

April 2005

## What's the Catch?

by **André LaRivière**

I recently joined other parents in the canned-fish aisle in a two-step of tin-picking and label-reading. Clearly, we were all searching for some clues as to which cans would yield the tastiest, healthiest, and safest (low in mercury) addition to our next batch of tuna salad. I'd spent the better part of the morning trolling the web and making calls for fresh opinions on the best choices. So, when someone asked why I'd picked the olive oil-packed Italian tuna, I said that all canned tuna contains some mercury, so my current policy is to serve much less of it and go for maximum flavour.

My daily forays into the dizzying pool of food information have led to two other realizations that now guide my relationship with my dinner and the global industry behind it. First, driven by cutting-edge technologies and supply-side economics, we're on the cusp of a significant turning point in the evolution of our food system. Second, debate and protest are increasingly ineffective agents of change. To ensure a healthy and secure—and, lest we forget, tasty—food future, we need to make many more conscious, informed choices before the fillet hits the pan.

One of the first to embrace and popularize the concept of informed choice was the Monterey Bay (California) Aquarium's Seafood Watch program. Its wallet-sized card, distributed locally by the Vancouver Aquarium, organizes popular species under three columns: Best Choices, Good Alternatives, and Avoid, to encourage "choices for healthy oceans." And, through the efforts of other local fish advocates, we'll soon be awash in more guides recommending the ingredients of our next seafood meal.

"Making people aware that the sea ought to be protected is a very good thing," says Dr. Daniel Pauly, director of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre and an expert on the impact of the world's fisheries on ocean ecosystems. "All these guides do their best with the data we currently have, though I'm not sure why we need more than one per region," he says.

Jay Ritchlin, campaign strategist for the David Suzuki Foundation's marine-conservation program, agrees



Black mussels, like these, fresh at Granville Island, are in the eat-more-often category. Photo by Jennifer Holland

### B.C. Mussels, Sweet as Honey

The typical European (if there is such a person) consumes nine pounds of mussels each year; Canadians tuck into less than a pound each.

That stat may change given the early buzz on the new B.C. honey mussel. Not a true indigenous species, but rather a naturally occurring hybrid of local and exotic mussels, it's the enterprise/obsession of Dale Williamson, owner/operator of the B.C. Mussel Company of Quadra Island. "Since our first test crop in 1999, we've been perfecting our methods of raising these unique, amber-shelled mussels using environmentally sound techniques," he says.

With favourable previews last fall at the Sooke Harbour House and Wickannish Inn and from celebrity chefs such as Toronto's Michael Statlander, Williamson shopped his sweet morsels directly to local chefs. You can now taste honey mussels at more than 40 restaurants around Vancouver.

Seafood City (Granville Island) and



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there is “a plethora of guides,” adding that his colleagues in the environmental non-profit sector are at work on a unified sustainable-seafood campaign for the entire west coast of North America.

They also plan to address the discrepancies in some guides that, left unchecked, could undermine the credibility of these programs. “Our scientists are asking tough questions, too, so we’re meeting to compare methodologies,” Ritchlin says.

The foundation’s team is about to contribute to the pile of guides with the release of *State of the Catch: A Guide to Sustainable B.C. Seafood*, which is aimed at volume purchasers of B.C. products, such as restaurant chains, grocers, and seafood suppliers. The project ranks 30 species fished on the B.C. coast according to the environmental impact of the fishery, benefits to local communities, and overall sustainability.

Because even David Suzuki can’t muster a fleet of independent research ships, getting an accurate picture of B.C.’s undersea reality remains a huge problem. Ritchlin says the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans gathers some good data but also supports the growth of an individual fishing quota system (IFQ), which promotes buying, selling, or trading portions of a total catch, including such popular species as halibut and sablefish. “IFQ associations regard the data they collect as business information and are often reluctant to share it,” he says. “They certainly have the right to make money catching fish, but we believe access to information needed to make good management decisions is in the public interest.”

