

— SUPPLIER OF THE YEAR —

SeaChange

Thanks to a sustainable seafood program that's been rolled out nationwide, Ocean Wise is changing the way Canadians think about eating fish



Approximately 75 per cent of the earth's surface is covered by deep, blue sea. The vast beauty of this aquatic ecosystem wraps around countries, is home to thousands of exceptional underwater creatures and has a direct effect on our climate. And thanks to a worldwide love for seafood, the health of our ocean is also on the verge of a complete breakdown.

Enter Ocean Wise. The program, founded by the Vancouver Aquarium, is changing the way Canadians think about the seafood that sits on their plate.

"At the Vancouver Aquarium, we've clearly identified that fisheries are the most direct way that we as humans impact the ocean and other aquatic environments," says Mike McDermid, program manager for Ocean Wise. "We also know that we're getting to a point in time where we're looking at a collapse in global fisheries. Something had to be done."

That sense of urgency, paired with a few million annual visitors, prompted the aquarium to start educating people about the types of seafood that would help sustain marine life.

For help, they looked towards the Monterey Bay Aquarium consumer program called Seafood Watch. In 1999, pocket guides were distributed to the Northern California aquarium's visitors, giving them a clear breakdown of what edible species were caught in ways that did not damage surrounding underwater ecosystems. The program was an instant hit, and a year later the Vancouver Aquarium became the official Canadian distribution point for the cards.

"Over the next four years or so we probably handed out three million cards," says McDermid. Visitor feedback about the cards started pouring in, too, and people began asking where they could find the sustainable items that were listed. Finally, McDermid says when Robert Clark, a local Vancouver chef, came knocking on the aquarium's door looking for help in choosing sustainable fish, he realized there was potential to take things much further than handing out pieces of paper.

"All of this came together around the same time, and it culminated in what Ocean

Wise is today," says McDermid. "We aimed to work with businesses, restaurants and foodservice companies and help them make sustainable purchasing decisions. We'd go through all their seafood, identify which ones are good options, which ones are bad, and explain exactly why. Then we'd help them try to source alternatives to the bad options."

By the end of 2004, the Ocean Wise concept was firmed up, and funds from the Vancouver Aquarium, coupled with a \$50,000 start-up grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, helped get it off the ground. The program works with restaurateurs, producers and suppliers, asking them to replace non-sustainable seafood items they would regularly offer with sustainable ones. A standard logo is applied beside that item when it appears on the menu, allowing customers to easily identify what dish keeps Ocean Wise principles in mind. Those four principles include choosing species that are: abundant and resilient to fishing pressures; well-managed based on current research; harvested in a way that limits bycatch; and caught using methods that don't damage surrounding aquatic habits.

"Our whole design of the program was to work on the positives...and not focus on the negatives," McDermid says. "It doesn't work at a business level to just be hammering on the bad points."

Nevertheless, before Ocean Wise launched operations in January 2005 at Clark's C Restaurant, many in the foodservice industry viewed the idea of procuring sustainable fish with skepticism. "The place was full of naysayers," says Clark. "Nobody was listening. Nobody cared. And seafood suppliers weren't interested in one little restaurant's specifications."

Clark believes the simplicity of the Ocean Wise program eventually encouraged restaurateurs to ask suppliers for sustainable seafood, adding that it gave them a sense that somebody was behind them. It also gave them that much needed push to change their menus. "The brand became powerful very quickly because people wanted in," he says. "Ocean Wise, as far as engagement, isn't all or nothing. You don't have to jump in with both feet. It's about open dialogue."

Today, Ocean Wise has more than 230 business partners nationwide with around 2,600 locations featuring Ocean Wise-certified items on their menus. Whether it's at Whistler's prestigious Araxi restaurant, or the cafeteria at the University of Prince Edward Island, the Ocean Wise brand has spread across the country. Even major national companies like Panago Pizza and Compass Group Canada have adopted the Ocean Wise program across their businesses.

"In many cases, our members have changed the seafood distribution companies they use, based on whether they were involved in Ocean Wise," says McDermid. "That's one thing about the program; we don't solicit any businesses. The chefs drive a lot of that because they just demand it from their distributors. But the distributors have also seen a distinct advantage to getting involved with it."

McDermid says the Ocean Wise program is growing at a rate of approximately 35 per cent per year. Things don't seem to be slowing down any time soon, either. This April, Ocean Wise held its official national launch party at The Fairmont Royal York Hotel in Toronto, hoping to inspire the rest of the country to get involved in the program. Chefs from Ocean Wise restaurants whipped up sustainable seafood creations for media members and prospective partners. Ryan Gustafson, executive chef at the Royal York's Epic Restaurant, recalls preparing top-cured, bottom-seared ivory salmon with lentils and 25-year-old balsamic vinegar. Epic is among a handful of establishments in the city that offer the program.

Gustafson says the event helped showcase the positive effect Ocean Wise can have, not just at the restaurant level, but also on the supply side of the industry. "It showed our suppliers in Toronto that Ocean Wise is a big deal," he says. "Suppliers now understand the benefits of Ocean Wise. They understand chefs want sustainable fish."

Above all, Gustafson believes Ocean Wise is setting a new standard for the industry when it comes to environmental responsibility. "It's about doing what's right. I can't stress that enough," he says. "It's right for us to educate our guests on the importance of sustainable seafood and the idea that we need to sustain seafood for the generations to come."

McDermid also hopes Ocean Wise will keep growing in Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic Canada, so those regions can have just as high a concentration of Ocean Wise partners as there are out west. Also in the works for Ocean Wise is a new website that will allow restaurateurs to manage both their menus and their relationships with suppliers online, a certified Ocean Wise server training program and a sustainable seafood cookbook set to be released in August 2010. It's a tall order for a company that survives on word of mouth, a modest advertising budget and a grassroots approach to building a brand.

However, McDermid is confident Ocean Wise has the ability to change how the world consumes seafood. After all, in 2007, the Australian Conservation Foundation announced it would launch a similar program based on Ocean Wise principles. "What that says to me is we have a good model," he stresses. "It's a model that works at the business level, and that's why so many people have been adopting it.

"The more places that take it on the more that message and awareness will be raised. More people will be looking for it," he adds. "That, ultimately, has huge impacts on our oceans."

Photography by Dina Goldstein