

fresh waters



menus come
naturally to
Chef Spurgin

Growing up in London, Andrew Spurgin, executive director and chef at Waters Fine Catering in San Diego, spent his impressionable boyhood days in the historic Borough Market, wafting in the smells of smashed melon after a warm summer day, passing by old, coal-stained buildings as he dodged puddles on the Market's cobblestone streets and listening to the trains clicking and clacking as they rattled overhead.

Spurgin recalls obediently fetching cups of tea and little ham sandwiches for the "Barrow Boys," the fruit and vegetable wholesalers he looked up to. He swept up sawdust at a relative's butcher shop, worked with greengrocers on the street and joined his aunts in visiting Covent Garden, a place that sold produce and flowers.

He says he admired his "tough as nails" aunts and grandmother, war-women who were restaurateurs, evermore donning aprons with ash-towering cigarettes tucked in their mouths.

It comes as no surprise then, that instead of wanting to become a fireman or a cowboy, Spurgin was set on becoming a greengrocer or a butcher. Forty-some years later, Spurgin's boyhood has come full circle in the catering industry.

Leaving his global footprints by supporting local or regional farmers and artisans, and educating others on the values of sustainable fishing practices, Spurgin has proven that one person can make a difference. Ever troubled with the notion of hormone-injected chickens or cloned beef produced by giant food operators, and frightened by the diminishing league of swordfish and marlin, what Spurgin



refers to as the “lions and tigers of the sea,” he’s determined to educate other chefs that they play a significant role in culinary responsibility.

The ocean minds

“They’re cold, slimy, breathe through gills and live in an environment we’re not used to. Fish hardly have a chance in gaining people’s attention as do fuzzy white seals in Alaska,” Spurgin says.

Even so, he does what he can to draw attention to the over-consumption of many sea creatures, an interest he acquired in the ‘90s when he formed a relationship with Scripps Institute of Oceanography.

Back then, he absorbed all the information he could about fish; everything from their size and availability to harvesting techniques.

“The more I got into it, the more I realized there was a big problem and hardly anyone in the industry was addressing it, which is the troubled state of our ocean,” he says. “I realized that people either didn’t know, care, or were just confused about it. It’s kind of like global warming, where nowadays you can run up to someone on the street and nine out of 10 people will have an idea of what you’re talking about, whereas 10 years ago, they’d have no idea or would be confused.”

Spurgin searched for others who were concerned about the sustainability of

principles to effect change

(Taken from Seafood Solutions by Chefs Collaborative in partnership with Environmental Defense)

1. ASK YOUR FISH SUPPLIER QUESTIONS

If the fish is farmed, ask if it was raised in a netpen or other potentially polluting system. Also ask if it is carnivorous or mostly vegetarian (15 percent of the global seafood is converted into fishmeal to feed farmed fish every year. In many aquaculture systems, the amount of wild-caught fishmeal outweighs the amount of farmed fish produced, resulting in a net loss of fish from the sea).

-- If the fish is wild-caught, ask where it was captured, how it was caught and if it was captured in a way that damages ocean ecosystems.

2. EDUCATE YOURSELF!

Research the population status of the seafood that frequents your menu. If they’re abundant and are caught or farmed in an

ecologically-responsible fashion, then bon appetite. Consider reducing your servings of depleted species, or replacing them with similar-tasting but plentiful fish (see substitutions sidebar).

3. INFORM YOUR CLIENTS

If you choose to remove an over-fished creature from your menu, let your client know. Consumers are increasingly savvy and interested in making environmentally responsible food choices.

4. CHOOSE ECOLABELED FISH

In some cases, ecolabels certifying that a species was sustainably fished from healthy, well-managed populations can aid in our selections.

5. GIVE THIS GUIDE TO YOUR FISHMONGER

seafood substitutions

(Taken from *Seafood Solutions* by Chefs Collaborative in partnership with Environmental Defense)

If you live on the East Coast and want to serve overfished Atlantic Cod, try serving hook-caught Atlantic Cod instead. If you're on the West Coast, Alaskan Lingcod or Black Cod are good replacements.

Striped Bass, a well-managed species along the Atlantic Coast, can be used as a substitute for many species of depleted fish, such as Black Sea Bass, Pacific Rockfish, Groupers, Snappers, Orange Roughy and Patagonian Toothfish (Chilean Sea Bass)

Catfish also can be used as a substitute for Orange Roughy.

Spot prawns and Atlantic Northern Pink Shrimp, or certified turtle-safe shrimp can be used as a substitute for shrimp (which is associated with habitat destruction and bycatch).

Dredging or dragging for shellfish such as clams, mussels, oysters and scallops is damaging to the seafloor habitat. Replace dredged clams with farmed clams, dredged mussels with rope-cultured native mussels, dredged oysters with cultured or farmed oysters and dredged scallops with farm-raised scallops.

Farmed crawfish make an excellent replacement for lobster, which are abundant but increasingly caught before they've had a chance to reproduce. Buy fully grown crawfish.



seafood – fish caught or farmed with a consideration for the long-term viability of the species and for the oceans' ecological balance. That's when he met Patricia Parisi, an investigative scientific reporter, and Carl Rebstock, a marine scientist working at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Together, they founded Passionfish, a nonprofit organization that initiates dialogues and forms partnerships to safeguard the future of fish and fishing.

"I think the catalyst for me was that 67 percent of all fish consumption is on a plate in a restaurant," Spurgin says. "That is an interesting figure, because it says that a chef has a huge part in the issue, since the chef controls the plate."