The 2005 edition of the *Citizen’s Guide to Seafood* from the Sierra Club of B.C. rates the best and worst choices among more than 50 local favourites. Sierra’s marine campaign coordinator, Colin Campbell, also bemoans the credibility gap embedded in local fisheries, particularly regarding rockfish. The catch of more than 50 species of these fish, often sold generically as rock cod or red snapper, is not regulated. “Even if B.C. boats are using environmentally conscious fishing methods, we can’t recommend that consumers support this product,” Campbell says.

Like the other guides, the Sierra Club guide puts Chilean sea bass, monkfish, and imported caviar on the “Don’t Eat” list. Pacific halibut, B.C. albacore tuna, and farmed (yes, farmed) Pacific clams and mussels, on the other hand, should be on our plates more often.

Another net gain for sustainability is coming from the Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre. Patrick O’Callaghan, the aquarium’s vice president of conservation and education, found inspiration on a visit to an aquarium in South Carolina, which produces a list of local accredited seafood restaurants. When he discovered that more than 60 per cent of seafood in the Lower Mainland is consumed in restaurants, the Ocean Wise program was born. Rather than listing species of fish to avoid or choose, the Ocean Wise program lists restaurants to choose, based on their commitment to putting only sustainable seafood on their menus.

Using data drawn from the Monterey Bay program and Ritchlin’s work at the Suzuki Foundation, Ocean Wise will start with 12 to 15 restaurants, including West, DV8 Lounge, Blue Water Grill, Joe Fortes, and The SandBar. “We’re working with each of them to develop the first phase of training programs, and are happy to take it slowly and get it right,” says O’Callaghan.

Whole Foods Market (Park Royal in West Vancouver) also regularly carry B.C. honey mussels, and you can order them at other seafood shops.

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Try this classic *moules marinières* with homegrown B.C. mussels.

Three pounds will serve four as an appetizer or two as a main course.

Debeard the mussels using pliers to pull out the beard protruding from the back (discard any open mussels). Put a tablespoon of butter or olive oil into a large pot over high heat, then toss in a handful of minced shallots or onions, two or more crushed garlic cloves, a bay leaf, a sprig of fresh thyme or teaspoon of dried, a handful of chopped parsley, and a wine glass of dry white wine—say, B.C. sauvignon blanc. Add the mussels, cover tightly, give the pot a shake, then return to heat for four to eight minutes, with an occasional shake and toss.

Remove from heat when most of the mussels have opened (discard the ones that haven’t), add a grind of black pepper, and pour the lot into a large serving bowl or individual soup bowls.

Pass around some crusty bread, serve the rest of the wine, and enjoy the extra sweet goodness of sustainable seafood. (AL)

Ocean Wise accreditation begins with a chef's commitment to remove an endangered or unsustainable seafood item from the menu and replace it with a sustainable one. Continuous improvement of the menu over a prolonged period earns the restaurant full Ocean Wise status.

It will come as no surprise to seafood devotees that Vancouver's C Restaurant is anchoring the program. Owner Harry Kambolis and executive chef Robert Clark have rewritten the operating guide to running a modern seafood restaurant with their "21st Century Responsible" policies, such as buying a Prince Rupert fisher's entire catch of ethically harvested salmon and sponsoring a new sustainable scallop fishery in Haida Gwaii.

Clark is excited by the potential for real change in the restaurant sector. "I think this is the biggest step forward for what we've been advocating," he says. "Ocean Wise will reflect well on the entire city and region, because though we laud the quality of our restaurants, that alone doesn't make us any better than any other dining destination. This is a guide we can all be truly proud of."

And how can we make a guide like this even better? The answer is simple and, incidentally, the same one chef Jacques Pepin gives a student when asked how to sharpen a vegetable peeler: "Use it more often."

## Sustainable-Seafood Sites

Monterey Bay Aquarium [seafoodwatch.org](http://seafoodwatch.org)

Citizen's Guide to Seafood [sierraclub.bc.ca](http://sierraclub.bc.ca)

David Suzuki Foundation [davidsuzuki.org](http://davidsuzuki.org)

Blue Ocean Institute [blueoceaninstitute.org/seafood\\_details/36](http://blueoceaninstitute.org/seafood_details/36)

Ocean Wise program [vanaqua.org/conservation/oceanwise.html](http://vanaqua.org/conservation/oceanwise.html)

C Restaurant [crestaurant.com](http://crestaurant.com)

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