



Local Fishermen Challenge Our Relationship with Food

by sylvie bigar | July 3, 2014 | [Food & Drink](#)

On the heels of the food industry's growing farm-to-table movement, local fishermen establish their own locavore program and institute major changes to help preserve a way of life that helped build the Hamptons.



At the dock, Dock to Dish founder Sean Barrett helps unload and inspect the incoming fish.

I have a confession to make: I don't love fish. I know I should. At least that was my opinion until I tried monkfish, caught in Montauk and delivered to Gramercy Tavern in Manhattan by an environmentally conscious fisherman named Sean Barrett via his Montauk-based endeavor, Dock to

Dish. It is the oceanic version of farm-to-table, and the first restaurant-supported fishery in North America.

Set against a bright green asparagus coulis, a fan of thick white slices dotted with toasted hazelnuts and wisteria flowers glistened on the plate. I took a bite. This bore no resemblance to anything I had tried before: Seemingly neither fish nor meat, each silky sliver felt like a new kind of protein. It dissolved in my mouth in an instant, leaving just a briny, dare I say it, desire for more.

The idea for Dock to Dish, which launched in the Hamptons in 2012, came to Barrett, a passionate, baby-faced gentleman-fisherman, several years earlier on the old continent. Seated with friends at an open-air eatery on the harbor of Spain's San Sebastián, Barrett, then a 24-year-old bartender in Westhampton Beach by night and avid East End angler by day, could not have guessed he was about to meet up with his destiny. "I was watching the fishermen unload their catch, stuff it into worn wicker baskets filled with ice, and stroll into the restaurants," he says. "As they left, empty-handed, the waiters were already scribbling the names of the fish on the boards. Suddenly it hit me, why can't we do this at home?"



Executive Chef Roy Wohlars from Ruschmeyer's smokes his own bluefish to use in his fluffy

scrambled eggs.

Once back on the East End, Barrett first took stock of what was happening on land. The farm-to-table movement was exploding. Inspired by Scott Chaskey from Quail Hill Farm in Amagansett, who founded one of the original CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), and by Dan Barber, the co-owner and celebrated executive chef at Blue Hill at Stone Barns, Barrett vowed to find a way to bring the freshest possible fish directly to the consumers. But he didn't realize what a can of worms he was opening. "Today, 90 percent of our seafood is imported, and half of it is farmed under dubious conditions," says author Paul Greenberg, most famous for his award-winning *New York Times* best seller *Four Fish: The Future of the Last Wild Food* (Penguin Press). "But wait, it gets worse—we export a third of what we catch, most of it, wild."

At an Edible Institute event, Greenberg summed up a conversation he had recently with an old-timer fishmonger at the Fulton Fish Market (now located in the Bronx). "'Used to be the housewives came to the market,' said the fishmonger. 'We told them what was freshest and how to cook it. They left and came back for more, happy. Now, they go to the supermarket, ask the fish guy, who, until the day before, was at the deli counter and knows nothing. They buy fish wrapped in plastic, and it's awful.'"

In his new book, *American Catch: The Fight for Our Local Seafood*, Greenberg addresses what happened to the local seafood industry, how we lost it, and what we can do to regain it. His advice, in a nutshell? Buy American fish.

"On the East End, fishing was a way of life, similar to farming," says Colin Mather, owner of The Seafood Shop in Wainscott. "Today, the regulations, while helping the fish stock, have made it very difficult for fishermen to make ends meet."



At Ruschmeyer's, Executive Chef Wohlers blends local smoked bluefish with fresh mixed greens.

On the client side, what Mather hears the most is, "What's local?" but no one seems to agree on the definition of the word. "Are we talking about a 350-mile radius, like at the Greenmarket, or are we talking about Peconic Bay?" he asks.

Perhaps the precise answer doesn't matter that much as long as the fish was not caught weeks ago in the Pacific, while here in the Hamptons, diners are surrounded by some of the most beautiful waters on earth. On Long Island and beyond, chefs, fishermen, and authors are fighting on behalf of the sea because they believe it is still possible to reverse the tide.

