

# SEA CHANGE

Are we loving  
our favourite fish to death?

BY SCOTT GARDNER

If you've ever gazed into the grey-green depths of one of Canada's three oceans, it seems impossible that puny humans could actually make a dent in its limitless bounty. Adding to that sense is the fact that unlike most of our food sources, what happens out in the ocean stays in the ocean — deep out of sight.

But we do love our shrimp, snapper and salmon. Canadians are eating more seafood, up 10 per cent between 1991 and 2003, according to Statistics Canada, likely due to increased ethnic diversity, and a more nutrition-conscious population. What's good for your cardiac muscle, however, is not necessarily good for Mother Nature.

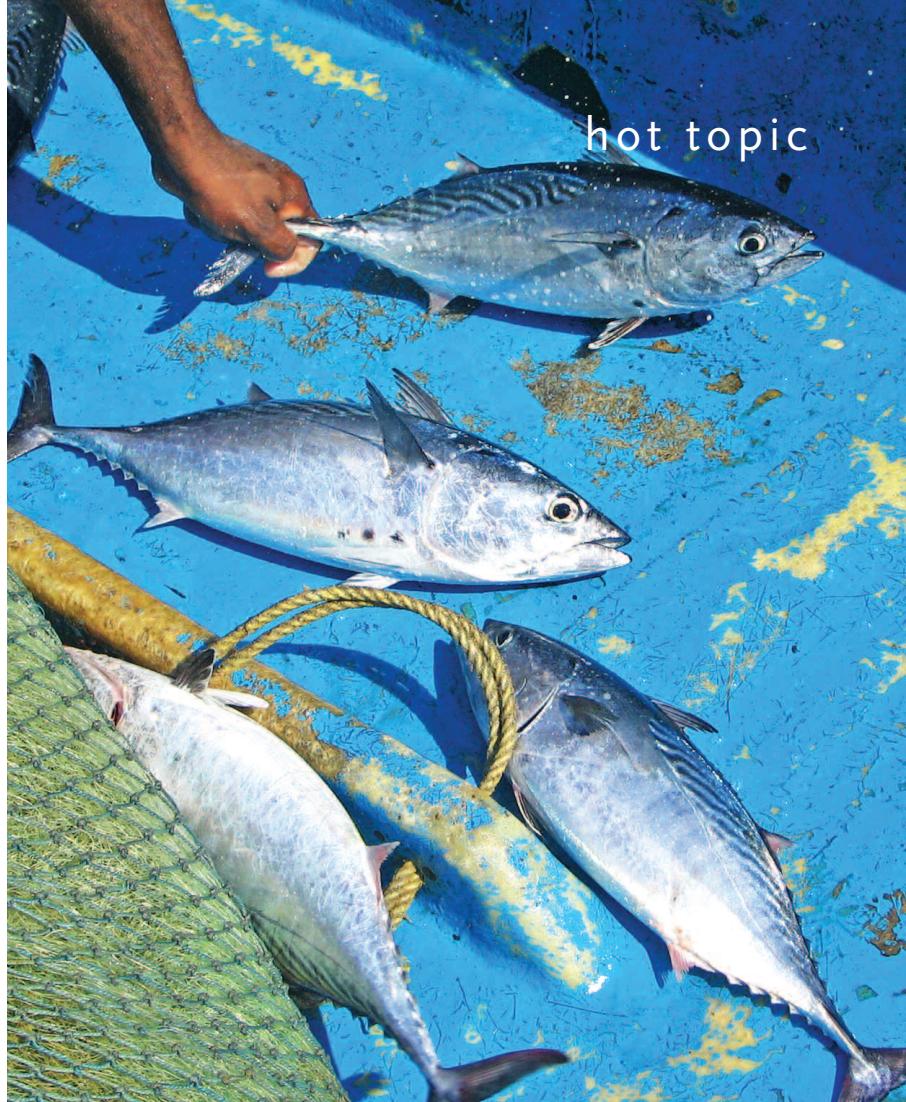
And if we did it to the cod, we can do it again.

That's why environmentalists and forward-thinking restaurateurs are now putting forward the concept of "sustainable seafood." There are numerous definitions, but what it reduces down to is serving, selling and consuming fish that are caught or farmed in a way that ensures the long-term health and stability of the species, as well as the larger marine environment.

