



Getting wise about their ocean menu

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Almost everywhere you look these days, the news is the same. Fish stocks are crashing, another species is at risk. The cod, the salmon, the list goes on. In all, scientists say as much as 90 per cent of the large fish stocks have disappeared over the last 50 years.

Those with a social conscience could make a pledge not to eat seafood at all in order to do their bit to preserve the remaining stocks, and there's some merit to that. However, Atilla Cimsit and Rich Atkins at The Landing West Coast Grill in Parksville have another idea — and it's an idea that's catching on.

Cimsit, the director of food and beverage for the upscale restaurant, and Atkins, the executive chef, both care about the oceans and the life that lives in it. It's not surprising. Their two giant fish tanks in the restaurant are considered one of the biggest privately-held aquariums in the province.

The salmon, starfish, crabs, sea anemones and other forms of sea life are not appetizers to show what's on the menu. Far from it.

"They're our pets," Cimsit said.

Concerned about the continuing degradation of fish stocks around the world, Landings signed on to the Ocean Wise program, an innovative initiative spearheaded by the Vancouver Aquarium. The program identifies seafood items as a good choice to protect life in the oceans, with aquarium staff doing the homework, reviewing the latest scientific information and then recommending sustainable seafood choices to their partner restaurants and markets.

The environmental issues addressed by the program, said Vancouver Aquarium public relations manager Brenda Jones, include overfishing and not leaving enough to re-populate themselves, bycatch — where animals are removed from the ocean that were not intended to be part of the catch — and habitat degradation, where fishing for seafood is done in such a manner that negatively impacts the local environment sea life depends on for survival.

For both Cimsit and Atkins, the program was a natural choice.

“It seemed to fit in with what we wanted to be known for,” Cimsit said. “We are very sensitive, living on the Island, to the beauty and abundance we want to maintain and pass on to the next generation. We are dealing with a lot of endangered species in our waters and this program shows a lot of sensitivity to those issues.”

Cimsit noted Landings was the first restaurant in B.C. To not only go 100 per cent Ocean Wise in their menu, but the first to get everything right on the first try.

Part of the credit for that has to go to Atkins, who said he has made a point of making responsible choices for quite some time.

“There are certain items, like orange roughy, people were using but I wasn’t using them myself at the time, because I heard through the grapevine they were getting a little low,” he said. “I haven’t used them in years.”

Similarly, he said, prawns, which are one of the most destructive fisheries going, are simply not on — for the most part.

“I dropped prawns altogether, unless they’re B.C. Prawns, and only in season, trap caught, not farmed with big pits dug that kill large areas of mangroves,” he said. “This program has made me look a lot more local, instead of overseas and to the south.”

Now, with the Ocean Wise symbol beside every seafood dish on their summer menu, Landings is preparing to carry on their new, environmentally conscious tradition on their autumn menu as well.

“People are reacting very positively,” Cimsit said.