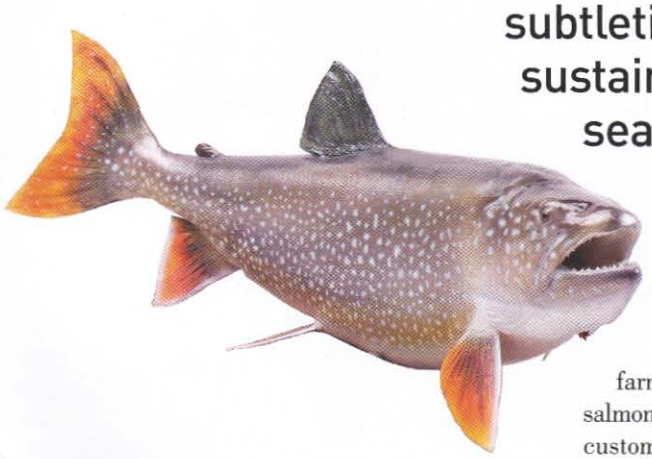
It is Monday night at the French restaurant Le Crocodile in downtown Vancouver. I feel like treating myself to a great seafood dish. I know that the world's oceans are in crisis and that more and more marine species are on the brink of extinction. So I take out the "seafood guide" wallet card that I always carry with me. This card is produced by SeaChoice, a program that helps Canadians make more sustainable seafood choices. The card is divided in three columns. It's quite simple: the green list represents the best seafood choices, the yellow list is for species of some concern, and the red list reflects seafood to be avoided for a combination of reasons such as habitat damage or endangered populations.

The waitress obviously forgot that she was now dealing with a different kettle of fish. Clearly, I was not the only person at Le Crocodile struggling with the subtleties of sustainable seafood.

As I study the menu, I come across grilled Atlantic salmon served with a grapefruit beurre blanc. I check my seafood card and see that Atlantic salmon is in the red column. I show the card to the waitress and ask her to provide further information on the grilled Atlantic salmon. After making inquiries in the kitchen, she tells me that this "Atlantic" salmon does not refer to the Atlantic Ocean but is actually a species of wild Pacific salmon. I know there are five different species of wild Pacific salmon, but I have never heard of Atlantic being one of them. Confused, I decide to play it safe and pick the Fraser Valley duck breast for my dinner.

The next day, I phone Taina Uitto, the SeaChoice coordinator who works for the B.C. Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, one of the five environment organizations behind SeaChoice. Uitto confirms that Atlantic salmon is definitely not a species of wild Pacific salmon. Determined to solve this mystery, I call Michel Jacob, the chef and owner of the 25-year old Le Crocodile. Jacob explains that the restaurant used to carry the red-listed Atlantic farmed salmon, but switched to wild salmon a few months ago because too many customers were complaining about it. Menus are updated every two years and that is why grilled Atlantic salmon is still on the menu. Jacob explains that he now offers coho salmon and that the waitress obviously forgot that she was now dealing with a different kettle of fish. Clearly, I was not the only person at Le Crocodile struggling with the subtleties of sustainable seafood.



Several non-profit organizations have taken on the challenge of helping consumers make responsible seafood choices. For example, the Vancouver Aquarium has launched a program called Ocean Wise, which works with restaurants to identify sustainable seafood options on their menus. To qualify for the program, restaurants have to remove at least one unsustainable species from their current menu and add at least one sustainable species. But according to Jason Boyce, manager of conservation at the Vancouver Aquarium, "90 per cent of the restaurants do more than one. On average they remove two to four unsustainable species." The options that meet the sustainability criteria are identified on the menu with an Ocean Wise symbol.

The voluntary program was launched in April 2005 with 16 participants. Across B.C., 78 restaurants are currently involved, including the seafood restaurant C, also in downtown Vancouver. According to Robert Clark, C's executive chef who partnered with the Vancouver Aquarium to launch the program, Ocean Wise "takes a lot of work out of the consumer's hands. The work is done by the restaurants."

Clark started asking questions 10 years ago about where his fish came from and how it was caught. Back then, obtaining information from seafood suppliers was an upstream battle. "It was very difficult, because nobody understood what we were asking for," Clark remembers. With Ocean Wise, things started to change. More restaurants asked more questions from their suppliers, who turned to fisheries for answers.

"They want to sell me stuff, so they are willing to do what it takes to find the information," says Dan Close, product development chef at the Cactus Club Café, another Ocean Wise participant.

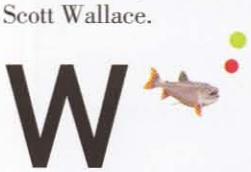
To determine if a seafood product is ocean-friendly, both the Vancouver Aquarium and the SeaChoice program rely on the five sustainability criteria that were initially adopted by the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program: the inherent vulnerability to fishing pressure, the status of the stocks, the nature and extent of discarded bycatch, the impacts on habitats and ecosystems, and how effectively the fishery is managed.