It's an admirable sentiment to be sure, but unless you're a food professional who moonlights as a marine biologist, how do you know where to begin? One of the first organizations to address this issue was California's Monterey Bay Aquarium. As part of its Fishing for Solutions exhibit in the late 1990s, staff developed a list of sustainable options in response to visitor questions about making better seafood choices.

Today that list has evolved into Seafood Watch — a comprehensive educational program for sellers and consumers that includes wallet-size resource cards, training presentations for restaurant staff, an annual cooking festival and an online A to W seafood guide (there aren't a lot of X, Y and Z fish), classifying choices as "best," "good" and "avoid," explaining why, and suggesting alternatives.

Recognizing the volume of information on the topic can be overwhelming, and many suppliers still can't tell you whether their sablefish is trap-caught or trawl-caught, the Toronto-based Endangered Fish Alliance (EFA) has taken a stripped-down approach to sustainability. Founded in 2002 by a small group of concerned restaurateurs, food writers, conservationists and



hot topic

chefs (including the well-known Jamie Kennedy and Michael Stadlander), the EFA encourages restaurants to take their first baby steps toward a sustainable seafood menu by simply avoiding four top-end fish that are in serious trouble: Chilean sea bass, swordfish, orange roughy and Beluga caviar.

In North America, two-thirds of seafood (by value) moves through restaurants to the consumer, which is why Jodi Frye, a project coordinator with Environmental Defence (which now administers the EFA), says the group's underlying principle is that food professionals can make a difference.

"Because they put the food on the plates, chefs are very influential. Telling customers they are serving sustainable seafood gets people interested in the issue — it's like a snowball," Frye says.

This describes exactly the experiences of EFA member Uwe Christian Velden, executive chef and program director of Vancouver's Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts. Four years ago while working in Calgary, Velden took the then-radical step of removing Chilean sea bass from his menu which, he says, prompted interesting conversations with customers and other restaurant owners.

"Sometimes someone would say, 'Why don't you serve this fish I love anymore?' Then when the chef figure goes out into the restaurant, talks to the customer and explains why, it makes a big impact. The reaction was almost totally positive," Velden says.

The EFA is free for all food professionals — all the organization

## THE SAD STORY OF A HOMELY FISH

**W**ould you eat a Patagonian toothfish? It's a prehistoric-looking five-foot-long mottled-brown charmer boasting a long underbite spiked with menacing fangs and glassy, bulging eyes. Even better, since it lives deep in the Antarctic oceans, it's developed freakishly oily flesh to keep warm. In fact, when the first accidental catches of Patagonian and Antarctic toothfish turned up in the 1970s, even impoverished South American fishermen — who called it *bacalao de profundidad* or “cod of the deep” — wouldn't touch the stuff.

Enter Lee Lantz, an ambitious young fish merchant from Los Angeles who stumbled on this pescado rejecto while travelling through Chile in 1977. Lantz saw potential in its cheap, bland, white flakiness and in a stroke of marketing brilliance, brainstormed an exotic but unthreatening new name: Chilean sea bass.

At first only fish-stick processors who needed a cheap substitute for halibut would buy the new find which, by the way, is neither particularly Chilean nor remotely related to real sea bass. But by the early 1990s, it had found its way into high-end restaurants where chefs discovered it would accept any flavouring (it's bland!) and was impossible to overcook (it's oily!), launching a North American craze.

But the toothfish's overnight popularity caused it to skyrocket in price, providing an incentive for acute overfishing and widespread fish piracy in remote Antarctic waters where law enforcement is difficult. By some estimates the pirate catch is double the legal one and, after just a decade in kitchens, there are worries the toothfish could become commercially extinct in just two to five years. Even worse, because of customs loopholes, once smugglers get the fish into the U.S. it's virtually impossible to trace where it came from. So despite best intentions, many restaurants may be unwittingly supporting illegal catches. That's why the U.S.'s National Environmental Trust says, no matter how it's cooked, the Chilean sea bass you're serving is probably poached.

asks is that members pledge not to serve the fading four target fish. So far, more than 160 chefs, personal chefs, culinary professors and others have joined. They are now showcased on the EFA's Web site, which also includes recipes and suggested substitutions.

