



A fishful of dollars

**Make sustainable fish
work for you:
access the right information,
find a good supplier, educate
your customer and sell it at a
healthy profit**

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The restaurant business is in a bit of a tangle about fish. For every well-informed chef on the phone to a supplier asking probing questions about provenance and catching methods, there are others ordering in with sketchy knowledge of the environmental consequences. Some restaurant operators have taken cod off their menus, citing a lack of sustainability, while others argue that Norwegian cod is entirely acceptable - and that they need to serve it to meet customer demand.

What is clear is that the oceans and many of their inhabitants are under threat. Just how bad things are currently is a matter of huge debate: environmental groups will tell you we're on the

brink of a major eco-disaster; others claim the problems are overstated and a lot of positive changes are afoot. Most would agree that if the fishing industry is not managed properly the consequences in terms of fish stocks and marine ecology will be significant.

Chefs and restaurant operators have a major role to play in this ongoing drama. What they put on menus will potentially influence buying choices for years to come, so they are in a unique position to educate. But restaurants and operators still have to match long-term principles with short-term pressures to maintain margins. The good news is that the two are not mutually exclusive. While sourcing fish ethically is not straightforward, and the waters are unlikely to get any clearer for some time, sustainable fish *can* deliver profits.

Greenpeace, an organisation that takes a notoriously hard line on fishing, tells *Restaurant* that it is more than reasonable for operators to expect to make money on sustainable seafood - many customers are willing to pay a premium for fish that has been sourced ethically. Plenty of restaurants take a hit serving sustainable fish, but it doesn't need to be that way.

If you want to move over to more sustainable fish, take it slowly, as changing everything at once could be disruptive to your business.

"Sustainability is a journey," advises Julian Heathcote, account manager at the Sustainable Restaurant Association. "You can't do it overnight. If you want to make your fish offer completely sustainable, you need to source information carefully. It could take up to a year to get it right."

So where can our industry go for decent info on this notoriously tricky subject? With many of the fishing trade bodies funded by levies from the fishing industry on one side, and environmental charities such as the World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace on the other, a lot of the information available is conflicting.

Lists of fish to avoid and fish to buy are particularly problematic. "Quite a lot of good-fish/

bad-fish guides don't pass muster," says Phil MacMullen, head of environment at fishing industry body SeaFish. "The information used to put together guides is often very old. With the best will in the world, restaurateurs often do a bit of armchair conservationist, surfing the internet for random advice about what to avoid. It can look credible, but you must evaluate and look at different sources." (For a full list of sources, see *The NGOs explained*, page 37.)

He cites the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries as a benchmark most reputable organisations will conform to. SeaFish produces FAO-compliant non-prescriptive information on species, with in-depth data on commercially popular fish, including fisheries, fishing methods and up-to-date stock analysis.

It's important to remember that farmed fish is not necessarily sustainable

James Simpson, a spokesman for the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), advises using at least two reputable sources of information. "A lot of restaurateurs are using our MSC-approved fish in tandem with the Marine Conservation Society's Red List to ensure they are not serving any fish that is under real threat," he says.

MSC-certified fish are becoming increasingly popular in the restaurant trade. In total, some 200 fisheries are engaged in the MSC programme, with more than 60 currently certified. Produce bearing the MSC logo is guaranteed sustainable, and the fishery will have gone through an 18-month FAO-accredited consultation. The MSC programme is also approved by ISEAL Alliance, a body that

independently verifies eco labels.

"The choice of fish is quite restricted at the moment," says Simpson. "It's just about possible to offer exclusively MSC-certified product depending on what other sourcing restrictions you have in place. Some customers insist on fresh and/or local, for example, and some MSC-accredited fish is likely to be frozen. But we expect a lot more fisheries to be accredited over the next five years or so."

Once you're reasonably well-informed, the next step is to talk to your seafood suppliers. Whether large and small, they should be able to give you in-depth information about how sustainable their produce is. If they can't, it might be time to consider alternatives.

"Chefs should be asking when was it caught, where it was caught, how it was it caught and who caught it," says Noel O'Brien, director of Channel Fisheries, a Brixham-based fish supplier. "Suppliers should be able to produce information on the 'chain of custody', from the boat it was caught on to the market the supplier brought it from. I'd also recommend asking peers if they've had any experience with a potential supplier before giving them your business."

Information from suppliers must be fishery-specific. It's no good saying that a whole species is sustainable - for example, at the time of writing cod numbers are at historically high levels in the north-east Arctic, but are under immense pressure in the North Sea. It's also worth asking about catching methods and familiarising yourself with the main methods so you understand the answer (see *Fishing methods explained*, page 34).

