

Wise Up - A New Way to Choose Sustainable Fish

Posted by [Sheryl Kirby](#)



We hear more and more news stories about how fish stocks are dwindling world-wide. Consumers are told to search out sustainable fish, but most of us don't really know what that means. Even if we are conscious of the problem and make an effort – carrying one of those wallet cards, for instance, or grilling our fishmongers as to the origins of their wares – it's still tough to know exactly where our fish dinner is coming from. And when it comes to restaurants, it's even tougher.

Restaurants have small profit margins, and the temptation for a chef to serve something cheap and cheerful is often high. The fish we love to eat the most are the ones that are most at risk, and restaurants play an important role in teaching and encouraging customers about choosing sustainable options.

[Ocean Wise](#) is a programme created by the Vancouver Aquarium to do just that. Working directly with restaurants and markets, Ocean Wise is a non-profit association dedicated to the education of consumers which allows them to make sustainable choices. The Ocean Wise logo next to a menu item or in a shop is an assurance that the item is a good choice for keeping ocean life healthy and abundant for generations to come.



Started as a small local initiative, Ocean Wise recently expanded to a national programme, including restaurants right across the country. Here in Toronto, the Ocean Wise programme is in place at [Epic at the Fairmont Royal York](#), [C5](#), [Pangaea](#), [Amuse Bouche](#), [Trios Bistro at Toronto Marriott Downtown](#) and [Perigee](#), along with [Panago](#) pizza, who use sustainable shrimp in all their restaurants.

Fairmont Royal York executive chef David Garcelon explained to the crowd at a recent media event that Fairmont refuses to sell several endangered items in their restaurants, including bluefin tuna, sea bass and shark. The Toronto Fairmont hotel served 47,000 seafood meals in 2008, so it's easy to see how the further destruction of endangered species can add up quickly if chefs and consumers are not conscious of the problem.

Garcelon indicated that Epic restaurant currently offers 50% of their fish entrees from sustainable fish but he hopes to move to the Ocean Wise programme as much as possible.



For those of us who may not be buying hundreds of thousands of pounds of fish each year, the problem might seem less obvious, but Ocean Wise indicates that 97% of the world's predatory fish are gone, and at current rates we can expect a complete global collapse of world fisheries by 2048. Which really isn't a long time off.

While the programme is well known and well supported in British Columbia, restaurants in the rest of the country are just catching on, although some admit they're been trying to source sustainable fish for their menus for many years. Chef Martin Kouprie of Pangaea says his restaurant has been serving sustainable fish for a few years already.

"Our involvement began in 2004 when information on our seafood choices including specific country and harvesting methods became available through the Seafood Watch Program from the Monterey Bay Aquarium," says Kouprie. "Once we started to examine our menu selection and cross reference it with the Seafood Watch information, we started to make changes immediately."



Pangaea brought in over 5000 [Seafood Watch](#) pocket guides to hand out to customers, who were supportive of the changes from the beginning. "Once the Ocean Wise program began to establish itself, we discovered a home grown vehicle to get our message out and continue to educate ourselves with."

Despite customer support, Kouprie admits it wasn't an easy process at first, just because sustainable fish was so difficult to source. "We realized that as long as there is a steady supply of endangered or unsustainable seafood hitting the counters in stores, customer perception in retail would be slow to change," he says.

It took the Kouprie and his staff pressuring Pangaea's suppliers to get the ball rolling. "We started working with our seafood suppliers 8 months ago educating them about Ocean Wise and why they need to think this way in order to further grow their business. One of the biggest suppliers, [McGregors Meat & Seafood](#), embraced the Ocean Wise program and began to come out with weekly best choice "green lists". Other of our suppliers such as **Daily Seafood** has been very slow to respond, and as a result, we are doing less and less business with them."

Kouprie also explains that, like many programmes in place to pair up chefs with farmers, The Vancouver Aquarium delights in connecting fishermen with chefs in order to develop maturing relationships.



In terms of creating a menu, Kouprie is enjoying the challenges. "I love preparing and serving seafood and with the new Ocean Wise way of thinking, we are using a greater variety of seafood than ever before," he explains. "Salmon that had been a mainstay on our menus in the past finally came off the menu this fall when the wild salmon run was over; we decided that the criteria surrounding farmed salmon did not suit the environment."

Kouprie is also honest about the fact that it takes small steps to make the switchover. "We are not perfect ourselves in terms of doing all that we can, but we are making incremental changes towards the absolute and that is doing something! Customers are becoming educated and appreciate the changes to

our menu selection. They know that they are part of a solution."

The hope is that more restaurants will sign on to the Ocean Wise programme and will begin to convert their menus to offer more sustainable fish and less of the species that are in danger. As restaurants make their involvement public, their customers will take that philosophy into their own kitchens.



"Restaurants are on the forefront when it comes to trends," Kouprie says. "Fine dining restaurants are where you see the most in terms of innovation and it eventually trickles its way down into the consumer stream. It is vitally important that all restaurants examine their purchasing practices and adjust according to the information that is present in Ocean Wise. Doing "Other Wise" is criminal."

To allow Torontonians to check out Ocean Wise in action, until May 31st, [Pangaea is offering two separate tasting menus](#) featuring sustainable seafood with a portion of the cost donated to Ocean Wise to support Vancouver Aquarium conservation initiatives.