

Ocean Wise program puts emphasis on sustainable seafood fisheries

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An initiative by the Vancouver Aquarium to promote sustainable fisheries to the masses through the restaurant industry was launched in Victoria yesterday, with six Vancouver Island restaurants the first to take the bait.

"It's the right thing to do ... we owe it to ourselves and our customers to protect the oceans and what's in them," said Ken Nakano, executive sous chef of the Fairmont Empress Hotel, who was dishing out spot prawns trapped off the West Coast to mark the aquarium's Ocean Wise campaign.



Spinnakers Gastro Brewpub chef Ali Ryan prepares Cortes Island oysters at the launch for Ocean Wise, a Vancouver Aquarium conservation program yesterday at the Fairmont Empress Hotel.

The aquarium created the conservation program in 2005. It has 80 participating restaurants, markets and culinary programs participating on the Lower Mainland. The program works individually with restaurant owners and chefs to ensure they have up-to-date information about where they can buy seafood that is fished by sustainable methods.

Jason Boyce of the Vancouver Aquarium said the criteria for Ocean Wise follows basic principles. For example, the species have to be in abundance and resilient to fishing pressures. The method of capture is considered so that there is little or no bycatch or extra species that are picked up and discarded along the way.

"We ask if the method of capture is along environmentally friendly lines ... are troll nets dredging the bottom? Or are they scraping mussels off rocks and damaging the environment?"

Some farmed seafood is allowed under the plan -- rainbow trout and most shellfish, for example, but Atlantic salmon from B.C. farms and tiger prawns from Asian operations are not.

Member restaurants aren't expected to retool entire menus, but they are asked to take off at least one item or dish when they join and work to remove other "unsustainable" products every six months after.

Mike Weaver, chef at Lure Restaurant in Victoria, said most of the local restaurants joining the Ocean Wise campaign have long been practising these principles, sourcing food through local sellers who supply sustainable products.

About 75 per cent of Lure's menu already fits the guidelines.

Weaver said menu costs may inch up slightly, "but it's the responsible thing, and I think people will approve of what we're trying to do."

The Landing West Coast Grill at Nanoose Bay, which serves one million meals a year, will convert its entire menu to Ocean Wise seafood by July 1, said executive chef Rob Atkins.

Nimmo Bay Resort on the north Island and The Marina Restaurant in Oak Bay and Spinnaker's Gastro Brewpub in Victoria are the other Island members.

Boyce said restaurants and the food services industry account for the largest percentage of seafood, based on value, sold in North America, so educating the public through chefs will reach many more people.

"A restaurant chef buys thousands of pounds of seafood every year compared with a few pounds by an individual," said Boyce, who said the aquarium got the idea from a North Carolina counterpart who convinced restaurants to resist selling endangered species.

"We thought it more of an efficient way of educating consumers because thousands of chefs are visited by millions of consumers."

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