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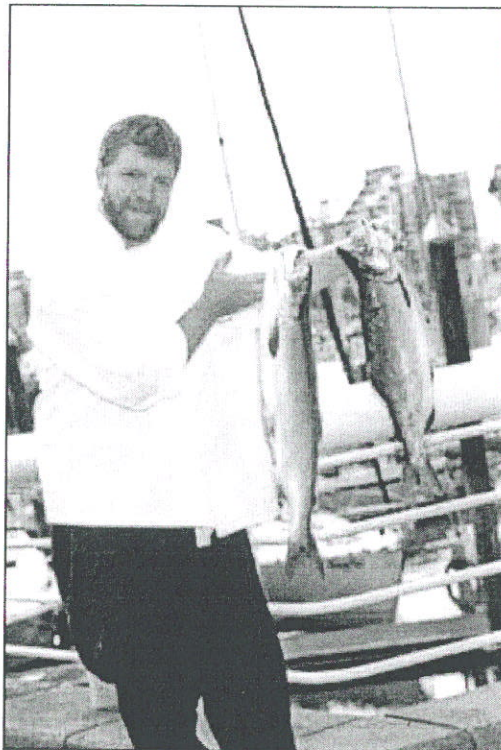
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photo Hamid Attie  
 C restaurant's executive chef Robert Clark has made a name for himself based not only on his inventive seafood cuisine but also his concern about sustainability. Now he's hoping other chefs will join the cause.

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**Wising up on seafood conservation**

Sustainability could drive menu choices

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GROWING up on the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec, Robert Clark learned from his family about respecting the land and taking from it only what was needed.

The York River - abundant with salmon - ran through the family's property and though, as Clark points out, his father and grandfather could have taken thousands of fish with no one the wiser they respected the two salmon per licence per day rule.

"We all had a fishing licence, so they could even have said our

family has four licences so we'll take eight fish, but

my father would say 'No bloody way.' I'd be playing ball and he would come and haul me out of the game and say, 'You're allowed to catch two fish and you're not getting out of that canoe until you catch two fish.'"

Clark carried that sense of responsibility with him through his formal culinary training at Ontario's George Brown College and into his career in some of Toronto's finest kitchens and finally, to his current gig as executive chef at C restaurant in Vancouver.

Right from the start, when the eatery opened in its unique harbour-side space at the foot of Howe Street in 1997, Clark and North Shore-raised owner Harry Kambolis agreed that C's mandate would be to present the best of what was available from B.C.'s oceans.

"We wanted to get away from food that is eight ounces of protein, potato and two veg," says Clark. "Instead, let's reduce the standard proteins and do five or six ounces of better-quality salmon and show off everything else we have here: geoduck clam, sea urchin, gooseneck barnacles, even seaweed."

"Which would you rather have?" adds Kambolis, "Eight ounces of mediocre fish, or five ounces of salmon that really shows itself?"

But it wasn't until Clark began to notice inconsistencies in the quality of the restaurant's supply of Chilean sea bass that the pair began to realize how dire the state of the world's - and B.C.'s - fish stocks were.

"I was asking my supplier 'How come last month's Chilean sea bass was so beautiful and this month's is crap?' It turns out it's not even necessarily from Chile." And upon further investigation he found out that most of the sea bass supply heading to restaurants is pirated, that many times the allowable tonnage of that species is being fished.

Clark and Kambolis immediately dropped Chilean sea bass from the menu and began to seek out other, sustainably harvested fish species.

What began as a question about quality has turned into a revolution. Today, C is the undisputed leader in seeking out ingredients that are high in quality and sustainable in supply.

The restaurant was one of the first to use sablefish (as a replacement for the sea bass). The B.C. sablefish fishery is committed to a reduced harvest of the rich, buttery-fleshed fish to ensure a healthy stock and a long-term future in the fishery.

Kambolis and Clark were also among the first in this town to wade into the wild salmon-versus-farmed debate.

"We were using farmed salmon," remembers Clark. It seemed like the responsible thing to do. "I thought if I'm using farmed salmon I'm saving the wild." Although it was counterintuitive to serve wild salmon as a sustainable choice, once Kambolis and Clark learned of the impact that fish farms were having on wild salmon stocks they made the switch without hesitation.

In 2001, they took it even further. Kambolis found Skeena Wild, a fishing company owned by Prince Rupert couple Fred and Linda Hawkshaw, who had pioneered a selective gill net fishery on the Skeena River. The company nets sockeye with a "tanglenet," catching the fish by the jawbone, not the gills, and lands them live. The method allows them to catch fewer fish, release any by-catch like coho and steelhead without injury, and earn more than the going rate for the fish they land because of their focus on quality, not volume.

Kambolis bought from the Hawkshaws their entire season's catch and served it at C and its sister restaurant Raincity Grill. He has done so every year since.