Making waves

At Waters, Spurgin tries to avoid serving shrimp, since most shrimp catching entails considerable habitat destruction and bycatch. In a worse case fishing scenario, out of 10 pounds of catch, you might get two pounds of shrimp, he explains.

"That's like taking a bunch of bulldozers, leveling an entire park then just collecting the park benches," Spurgin adds.

While he agrees that not all shrimp-catching techniques are bad, he prefers to serve spot prawns – a good alternative to shrimp – which flourish in California and are caught in the same method as crab or lobster. The species actually go into a cage, which eliminates bycatch.

"On average, 25 percent of what we take out of the sea is left for dead or dying

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We are the gatekeepers, if we don't support growers, ranchers and producers of like mind, they won't be here in the future.

and used for nothing," he exclaims. "That is just obscene."

To help get this information out, Passionfish and the Packard Foundation produced a booklet featuring recipes that use sustainable fish from chefs with like minds and goals. Culinary students were invited to work beside these chefs to learn how they could adopt this culinary responsibility in their future careers.

Spurgin also worked with Chefs Collaborative, a community of chefs, farmers, fishers, educators and food lovers dedicated to promoting sustainable cuisine, on "Seafood Solutions," a booklet about reckless harvesting techniques and sustainable menu ideas for chefs.

In conjunction with Oceans 2003 Marine Technology and Ocean Conference, in San Diego, Passionfish members organized

PHOTOS BY BOYD HARRIS

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what Spurgin calls, "Socratic dialogue," a chance for people with all angles of the ocean security issues to voice their opinions and to listen to others' views.

Among those present were representatives from environmental concerns, seafood-serving restaurants, fishers, and the manager of sustainability projects at Unilever, one of the world's largest food producers.

"The dialogue certainly made a difference, what it did was allowed the big guys to embrace the little guys and show that it is in everybody's best interest to have fish for tomorrow," says Spurgin.

Fresh from the ground

From the sea to the earth, Spurgin's eco-friendly initiatives flourish. By choos-

ing to use fresh, regionally produced foods for the menu at Waters when possible, he eliminates waste in energy and economic resources of shipping products in from around the world. Spurgin supports family-run businesses instead of giant food operations, which, he says, have inferior products and agendas of eliminating the little guys.

Spurgin says he uses beef with no added hormones raised only an hour and a half away from Waters, by a family he met and has come to love. His menu prices reflect the beef's quality, however, Spurgin believes his clients are willing to pay the price to know what they're eating.

"I could go buy some choice rubbage meat, or I can support a family that does amazing work, has an amazing product and practices what I believe," he says.

"We're blessed here at Waters to have seen a 30 percent growth in the past three years, so I'm not buying that price is the ultimate factor. I think you're given an opportunity as a chef and decision maker to practice culinary responsibility. You can say, 'No, I'm not going to buy that, I'm not going to serve that, and I'm not going to

support people who inject animals with all kinds of alien things and treat them poorly,'" he says.

Also found on the Waters' menu is Vande Rose pork products. At the Vande Rose farm, the pigs are fed natural grains grown on the farm with no added antibiotics. The hogs also are not constrained in small cages.

"Pigs are supposed to run around, get messy and just be pigs," Spurgin says. "When they're thrown in a cage, they can't get fat, and that is where all the flavor is -- in well marbled fat."

Spurgin loves surprising clients by reintroducing them to meats they originally perceived as gamey.

"You can really taste the difference by eating the fat," he says. "When clients have this lamb (another regional product from a small family farm) and the fat doesn't stick to the roof of their mouths, it's totally clean, unlike that fat coating from other lamb that tastes awful, I tell them about how what they're eating is totally diet and lifestyle induced."

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To complete the menu, Spurgin shops from a local, micro and petite greens grower, David Sasuga of Fresh Origins, who actually asks what he can grow for Spurgin. For the spring, Sasuga nurtured a petite legume mix, a combination of young greens like haricots verts, fava bean, edamame, mung and pea greens.

Say cheese

"I've never met a cheese artisan, who isn't the nicest person in the world," Spurgin says. "They are so centered, so in touch with nature, no ego- just good soul people. When I talk about them, I get tears in my eyes; that's how much I respect what they're doing."

When chefs buy cheese from an artisan cheese producer, preferably in one's own backyard, it helps to keep the craft and the product alive. "We are the gatekeepers, if we don't support these hand-crafted, wonderful cheeses as well as supporting other growers, ranchers and producers of like mind, they won't be here in the future," Spurgin says.

While he acknowledges that there are great cheeses from Europe and sometimes uses them, his first choice is to use California products followed by cheeses from other parts of the United States.

PHOTOS BY BOYD HARRIS



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Building relationships

Every year, Spurgin participates in a local event called Celebrate the Craft which unites local chefs, farmers, and growers at The Lodge at Torrey Pines, to share their craft with the public. The chef cooks the food the local farmer or grower produced, which allows the guest to meet the people who raised the animal, caught the fish, or made the cheese as well as meeting the person who is making it.

The event is about giving guests the rich experience of learning where the food their eating comes from and how it was raised as well as allowing a source where the chefs and farmers can form relationships.

"When there is a story behind the food, it's nice to bring some of that into your menu, or at least let clients know about your philosophy," says Spurgin. "Get out there and go to farmers' markets, talk to other chefs, ask questions, meet people, try food, make friends and form relationships.

"By doing so, you can put together menus that are so seasonal and so regional that not only you and the staff you work with will be proud of, but also the clients will really appreciate what you're doing," Spurgin says. "It makes a huge difference." ●

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