this sustainably-caught seafood available to everyone. They recently announced a partnership with the fast-casual chain, Chopt Creative Salad Company, and are providers for all of their wild-caught shrimp from the Gulf Coast.



Seafood Watch Business Partner Program – The Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Seafood Watch Program is committed to helping businesses like yours implement a sustainable seafood program. To this end, they work directly with businesses, guiding you through the steps, helping you find sources, and providing you with the information you need to determine if the seafood you are acquiring is sustainable, and to pass this information on to your suppliers as well. There are over 1,000 restaurants partnering with the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Seafood Watch.

The Cost to Convert to Sustainable Seafood

As a global supplier, Mazzetta Company understands the need to provide sustainable seafood that is consistent in both quality and price. According to Joe Chekouras, Import Director, **there is commonly a \$.05/lb increase in price for each BAP star certified product.** This, however, is not a hard rule because there are additional factors that can affect price including both supply and demand.

ACS certified products often carry a \$1 to \$2/lb increase. However, ACS certification has a stronger presence in Europe than in the U.S.

Currently, most shellfish and shrimp are farm-raised; particularly mussels, clams and oysters, making sustainable shellfish priced relatively in-line with their wild-caught counterpart. They are also typically raised in clean environments without the use of chemicals or antibiotics and well-managed worldwide.

Alternatives

There are affordable alternatives that many restaurants don't consider because of their reputation. However, with the current interest in sustainability, your customers are often intrigued to try a fish that they would not normally consider or have never heard of.

Examples of these alternatives include Pacific perch, lingcod, Longnose skate, Chillipepper rockfish, monkfish, and Red grouper. According to the National Restaurant Association, "In most cases, the fisheries harvesting these fish have switched up their management practices in recent years to focus on sustainability." Not only are you helping the ecosystem, but you are also providing business to U.S. fishermen and farmers who supply these types of fish. Other wild-caught fish whose populations are not threatened include species such as dogfish, tilefish, Wild Blue catfish, Almaco jack, and Striped Black mullet.

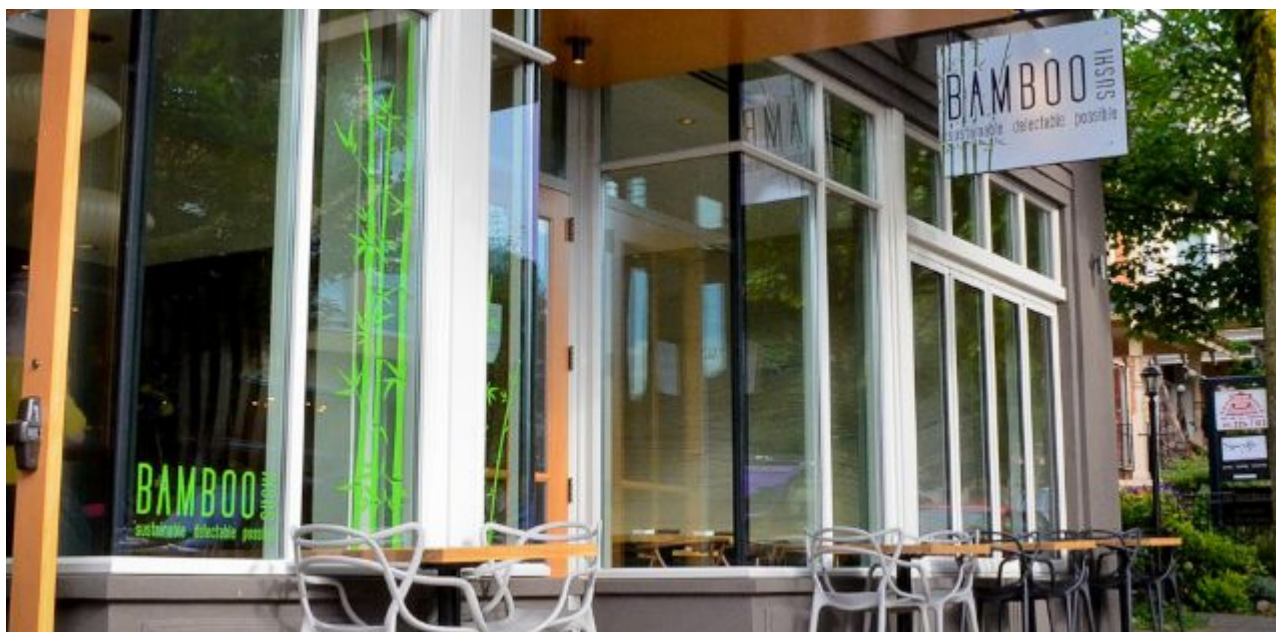


Chef Rogers of Cindy's Waterfront restaurant relayed a good example of this strategy to Fern Glazer of Nation's Restaurant News. When Salmon hit \$22 per pound, he switched to farmed Arctic Char, a similar tasting fish that is less expensive and on Seafood Watch's Best Choice list.

Restaurants That Are Doing It Right

Bamboo Sushi

This sushi concept comes from Sustainable Restaurant Group and is committed to sustainable sourcing. In 2008, Bamboo Sushi was awarded as the world's first certified sustainable sushi restaurant. They focus on sustainably caught and humanely raised fish, and 80 percent of the fish they serve is caught domestically. An example of this is their Bigeye tuna, known as Ahi, which is line-caught off the coast of Hawaii by suppliers who use specific hooks that ensure no bycatch. They have chosen this fish over the popular bluefin tuna from Japan due to its seriously overfished status. Their farm-raised Ora King salmon from New Zealand is derived from a farm that has obtained the world-leading Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) certification from The Global Aquaculture Alliance. Businesses that help them maintain this level of sustainability includes the Seafood Watch program, Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and the Ocean Foundation. Their fast-casual counterpart, QuickFish Poke Bar also abides by the same standards. They are located in Seattle, Denver, and Portland, Oregon.



Fog Harbor Fish House

Created by the family who developed PIER 39 in San Francisco, Fog Harbor is the first restaurant in Fisherman's Wharf to serve 100 percent sustainable seafood. Their menu is based on recommendations from the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch Program and Aquarium of the Bay. Their primary concern, when first implementing this strategy, was how they were going to comply and purchase seafood at the volumes that they require? They called each vendor, let them know their commitment to sustainability and, for the most part, found that their purveyors were happy to help them.



Promoting sustainable seafood in the restaurant industry will only continue to accelerate as aquariums and conservation groups provide increasing education regarding the effects of sustainable efforts. As a restaurateur, it's important to know and be able to tell your "food story." Many in the business have found that a sustainable story that peaks guests' interests and stirs their hearts has created loyal, lifelong, brand-promoting customers.

Even if 100% sustainable is not yet realistic at your locations, implementing sustainable seafood standards is still important. Many mainstream chains are already moving in the sustainable direction; for instance, Red Lobster implemented a "Seafood with Standards" program ensuring that all wild seafood is sustainably caught, and farmed seafood is grown at farms that are compliant with the standards set up by the Global Aquaculture Alliance's Aquaculture Certification Council (ACC). Implementing a sustainable seafood program at your restaurants may not be easy but it is attainable. The long-term benefits to your restaurant, consumers, and the world will make it well worth the effort.



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