At Ruschmeyer's, the hip-haute summer camp in Montauk, newly appointed Executive Chef Roy Wohlers slips local smoked bluefish among the fluffy layers of his scrambled eggs and studs the raw bar with a different kind of gem—Montauk Pearls—deep-cup oysters harvested just a few miles away. Stringing the "pearls" is Mike Martinsen, a "reformed" commercial fisherman-turned-oyster farmer. After years of watching the fishing boats armed with sonar and trawlers destroy life in the very waters they depend on, Martinsen went back to school and graduated from Stony Brook University with a degree in marine biology. There, he met marine biologist Mike Doall, who would

become his business partner. Shielded under a large straw hat and with eyes the color of the ocean, Martinsen has finally found his calling. “We’ve created the first commercial surface-grown oyster farm in New York State,” he says. “Most oysters are grown at the bottom, but our Pearls take advantage of phytoplankton and of the wave activity that can be found at the surface.”



Montauk still life: the freshest possible bluefish.

Because the oysters feed on the plankton and filter the water around them, they have a positive impact on the surrounding waters—they are the epitome of sustainability. “We are 120 miles from New York City,” says Martinsen, watching bags of oysters dangle on Lake Montauk. “Here and in the Block Island Sound, where we lease more space, the water is pristine.”

“Restoring native shellfish habitat is now a trend all around the country,” Doall says, “but Long Island is a microcosm of what’s happening elsewhere.” From Great South Bay to the Peconic Bay, nature conservationists fight to combat the effects of the 1980s’ brown tides. “Shellfish aquaculture has to be part of our future,” he adds. “To me, our farm is a vineyard on the water.”

Later that night, at the bar at Almond in Bridgehampton, I sample a Montauk Pearl: Crisp and sweet, it speaks of coastal breezes and an ocean teeming with life. Dock to Dish riches are all over the menu. I start with a sea bream (also called porgy) crudo, the fish sliced thinly, barely dressed with aji amarillo (chili) for a drop of heat, olives for their salty bite, and avocado that mirrors the silky texture of the fish, then on to the best clam chowder of my life. Why is it that I feel I have never tasted seafood before?

“You shouldn’t have an idea for a dish and then try to find the ingredients,” says Almond’s Executive Chef Jason Weiner. “The ingredient is the boss; it should lead us to inspiration.” But he explains that with Dock to Dish, the process can also feel like a high-wire dance because the chefs don’t know, until the day before, which species of fish they will be getting. “And that’s the fun of it, too,” he says.

“We leave the dock in Montauk at 3:30 am, deliver to Nick & Toni’s and Almond, and then head to Manhattan,” says Barrett, whose NYC clients include Le Bernardin and Telepan. In his treasure chest, this modern pirate carries pounds of the carefully chosen sustainable fish he gets right off the 36 Montauk-based boats he has partnered with, thanks to his longterm ties to the community.



Co-owners of the Montauk Shellfish Company Mike Martinsen (LEFT) and Mike Doall rotate the

oysters regularly.

Just after harvest, the fish is brined in a mix of freshwater ice and seawater with a crust of kosher salt seal at the top. As in a CSA, individual and chef members prepay to receive a weekly delivery of seafood guaranteed to reach its destination within 24 hours of leaving the dock. They learn how the fish were harvested, where, and by whom. Through Dock to Dish, Barrett is restoring the communication channels between the fishermen and the customers, reverting to a time when middlemen didn't exist. But to this day, despite all the sonar in the world, the ocean and its creatures remain a mystery. "It's all about the moon, the wind, the cloud cover," says Barrett. "Ask a fisherman what's happening in the water, and he will look up to the sky to map the birds' behavior."

There's always a bit of unknown, and the members of Dock to Dish, whether individuals or restaurants, have to be able to work with that. "I'll call Sean Barrett," says Jenny Jones, the receiving manager at Gramercy Tavern, "and say, 'Dude, what's coming?'"

Summer is finally on its way, and in the ensuing weeks, I feel my sense of taste literally bloom. Here are the first strawberries that actually taste like the strawberries of my childhood. The grass is cut, and I inhale its bouquet as if it were perfume. Perhaps I had never eaten fish this fresh, or perhaps it is the combination of freshness and sustainability in the hands of great chefs that revives the way fish was always supposed to taste: delicious.

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