

Guide helps you stop biting into at-risk fish

Besides the fact that it's located across the street from the David Suzuki Foundation, there's another reason to meet the foundation's Alaya Boisvert at Fish Café (2278 West 4th Avenue): she also works on the SeaChoice program. While I wait for my calamari salad, Boisvert gives me a wallet card entitled Canada's Seafood Guide, which categorizes fish and seafood as green-lighted "Best Choice", cautionary amber "Some Concerns", and red-listed "Avoid". To my embarrassment, calamari (listed as squid) is amber.

I'm curious, so back home I go to www.seachoice.org/ (where you can download the card) and learn that my calamari's caution rating is due to the status of stocks, by-catch (other fish accidentally caught at the same time), and habitat effects. Not all squid are bad squid. The site also tells me the key question to ask, so I call up Fish Café and ask if they serve long- or short-finned squid. The person who answers doesn't know but volunteers to ask someone else. They don't know either, but I bet if enough customers pose the question, the restaurant will eventually ask its supplier.

But back to my lunch with Boisvert. "You have to ask. That's the challenge," says the program assistant for the foundation's Marine Conservation Program, adding that SeaChoice is advocating for eco-labelling on fish that at least shows the country of origin. "They have it in the U.S. and parts of Europe," she adds, "and it would help consumers make educated decisions." How would she change the chalk-written menu board at Fish? "It would be easy enough to say where the fish came from. 'Wild sockeye salmon' could say 'river-caught', could say 'B.C.'." Still, she can see the restaurateur's point of view. Doing the necessary research may take extra time, and purchasing more-sustainable fish may be cost-prohibitive, although, she points out, if they ask, "It's quite possible the supplier may have alternatives."

Going for just over a year now, SeaChoice—a program of Sustainable Seafood Canada that brings together five conservation organizations—wants to get Canadians involved in supporting sustainable fisheries and the long-term health of the ocean. Some fish choices are no-brainers. Hugely popular some years ago, Chilean sea bass—rarely, if ever, seen on menus now—is the worst of the worst, according to Boisvert. It has become an endangered species, which is why Albion Fisheries, Western Canada's largest seafood supplier, no longer sells it. (Company sales representatives also carry a list of seafood at risk.) "Farmed salmon we strongly, strongly advocate you avoid altogether," Boisvert says.

Consumer information is posted on-line as soon as new assessments are done, and the Canada's Seafood Guide wallet card is updated every six months to a year. "Part of the goal is to move some from yellow into green categories," Boisvert says. As backup, buy Aliza Green's excellent Field Guide to Seafood: How to Identify, Select, and Prepare Virtually Every Fish and Shellfish at the Market (Quirk, \$19.95).

It's not just a Canadian problem. The April 2007 issue of National Geographic magazine (archived at www7.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0704/) devotes 65 pages to the state of the world's fish. Its conclusion: "The oceans are in deep blue trouble." Boisvert concurs: "There's great concerns about bluefin tuna. Globally, sharks [too], because of shark's fin soup being so popular in Asia."

But what about that anonymous "seafood" in your chowder? You won't always get an answer. "This is where the consumer ends up feeling frustrated," Boisvert admits, which is why SeaChoice works nationally at all levels of the journey from fish being caught to fish being eaten. "We're developing a retail campaign," Boisvert says. "They [retailers] have huge sway over the industry because they buy in massive quantities." The response from restaurateurs varies, she says. "You can get blank faces." In which case, it's up to us as consumers to ask and, if we don't get an answer we like, let our feet do the talking.

We can also look for the Ocean Wise logo. This Vancouver Aquarium conservation program has persuaded dozens of B.C. restaurants to identify "ocean-friendly" dishes that use sustainable seafood (full list of participants at www.oceanwisecanada.com/). The restaurants also commit to removing one "unsustainable" dish from their menu every six months. So far, about 50 Vancouver restaurants have taken the pledge, including chains like the Boathouse and Cactus Club. Thinking consumers have to ask how come the Keg and Earls don't get onboard. "Restaurants can differentiate themselves by engaging in programs like this," Boisvert says.

The Ocean Wise logo is one means of being aware of what you're eating, but it still leaves the source of hundreds of dishes unknown. For instance, ask yourself (better still, ask the eatery) if that salmon in your B.C. roll is farmed or wild. We're not talking Tojo's here (which, surprisingly, does not list Ocean Wise dishes), but your little local sushi joint. These days, some places tell you with handwritten signs. Near where I live, small Hoshi Sushi (2825 West Broadway) states "We serve wild salmon" on its printed flier. But, says Boisvert, "Even wild salmon falls in the yellow category" of Canada's Seafood Guide because it depends on runs and stocks. How about a dynamite roll loaded with prawn and tempura? Er, maybe. Shrimp and prawns are green, amber, or red depending on whether, in a descending scale of desirability, they're trap-caught, trawled, or are tiger prawns sourced internationally. You're safe with pollack, the prime ingredient in imitation crab, so California-roll on.

Still on the topic of cheap eats, I'm wondering what's in McDonald's fish burgers. The corporate Web site provides the answer: cod, Alaskan pollack, or hoki makes up the white layer in the Filet-O-Fish. Checking my wallet card, I learn that cod is green, yellow, or red depending on catch method and pollack gets the green light, but that hoki (not in the SeaChoice database) comes from New Zealand, and according to the Field Guide to Seafood, stocks are declining through overfishing. If we could just persuade McDonald's to use pollack only, we'd be loving it. Public demand? It worked with polystyrene clamshells.

Farmed clams are good, SeaChoice says, as are Dungeness crabs and farmed mussels. Farmed rainbow trout are okay locally because they're from land-based operations. Feel free to indulge in B.C. or Alaskan sablefish, but not those from south of the 49th parallel because of concerns about by-catch and the status of stocks. I confess to a weakness for rust-red barbecued salmon chunks so, lunch over, Boisvert and I head to Capers, the first retailer to participate in the Aquarium's Ocean Wise

program, which means all the salmon is wild, including the maple-syrup-wild-spring nuggets. Locally owned Choices also makes a point of selling wild salmon only and, when I drop by my local branch, has an in-store special on "fresh wild Nass River sockeye". Its barbecued salmon is wild too. The other place I regularly buy seafood is Seven Seas Seafood (2328 West 4th Avenue). Staff here could win prizes for knowing where stock comes from and tell me that while they have plenty of fresh wild salmon for sale, their barbecued tips are made with the farmed kind. Again, it comes down to asking and keeping in mind that, as Boisvert points out, "We don't see what's happening beneath the waves."