While these criteria are commonly agreed upon in the ocean conservation community, there are still debates over how to best capture the concept of sustainable seafood. For example, at the present time the amount of fossil fuel used to capture a fish is not considered in the sustainability determination. "We rate a lot of the fisheries as green because they have low bycatch, low habitat damage and are well managed, but there is a huge fossil fuel consumption per unit of fish caught," says Scott Wallace, a sustainable fisheries analyst with the David Suzuki Foundation.

Another ongoing debate involves the difference between protecting an entire species and ensuring specific fisheries are well managed. "Are we making broad species recommendations or are we making very specific fishery level recommendations?" asks George Leonard, senior science manager for the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program.

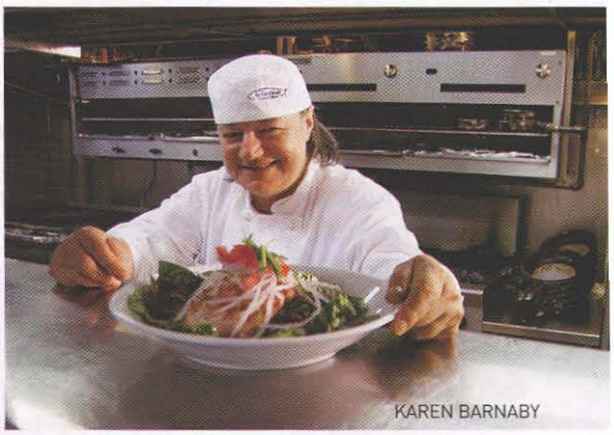
When the sustainable seafood movement started in the late 1990s, consumers knew very little about seafood, and the Monterey Bay Aquarium focused on building awareness about the broad differences between the species. However, as consumers became savvier and the seafood industry started responding to the campaigns, there has been an increasing need for much more specific fishery-level analysis. "It has become a much more complicated environment in which to operate," Leonard acknowledges. There is now a dilemma as to how to credit individual fisheries that have good management practices within an overall fishery that might not be doing so well.

Boiling all this complex information down to a wallet-sized card can be a challenge. For example, the SeaChoice ranking for B.C. pacific salmon of "yellow" doesn't really tell the whole story about that particular fish, so SeaChoice puts out annual updates on the general status of salmon in B.C. In 2007, Nass River sockeye salmon and seine-caught pink salmon are two "better choices" and Fraser River sockeye salmon and Chinook salmon are two "poor choices." It is then up to consumers, chefs and retailers to ask where their salmon is from. "It is actually possible for consumers to be eating sockeye from an endangered run and they wouldn't know it," warns Scott Wallace.



With so much information available, I want to find out if sustainable seafood programs are actually helping Vancouver consumers

to make better choices. I take SeaChoice coordinator Taina Uitto on a culinary field trip. Our first stop for lunch is a popular sushi place on Granville at Robson called Kitto Japanese House. The Ocean Wise program has not yet penetrated the sushi eateries, so we have to rely on our SeaChoice wallet card. One of the safest choices on the menu appears to be California rolls that contain imitation crab. Imitation crab is generally made of pollock and is on the "green" list. As we double-check this information and ask our waitress what species the imitation crab is made of, we learn to our dismay that in this specific case, it is a mix of species containing shark, cod, and flounder. The sustainability status of these species is questionable, and Uitto soon realizes that her wallet card doesn't help much.


KAREN BARNABY

"Imitation crab is on the green list. I have always been thinking it was pollock," she says. "If I have been eating shark without knowing that I was eating shark in imitation crab meat I would cry."

Our waitress politely attempts to answer all our questions, and when shown the sustainable seafood card, she almost apologizes, indicating that we might have better luck "at the more fancy restaurants."

The next day I take Uitto for lunch at the Boathouse restaurant in English Bay, a seafood chain restaurant that is participating in the Ocean Wise program. The Ocean Wise symbol is prominently placed on the lunch menu, although it is not linked to any specific fish item. We feel that we are in good hands, and when we ask our waitress if everything on the menu is Ocean Wise and sustainable, her answer is an unequivocal yes. As far as she knows, everything is Ocean Wise on the lunch menu. Yet the menu offers jumbo prawns and tiger shrimp, which come from India and Vietnam, according to the waitress. International shrimp and prawns are on the card's "avoid" list, mostly because farming practices are destructive to sensitive mangrove habitats.

It turns out that even with the best information available, sustainability messages are confusing and mixed, and consumers are not able to make the right choice. "I end up ordering the jumbo prawns, unknowingly supporting the destruction of mangrove forests in Asia. So because of either lack of information, misinformation or untrue information, I still can't make a good choice and end up making a worse choice," Uitto concludes.