Farmed fish is close to making up 50% of worldwide fish consumption, and most restaurants will offer it somewhere on their menus. But it's important to remember that farmed fish is not necessarily sustainable - in fact, there's a good chance it won't be. Some methods are low-impact, such as growing mussels on suspended ropes. Others, such as certain types of prawn or salmon farming, can be very damaging to the environment. The vast majority of farmed fish is fed on wild marine life, which is problematic. "It's destructive," says seafood marketer Kit Smith. "It takes a important part of the food chain out of the oceans."

Aquaculture can also be very inefficient, in some extreme cases taking 10kg of wild caught fish to produce just 1kg of farmed fish. To ensure the farmed fish you're using has had minimal impact on the marine environment, ask your supplier if its farmed fish is from a farm that conforms to ISO 14001 and gets its feed from sustainable sources. The farm should also be subject to an annual audit by an independent body; organic farmed fish and prawns are preferable as the certification demonstrates a higher level of environmental awareness and responsibility.

Carefully-sourced sustainable fish will, broadly speaking, be more expensive. But there are many ways to reduce and offset the extra cost. A good working relationship with suppliers is key to reducing outlay. The fewer suppliers you use, the more you'll get to know them and the more you'll buy, and this - along with paying them promptly -

Case study: Is cod sustainable?

Cod - a fish that has hit the headlines for two decades - provides a perfect illustration of how complicated the fishing industry can be. A prevailing menu choice, few diners or chefs are clear on whether or not it is ethical to eat it.

The alarm bells started ringing in the wake of the Newfoundland cod disaster. After unprecedented over-fishing in the North Sea, the world's most abundant population of cod suddenly collapsed in 1992, throwing the issue of fish sustainability into the international spotlight.

People looked to Europe: stock levels were examined and quotas were cut dramatically, causing high levels of illegal cod landings. The supermarkets saw the increasingly negative headlines and looked to big producers such as Birds Eye and Findus for alternatives.

Species such as Alaskan pollock started to be used in products such as fish fingers, and the media and many restaurants branded cod unsustainable. The price of Alaskan pollock has now leapt up, and can be more expensive

than cod. But since the major white fish buyers turned away from cod, stocks have had a chance to recover.

The main fisheries for cod generally regarded as sustainable are the Icelandic, Norwegian and Pacific fisheries. North Sea cod is not such a good bet. High-quality farmed cod is also available, much of it from Norway.

"Cod stocks are making a comeback," says Tsuru Sushi co-founder Emma Reynolds. "I'm just waiting for a little more research, then we'll think about getting it back on our menu."



will give you a very strong negotiating position.

Ben Tunncliffe, chef at the Scarlet Hotel in Mawgan Porth, Cornwall, uses two local suppliers to keep prices as low as possible. "I'll speak to my two guys everyday to find out what's good value. I don't plan on keeping it for any longer than two days - buy it fresh and get it out the door as quickly as possible." Having excessive amounts of any stock on site is bad news for cash flow, but most operators will need to get a fresh fish delivery at least every other day to ensure food quality.

The vast majority of restaurants buy in ready-portioned cuts of fish such as fillets and steaks. While this does take a lot of pressure off chefs, it's expensive because you're essentially paying the fishmonger to do it for you, and they won't necessarily do it properly.

"Buying fish in whole is cost-effective, but it's also preferable from a quality-control point of view; it's much easier to tell what fish you've got and what condition it's in," explains Theo Randall, executive chef at his eponymous restaurant at London's Intercontinental Hotel. "It gives you more scope to use the product creatively. Bones can be used for stocks and you can use the lesser bits in certain dishes to help balance the menu - for example, we use the smaller part of the sea bass fillet in pasta dishes, which allows us to lower the margin slightly on more expensive sea bass dishes."

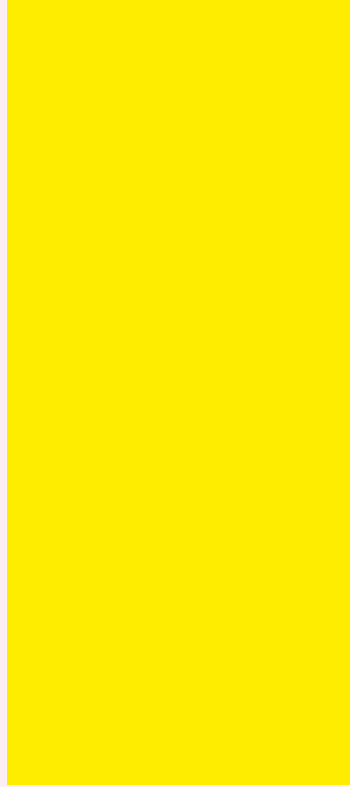
Trade skills are essential if you plan to use whole fish. Gurnard, for example, is a good value and sustainable species but it's difficult to work with - you need a skilled chef. "Decent chefs don't come cheap, but if you're using expensive ingredients such as fish I think it's worth it," says Tsuru Sushi

Only using a few suppliers and paying them promptly will give you a strong negotiating position

co-founder Emma Reynolds. "And they can offset costs by using every bit of the product. Our chefs use salmon skin in some dishes, which is usually thrown out. Consumers are surprisingly willing to experiment with non-premium cuts of fish."