Of course, not everyone considers banning these species a hardship. “Not only is it endangered, I personally find [Chilean sea bass] one of the most disgusting fish out there,” says Sam Girgis, executive chef and proprietor of Toronto's Lure, which features modern Mediterranean dishes with a focus on sustainable Pacific seafood and shellfish.

“They are nasty to cook,” he says. “The smell of the fat that comes off the fish in the kitchen just turns my stomach. People love it because you can cook the crap out of it and know it's still going to come out of your oven golden brown and looking delectable, but I think it's the fish people cook if they really don't know how to cook fish.”

In his daily specials, in particular, Girgis prefers to explore alternative, often-overlooked — and sustainably harvested — species. “Our mandate is to offer fish that people might not necessarily see in a higher-end restaurant. Things like [Pacific] flounder or white bass from Northern Ontario that take a little more finesse, skill and knowledge to clean, fillet and properly cook — and not over cook,” he says.

One of the most recent programs helping restaurants and their customers make environmentally friendly seafood choices is Ocean Wise, launched by the Vancouver Aquarium in January 2005.

## SUSTAINABLE-SEAFOOD RESOURCES

“The Aquarium’s involvement in sustainable seafood might seem a bit odd — somebody likened it to a ranch running a slaughterhouse — but through the Monterey Bay program we started to realize how much power consumers have in the marketplace,” says Ocean Wise coordinator Mike McDermid.

Ocean Wise works individually with local restaurants to identify sustainable seafood options on their menus, which are then highlighted with a logo to help diners. The restaurants must also agree to immediately remove at least one “unsustainable” species from its menu, followed by an additional item every six months, gradually replacing them with fish that are certified by the Aquarium as eco-friendly. In return, participants appear in a dining guide, qualify for staff-education sessions and receive assistance organizing festivals, cook-offs and other media events.

McDermid says Ocean Wise first attempted to work with suppliers, but when they didn’t return his calls, the Aquarium took the idea to chefs and restaurateurs who eagerly embraced it. After launching with just a single partner — sustainability pioneer chef Rob Clark’s C Restaurant on the Vancouver waterfront — Ocean Wise now counts 37 participants totalling 56 locations, plus the Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts and Capers Community Markets.

“We’ve been amazed by the response in the Lower Mainland. Now we’ve come full circle and the suppliers have contacted us about getting involved since the restaurants are asking for sustainable seafood,” McDermid says. In fact, Ocean Wise hopes to soon launch a chefs’ collaborative that will exercise their growing influence on farms, fishermen and merchants.

**Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch:** [seafoodwatch.org](http://seafoodwatch.org)  
**Vancouver Aquarium Ocean Wise program:** [vanaqua.org/conservation/oceanwise](http://vanaqua.org/conservation/oceanwise)  
**Endangered Fish Alliance:** [endangeredfishalliance.org](http://endangeredfishalliance.org)  
**Seafood Choices Alliance:** [seafoodchoices.org](http://seafoodchoices.org)  
**Sierra Club of Canada’s Citizen’s Guide to Seafood:** [sierraclub.ca/bc/programs](http://sierraclub.ca/bc/programs)  
**David Suzuki Foundation’s State of the Catch - A Professional’s Guide to Sustainable Seafood:** [davidsuzuki.org/files/Oceans/StateoftheCatch.pdf](http://davidsuzuki.org/files/Oceans/StateoftheCatch.pdf)  
**Audobon’s Living Oceans Seafood Lover’s Guide:** [seafood.audubon.org](http://seafood.audubon.org)

The Culinary Institute’s Velden acknowledges changing attitudes and habits is a 10- or 15-year project, but by graduating 250 chefs a year schooled in the idea of sustainable seafood, he’s hopeful they can have an impact on both diners and suppliers. “It’s growing on the West Coast, and I would like this movement to spread over the country so Canada could be one of the leaders,” he says.

Until that happens, the point concerned environmentalists and food professionals stress over and over is that making a few changes to the fish we eat — even if it’s just so we can keep eating ’em — is hardly a radical idea. Additionally, when simply not serving species that have been overfished, oversold and overeat-en to the brink of extinction puts you at the forefront of a movement many see as inevitable, you can’t lose.

“There’s nothing to be reluctant about,” says Lure’s Girgis. “There really is an alternative to the tuna-salmon-Chilean sea bass triumvirate.” □