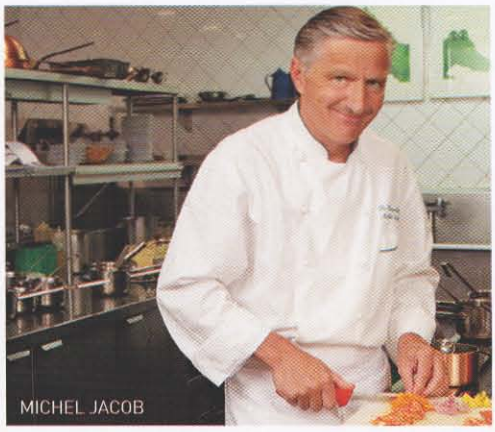
Kelly Gordon, the vice-president of operations for the Boathouse restaurants, says that 65 per cent of their current menu items are Ocean Wise, as compared to 35 per cent five years ago. "We are trying to do our best to move in a direction of high sustainability, but we do not claim to be 100-per-cent there yet." While Gordon recognizes that the Boathouse needs to be more clear on how to present the Ocean Wise logo, he also says it is not easy with menus that are printed only once a year.

To Jennifer Jacquet, a researcher with the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia, North American consumers' choices do not even make a significant difference in saving the ocean environment, as the future growth in seafood demand lies in markets such as Asia, which are typically unresponsive to seafood awareness campaigns. "Vancouver consumers can feel less guilty about their own individual impacts, but they can't mobilize change on the water," she says.

Jacquet and others suggest that conservation groups should focus their efforts on lobbying the government to ban unsustainable fish and pushing for better labelling standards and improved seafood traceability.

As a start, the Marine Stewardship Council has implemented a "Chain of Custody" certification that guarantees fish buyers that seafood can be traced from the fishery to the dinner plate. MSC-certified products are not yet widely available in the Canadian market.

"Government could stop import of anything that is not considered from a sustainable source. Consumers should not have to worry about it. It should be all taken care of behind the scenes," says the David Suzuki Foundation's Scott Wallace.


MICHEL JACOB

Given the challenges of translating complex environmental issues into simple labels, what have programs such as Ocean Wise changed for Vancouver chefs and consumers? Even though Ocean Wise has made it easier for chefs to select sustainable seafood, some of them still struggle with the fact that the information they receive may be incomplete and uncertain. "It is always vague," says Karen Barnaby, the chef of the Fish House in Stanley Park.

According to Fred Cirillo, the corporate accounts manager for seafood supplier Albion Fisheries, Albion is able to guarantee the information for most species, particularly local species, including identifying the river system wild salmon is coming from. However, it is still difficult to get all the answers on exotic species or fishing methods for fish such as tuna. "It is difficult for us to get all that information; you would have to tag all the fish," Cirillo says.

Some chefs are not necessarily even able to act on the information. Kelly Gordon from the Boathouse indicates he does not have the time to figure out which river each of his salmon comes from. Barnaby at the Fish House says she takes salmon runs into consideration to some extent, "but not to a huge extent because we have to serve salmon. We cannot not serve salmon."

Product availability is a limiting factor as to how far restaurants can go on the sustainable seafood road. "Every once in a while someone tells me there is no sockeye coming down the river this year, and my heart goes like this," says Gordon, tapping his chest. "It is not like cattle. It is both the beauty and the conundrum that they are wild," he says. To solve the uncertainties about the availability and the sustainability of individual salmon runs, Dan Close at Cactus Club has switched from wild salmon to an Ocean Wise-approved farmed steelhead from Powell River.

As much as they would like to remove unsustainable Asian farmed tiger prawns from their menus, many restaurants are hesitant to do so because of high customer demand. Replacing tiger prawns with sustainable B.C. grown spot prawns might be the right thing to do, but it presents problems with prawn size, price, and availability. Robert Clark at C proposes a different approach: "We should all just be eating higher quality and less of it," he says. Not everybody is ready to follow him.

Some chefs have tried to introduce green species such as sardines or tilapia, but quickly had to remove them from their menus because they didn't sell. "When they come to the Fish House, they want to see fish on the menu and they want to see fish that they want to eat on the menu," says Barnaby.

Ocean Wise participants say they have not seen much difference in seafood sales for items that bear the Ocean Wise logo. According to Aron Bjornson, marketing manager at Capers Community Market, freshness, price, and overall attractiveness of the fish are more critical factors. Out of the five top-selling seafood dinner entrees at the Fish House for 2006-2007, two are not Ocean Wise products.

These findings might not surprise Michel Jacob at Le Crocodile. "My colleague chefs ask me how come you are not part of Ocean Wise yet. I tell them that I have to sell my menu," he says.

Jacob has promised that he will join Ocean Wise within a year. "I know we are the bad boys of Vancouver with our fish," he candidly admits. "But you will see on our new menu, there might still be one or two items that are not politically correct. But everything else will be good."

I feel relieved that next time I go to Le Crocodile, I will be able to enjoy a guilt-free dinner thanks to Ocean Wise. But Barnaby still wonders about the true value of the program.

"The program is good in that it makes you feel good and virtuous about what you are doing, but otherwise I don't know if it really made that much a difference to the consumer," she says.