For some operators, frozen fish is also an option. "A big thing chefs and the public need to get over is frozen fish," explains seafood marketer Kit Smith. "Fish frozen properly at sea is, in many ways, better than fresh." Some species of fish freeze better than others. Frozen cod and salmon, for example, are nearly indistinguishable from fresh when properly defrosted. Using frozen will also introduce a larger range of species from around the world.

If you have shifted to a sustainable fish policy, it's vital to let your customers know. Plenty of restaurants that serve fish will tell their customers they are sustainable, so it's absolutely key to ensure



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Fishing methods explained

The numerous methods used to catch fish are a crucial factor in determining sustainability of a fishery. Bear in mind that the actual impact of each method is dependent on how responsibly each individual boat is managed and where they operate. Compiled with the help of Good Catch.

Longlining

Used to capture fish in bottom or surface waters. Can vary in size from lines carrying thousands of hooks to smaller lines designed to be used closer to the shore.

Particularly associated with capturing seabirds, sharks and sea turtles but bycatch-reduction techniques can reduce impact

Purse seines

Very large vertically floating nets used to encircle fish such as herring and mackerel. Issues with bycatch including dolphin.

Pots and creels

Traps designed to catch including crab, lobster, langoustine and octopus. Very few bycatch issues.

Demersal trawling

Designed to catch fish near the sea bed, there are several types of demersal trawling including beam trawling (flatfish), seine netting (cod, and haddock) and twin-rig trawls (langoustine). Beam trawlers, which are designed to disturb the seabed, can be very damaging, but there are bycatch issues with all types of demersal trawling.

Pelagic/mid-water trawling

Targets fish that live in the upper part of the ocean including hoki, herring and mackerel. Bycatch can be an issue but it's typically less than in demersal trawls.

Dredging

Using metal-framed baskets as opposed to nets, this method rakes the seabed to catch bivalves such as scallops, oysters and clams. Habitat damage is often a problem, but depends on the frame's weight. Dredging can also catch other species unintentionally.

Drift, gill and set nets

"Passive" nets that are not actively towed by boats. Gill-netting targets the ocean floor, draft-netting targets tuna, squid and sharks and set-netting targets migrating species such as wild salmon and sea trout. Often fairly low impact.

Pole and line, trolling and handline (hook and lines)

Selective fishing methods that have strong sustainability credentials. Tend to catch bass and mackerel and be favoured by smaller boats operating close to the shore.

that you stand out from the crowd. The challenge is to do so without ramming it down your customers' throats. They're there to enjoy themselves and won't necessarily want to hear every detail of your new sustainable seafood initiative.

"It's of real and increasing interest to diners," says Laura Hadfield, senior account manager at restaurant PR agency Roche Communications. "It's a great opportunity to promote a brand, and it can provide a point of difference."

"We made a commitment not to sell unsustainable seafood at the beginning," recalls Richard Morris, director at the Loch Fyne seafood restaurant chain. "At the time it properly wasn't top of people's agendas but looking back it was a good decision from a marketing and PR point of view."

Loch Fyne capitalises on its sustainability credentials in a number of ways. On the menu, there is a small piece of text detailing its sustainability policy. It sets out the company's stance on catch methods and outlines its mandate to use small reputable suppliers.

Read a little further and you'll see MSC accreditation next to certain dishes and all the salmon, supplied by Loch Duart, is RSPCA approved. The MSC tick logo indicating certified sustainable seafood will be familiar to most diners as it is also used in the retail sector, as will the RSPCA brand. Restaurants are obliged to pay a small royalty to use most eco-labels - the MSC, for example, charges 0.5% of the wholesale value of the fish. A visible but subtle way of letting customers know you take fish ethics seriously.

In tandem with the menu, Loch Fyne has had great success with on-table tent cards detailing seasonal specials. "They're a brilliant selling mechanism," explains Morris. "It shows customers

Customers won't always want to hear every detail of your sustainability policy



we are seasonal and emphasises the idea of freshness.” The operator also does a monthly email newsletter that is sent to 250,000 customers telling them what’s in season and sustainable.

