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Chefs Go Fishing for Sustainable Seafood

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With new technologies, aquarium outreach programs and a local focus, more chefs are going green.



NYC chef Anita Lo serves Australis Barramundi.

Diners are riding a wave of awareness regarding threats to oceanlife – but they don't always know what to do about it. When a recent ZAGAT.com poll asked, "Do concerns about over-fishing and other threats to seafood populations affect your dining decisions?" 54% of respondents said they "try to order sustainable seafood but can't always keep track of what they are supposed to order."

While there are ways for environmentally conscious diners to stay informed (see sidebar), chefs around the country are helping take the onus off customers by putting the "right" seafood on the menu. And since more than two-thirds (by value) of seafood consumed in the U.S. is eaten in restaurants, according to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, chefs have the potential to make a huge impact on the ocean's health.

You don't have to tell that to chef Ted Walter and wife Cindy, owners of [Passionfish](#) in Pacific Grove, CA. When they're not preparing dishes featuring sustainable fish – for example, California sturgeon in charmoula marinade, or tilapia with garlic-balsamic-vinegar butter –

FIND YOUR FISH

Organizations including [Seafood Choices Alliance](#) and [Greenpeace](#) offer charts and cards to help consumers make informed choices

with garlic-balsamic-vinegar butter – they're working to spread their mantra that "smart harvesting can strengthen global fish stocks" by offering public presentations, forums for culinary students and professionals, and through legislative advocacy. Cindy's efforts helped lead to Pacific Grove's adoption in 2005 of a Sustainable Seafood Resolution, making it one of only two cities to do so (San Francisco was the first). The resolution encourages restaurants and markets "to give preference to seafood harvested in a sustainable way" and to opt for local seafood.

about the seafood on their plates. And some information has gone mobile – the status of an item on the [Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch](#) list can be checked via any [handheld device](#), and the [Blue Ocean Institute's FishPhone](#) makes it easy to text for up-to-date info right from the table.

Local is key at the [East Coast Grill](#) in Cambridge, MA, where chef-owner Chris Schlesinger, a fisherman himself, has long-standing relationships with providers that he trusts. "I stay informed about seafood stocks," says Schlesinger, who features the likes of sea scallops from New Bedford, MA, harpooned swordfish and a daily fish that's "wicked fresh, wicked local" on his menu.



Seafood Choices Alliance partners with [Charting Nature](#) for illustrated posters with descriptions of sustainable fish and shellfish.

Growing your own can work too. San Francisco's [Hog Island Oyster Company](#) raises its own Sweetwater, Atlantic and Kumamoto bivalves with sustainable methods in the Tomales Bay. Of course, not every restaurant can raise its own seafood. But there are plenty of other ways for toques to support healthy oceans.

Aquariums across the country have programs to promote sustainable seafood, including partnerships with restaurants. At Boston's New England Aquarium, the [Celebrate Seafood](#) dinner series features sustainable seafood plus appearances by guest chefs from local restaurants like [Beacon Hill Bistro](#), [Chez Henri](#), [Garden at the Cellar](#) and [Sel de la Terre](#). The evenings include cooking demos and discussions; the menus highlight wild-caught fish such as striped mullet, Alaskan salmon, mahi mahi, wahoo and bluefish along with responsibly farmed oysters, mussels, clams, bay scallops, barramundi and cobia.

In Chicago, the Shedd Aquarium's [Right Bite](#) program not only partners with chefs for special dinners, but helps restaurants plan menus. Right Bite participants promise to have at least one sustainable seafood dish on their menus at all times and take off at least one unsustainable seafood item; their staffs receive special training twice a year. The program has attracted [Carnivale](#), which features dishes like arctic char ceviche and [Shaw's Crab House](#), which serves items like sautéed Lake Erie Walleye with horseradish crust. Carrie Nahabedian has also signed up her top-rated [Naha](#), whose sustainable dishes feature the likes of wild Great Lakes whitefish and

native lobster.

Long a leader in ocean education, The Monterey Bay Aquarium's [Seafood Watch](#) program began in 1999 as a way to raise consumer awareness. Sheila Bowman, the program's outreach manager, explains that restaurants became involved when consumers, armed with seafood guides, went out to dinner and started asking questions. "At first chefs were like 'What the heck is that aquarium doing?'" she says. But in the last two years a widespread shift occurred. "Chefs had started looking at where their beef, pork, produce, dairy and even wine came from before they started looking at seafood. Ultimately they looked at seafood," says Bowman.

There's now a restaurant component to Seafood Watch, with members pledging to eschew items from the organization's "avoid" list. Participants include [rm](#) (Las Vegas), which brings the message to the table with farm-raised Ocean Rose Abalone and bigeye tuna that's hook-and-line caught from a sustainable population in Hawaii; [Ciudad](#) (LA), where marinated white anchovy with lemon, garlic and parsley makes the menu; and [Fish](#) (Sausalito), which highlights seasonal fish, line-caught local albacore tuna and local Miyagi oysters.

WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD?

[SeaChoice](#) describes it as "fish that are caught or farmed with consideration for the long-term viability of individual marine species and for the oceans' ecological balance as a whole."

Improved fish-farming techniques are another boon for sustainably minded chefs. [Australis U.S.-farmed Barramundi](#), for example, is raised indoors with a special system that keeps the water clean. The fish meets environmental and sustainability standards and has been given a place on Seafood Watch's "Better Choice" listing. It can be found on the menu at Napa's famed [French Laundry](#), where chef Thomas Keller serves it sautéed with potato confit, piquillo peppers, chorizo and arugula. At Charlie Palmer's Las Vegas [Aureole](#), it's pan-seared and served with citrus-braised butter lettuce and carrot-orange reduction. In NYC, Anita Lo ([Annisa](#)) prepares it with artichokes, garlic chives and black trumpet sauce.



Kona Kampachi

Meanwhile, open-water aquaculture farms have modernized as well. [Kona Kampachi](#), a Hawaiian yellowtail, is raised "from hatch to harvest" with improved nets and water monitoring systems, sustainable sources for feed and a harvest-to-order system that cuts waste. New York chef Dan Barber ([Blue Hill](#) and [Blue Hill at Stone Barns](#)) offers it as a special in preparations such as crudo with panther soybeans and apple mustard. "Flavor is where we're leading with this stuff. I'm an environmentalist, but first and foremost, I'm a flavor guy...I decided to support this, getting behind the cause of how we want fish to be produced in the

future," he says.

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