And in 2002, C restaurant teamed up with a major player in the conservation game, the David Suzuki Foundation, and created the SEAfood menu (Sustainable Environmental Awareness). Its purpose was to support sustainable fishing practices, to serve responsibly harvested seafood and to increase public awareness. A portion of the special menu went to the foundation. It was a well-founded idea, but the SEAfood menu could only reach those diners who had the big bucks to dine at C, which is a far cry from a budget eatery.

Is it strange for a chef to be so concerned about the sustainability of his supply?

"I think a lot of chefs think the way I do, but not a lot of owners think the way Harry does," says Clark.

They both agree that making responsible choices is worth the extra expense.

"We should never be afraid of quality," says Kambolis.

"We call ourselves a food city," adds Clark. "But we'll never be a food city until we look at what comes from here and start treating it with respect."

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When it rains hard, the Lower Mainland is strangely quiet. Few people are out dodging the rain that drives with such force it bounces when it hits the ground.

Inside the Vancouver Aquarium, Vancouverites are taking shelter from the wet by looking at . . . more water. A group of 40 or so -

including students, families, couples and solo visitors - are gathered around the Strait of Georgia exhibit in the Pacific Canada gallery. There's a diver in the habitat, hand-feeding wolf eels, sturgeon, rockfish and other marine life while a naturalist talks to the crowd about local ecology and conservation. At the end of his presentation he offers Seafood Watch wallet cards to any takers.

The cards - which outline seafood varieties that are best choices (green), good alternatives (yellow) or that should be avoided (red), based on origin and how the animal is caught - are part of the Seafood Watch initiative started by the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California. The Vancouver Aquarium is a West Coast partner. By giving them out to consumers, the aquariums involved hope the word will get out about making sustainable choices.

But it isn't as easy as all that, says Patrick O'Callaghan, vice-president of conservation and education at the Vancouver Aquarium.

"The seafood wallet card is published four times a year. Categories change, some items are added, some are taken off," O'Callaghan says. The process is responsive: as species or stocks begin to decline they may switch to the red category. As their numbers increase or fishing practices improve they might make the green category.

"That's confusing for people," says O'Callaghan. "If they think they are doing the right thing by not eating something and then later they find out that it's actually OK, they feel misled. It's challenging from a communications perspective."

To truly exercise their power of choice, diners would have to be doing regular research and keeping lists so they could support fisheries and fish farms that are harvesting sustainably and not impacting the ocean environment in a negative way.

For example, on the current Seafood Watch West Coast Seafood Guide published in November 2004: farmed caviar is fine, but wild-caught should be avoided; Dungeness crab is great, snow crab is an OK alternative and king crab should be avoided; wild-caught salmon is fine, but farmed should definitely be avoided. Those are only a few of the 60 or so varieties mentioned on this edition of the card (which is available online at [www.seafoodwatch.org](http://www.seafoodwatch.org)). And even those classifications are too general, says O'Callaghan.

"In Vancouver we have a real focus on farmed salmon bad, wild good. And that's kind of erroneous. There are scales of impact. A wild salmon could be endangered depending on which run it comes from. And while salmon farming as it is typically practised is certainly not a good thing, there are some land-based farms that have no impact on the ocean environment. By calling salmon farming bad it shuts down opportunities to find other ways."

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Question: How do you make such a complex subject easy?

Answer: You reduce the number of choices for the consumer from hundreds to just one.

On Jan. 13, C restaurant and the Vancouver Aquarium announced their commitment to Ocean Wise, a restaurant-based seafood conservation communication program.

Instead of asking consumers to know which seafoods are harvested or produced in a sustainable way, the Ocean Wise program will ask restaurants to. In order for restaurants to participate in the program, they must be dedicated to a process of continual improvement in the seafood they serve, removing unsustainable seafood items from their menu and replacing them with sustainable alternatives whenever possible.

C is the founding restaurant partner in the program, and the aquarium's own in-house catering department and cafe will also be an Ocean Wise partner.

"From C's point of view it makes sense," says Clark. "We love variety in seafood, and the way things are going now . . . there won't be any seafood left to serve. It'll just be Farmed Atlantic Salmon Served 10 Different Ways."

He points out that committing to the program will actually be easier for other seafood restaurants - those that might have four or five fish dishes on their menu as well as several meat dishes - than it will be for C, which serves seafood almost exclusively.

And with serendipitous timing the David Suzuki Foundation is in the process of creating a resource that will help the Ocean Wise program determine which of B.C.'s species will make the OK and not-so-OK lists for participating restaurants to serve.

The State of the Catch: A Guide to Sustainable B.C. Seafood is also due to be launched in the spring. The guide will be a resource tool for chefs, restaurateurs, seafood suppliers, and other food industry professionals to make informed choices about the sustainability of their product, and to better respond to growing consumer demand for socially and environmentally responsible seafood. It's a better option than the Seafood Watch program, which though it's a good one, tends to concentrate heavily on species fished and/or consumed in the United States.

According to a recent release, State of the Catch will rank 30 species currently fished on the B.C. coast according to their environmental impacts, benefits to coastal communities, and overall sustainability.