One-offs that make your ethical stance clear also raise customer awareness. Tsuru Sushi’s Emma Reynolds recently introduced a three-dish mackerel menu. All the fish is sourced from an MSC-approved fishery in Hastings, East Sussex, and Reynolds even name-checks the fisherman.

“It’s about getting the customers involved in everything. There’s a lot of awareness at the moment: films such as *The End Of The Line* and press coverage of the fishing industry and what is or isn’t being done. It makes good business sense to tie in positively with that.”

Much is being done within the fishing industry to put things right - and the restaurant sector can add its weight to the growing momentum behind the issue of sustainability. Consumer interest and understanding is growing rapidly, so make sure you’re on the crest of the wave by implementing a properly researched and well-communicated fish policy. After all, making your customers feel positive about coming to your restaurant is one of the most powerful tools at your disposal. **■**

Special thanks to Channel Fisheries and M&J Seafood for supplying the fish for the photo shoot.

channel.hostinguk.com

mjseafoods.com

Much is being done within the fishing industry to put things right



The NGOs explained

Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)

Arguably the best-known group, the MSC is an international non-profit organisation that works to develop sustainable practices including two accreditation schemes.

mcs.org

Marine Conservation Society (MCS)

Charity with a remit to care for our seas and marine life. Works with the fishing industry and runs a consumer-awareness programme.

mcsuk.org

Good Catch

Particularly relevant to the restaurant industry, Good Catch publishes a free guide aimed at chefs and restaurateurs.

goodcatch.org.uk

The Sustainable Restaurant Association (SRA)

A recently-launched trade body that audits restaurants and aims to guide them through the process of becoming more sustainable.

thesra.org

Fish2Fork

Founded by the team behind *The End of the Line*, a hard-hitting film about overfishing, it rates restaurants on fish sustainability.

fish2fork.co.uk

Throw it back?

Ten fish that - while not necessarily unsustainable - you should be grilling your supplier about.

Compiled by *Restaurant* with the help of the IUCN Red List, the MCS Fish to Avoid list and a seafood-industry insider

Tuna

Bluefin is an absolute no-no and other tuna species are under increasing pressure. “Dolphin-friendly” means just that - other species may still have been affected. There are some MSC-accredited fisheries for albacore and more under assessment, including yellowfin, the closest in terms of taste and texture to bluefin.

Sturgeon and caviar

Wild-caught sturgeon is under serious threat and protected by international law. Caviar is available in very limited quantities. It’s sturgeon’s roe, so we’re eating the next generation. Farmed types available.

Turbot

A bit of an enigma. Very little research has been done into stock levels - as turbot is always part of a mixed catch, it doesn’t have a specific fishery. It’s unclear how much is left in the sea but anecdotal evidence points to a marked decline. Farmed turbot from Spain and France has improved dramatically in recent years.

Swordfish

Historically heavily over-fished, less is being taken out of the seas but there’s currently little evidence to suggest stocks are on the up. The MSC has approved a Canadian longline fishery, but you’re unlikely to get it in the UK. Two farmed alternatives are wahoo and cobia.

Skate

A complicated fish - there are many types and it’s hard to tell them apart. The common skate is under a lot of pressure at the moment but smaller ray species - spotted, cuckoo, or starry rays - are generally okay. It’s just a case of knowing which one you’re using. For this reason, try to buy them in whole where possible.

Halibut

A big slow-growing fish, some stocks of which are under threat, especially in the Atlantic. The MSC has recently approved a Pacific halibut fishery where a closed season is rigorously imposed when the fish is spawning. Farmed halibut is of increasingly good quality.

Cod

See *Is cod sustainable?*, page 32. But cod stocks are holding up pretty well since companies such as Birdseye and Findus turned their attention to pollock. Cod from the Atlantic and North Sea is not a great choice and there is debate about the sustainability of Icelandic cod. The Norwegians have come up with more evidence to prove sustainability.

Anchovy

The large anchovy fishery in the Bay of Biscay was closed recently due to very serious over-fishing but has reopened. Ask for day boat-caught fish from the Mediterranean. Anchovies from Peru aren’t a great choice as they’re caught from very large trawlers.

Plaice

Avoid plaice from the North Sea, although a Dutch North Sea fishery is currently going through MSC accreditation. Carefully-caught plaice from the west of the UK is fairly sustainable, as is some fish from Iceland and Norway.

European eel

A big debate at the moment. All European eels start out in the Sargasso Sea and are normally caught as they are returning to spawn, which is problematic. Data on stock levels varies erratically, and there is an argument among UK producers that European eel must be properly regulated and fished sustainably to ensure its long-term survival.

