



Local gets fresh look

Photo courtesy of Walking-Fish

Community-supported fisheries model expands on East Coast

By Lisa Duchene

MAINE scallops from Portland's Bristol Seafood appear among cheeses and beers, a feast of New England flavors, as pictured in Hannaford Supermarkets' "Close to Home" promotional program. The 171-store Northeast chain is sourcing half its seafood from the Gulf of Maine and has highlighted that effort the last couple of years with its Close to Home promotion.

The idea of selling fresh, local fish in coastal markets is hardly new. But in practice, it's tougher than it sounds. Needing consistency and variety, large retail and restaurant chains shop the

global market. In 2008, imports made up 83 percent of the U.S. seafood supply.

Now, a few trends are colliding: New England's seafood supply is surging again, and efforts are underway to help it regain access to markets lost when groundfish stocks dwindled in the 1990s. Haddock is doing particularly well, and NOAA scientists say a summer 2009 scallop survey showed the highest numbers of juvenile sea scallops on Georges Bank since 2000.

Among consumers, the buy-local trend has only gained steam in the last

decade, from the growth of farmers' markets nationwide to the rise of consumers buying produce directly from farmers in community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs, an approach fishermen are trying with some success. Within a year, the number of community-supported fisheries (CSF) grew from one to at least six.

Nationally, local sourcing of seafood, produce and meat, along with sustainability, topped the "What's Hot in 2010" survey of more than 1,800 professional chefs conducted by the National Restaurant Association.

Freshness, minimizing transportation and supporting local communities and businesses are all driving the trend toward local sourcing, says the NRA.

"[Local sourcing] is retro," says Michael Ty, national president of the American Culinary Federation. "It's what we did in the past when chefs relied on local markets because we did not have the luxury of today's transportation system."

More than 40 percent of 1,013 consumers surveyed by the Gulf of Maine Research Institute in Portland, Maine, in spring of 2009 said they were "very likely" to increase their seafood consumption if they knew the fish was caught sustainably, and 55 percent said they'd buy and eat more fish if it was locally harvested.

GMRI is developing a regional eco-brand for Gulf of Maine seafood and helping Hannaford with its sustainable-seafood policy.

Jen Levin, GMRI's sustainable-seafood-program manager, equates sustainability with regional sales of Gulf of Maine seafood, due to a smaller car-

Fishermen are selling their catch direct to consumers through CSF programs.

bon footprint and the improved status of the fisheries. The recession, she says, has also boosted consumer awareness of sustaining local fisheries and fishing communities by helping to even out the historic booms and busts.

The CSF model is that fishermen get a better price for their catch by skipping wholesalers and selling directly to consumers. Those customers commit at the beginning of a season to a share of the catch and pay up front, usually less than they would at the supermarket. But the CSF concept is not all about price. Many consumers want to know precisely where their food comes from.

Port Clyde Fresh Catch, out of Maine, started its CSF in 2007. A second Maine CSF, at the Penobscot East Resource Center in Stonington, in 2009 sold 6,000 pounds of Maine shrimp to 120 customers. It expects to expand on both counts this year during a 10-week season January to March.

There are two CSFs in New Hampshire, one on Cape Ann, Mass., and one at Duke University in Durham, N.C.

Ed and Carolyn Eastman, husband-and-wife owners of Seabrook Beach Eastman's Fish Market, run a summer and fall/winter CSF in New Hampshire. They've also branched out to selling fish at local farmers' markets.

The Yankee Fisherman's Cooperative started a second New Hampshire CSF this winter for an eight-week period during the northern shrimp season. The

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fishermen's co-op is working with the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension/NH Sea Grant Fisheries program.

CSF shareholders number 130 and pay about \$1.60 a pound. Outside the CSF, fishermen have been receiving a wholesale price of 45 to 51 cents per pound.

Joshua Stoll, a Duke University graduate student studying coastal environmental management, last year helped start a pilot CSF with the student chapter of the American Fishery Society, DukeFish, in Durham, N.C. Four hundred people subscribed and 400 more are on the waiting list.

Each week, the CSF, called Walking-Fish, worked with one or two local fishermen who delivered their catch to a retailer for processing. The retailer, three hours away, got a share of the proceeds, as did the refrigerated-truck driver who delivered it to a public garden on the Duke campus for distribution.

Over a 12-week period, subscribers could purchase 2 pounds of fillets or shellfish (including shrimp, blue crabs, clams, oysters, southern flounder, mullet and weakfish) every other week for \$80, a half-share of 2 pounds a week or 4 pounds every other week (both \$210), or a full share of 4 pounds for each week for \$420. H&G fish

worked out to be about \$1 per pound less.

Before the CSF, fishermen in 2008 received an average of \$2.04, round weight, for their shrimp. In 2009, they received \$6 per pound for headed shrimp. The group is gearing up to run the CSF again for 12 weeks beginning this spring.

CSFs encourage ecological, environmental and social sustainability — and a way to hash out all the related aspects, says Stoll.

“What the CSF does better than anything,” says Stoll, “is connect different groups of people so you can have this conversation.”

Contributing Editor Lisa Duchene lives in Bellefonte, Pa.

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always a great item with wide acceptance, but at retail it always subsidized the shrink — the products that didn't sell as well.”

Fields of Sam's Club says the company's strategy of focused offerings keeps shrink down. Sam's has roughly six fresh-seafood SKUs and about 24 frozen SKUs.

“We try to carry a limited assortment and turn volume and keep the product fresh and the quality high. When you look at our fresh-seafood area, I'm only carrying salmon, catfish, tilapia and maybe one other species. It's a whole lot easier to manage the logistics and the shelf life of

the products. Our shrink is definitely lower than a supermarket's,” says Fields. “Seafood is not a loss leader for us as a company.”

Dave Ritacco, BJ's fresh-seafood buyer, says core items allow buyers to branch out.

“While the top-line sales contributors are skewed toward a handful of items — e.g. salmon, tilapia, shrimp

— it gives us the opportunity to offer products, regionally or chain-wide, that round out the selection and create the 'wow' factor for our members,” Ritacco says. But BJ's evaluation methods aren't based on gut

feelings or emotions — it's more like advanced mathematics.

“BJ's looks at trend analysis [even at the foodservice level] and data supporting potential incremental sales versus cannibalization to help define the expected penetration into a category the new item would offer,” says Ritacco. “The information is then compared with BJ's current product selection to assist in the decision process.”

Whatever club stores are doing, it's working. Costco posted nearly \$70 billion in sales in 2009, down 1.5 percent from the previous year but enough to lead the members-only discount-retail category, despite having fewer stores in fewer states than Sam's Club.

Sales increased a modest 1.6 percent for BJ's in 2009, to \$9.9 billion. Sam's Club did the best in 2009, reporting a 5.6 percent increase in sales

last year to nearly \$47 billion. But in late January Sam's let go of more than 11,000 employees — mostly part-time positions in the product-sampling department, a move that CEO Brian Cornell called “cost neutral.”

But even with lateral moves of late, club stores are positioned for the future with a proven and profitable value proposition — one in which the customers always pay to play.

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