

# SCIENCE, EDUCATION & INNOVATION

## UNIQUE CONFERENCE EXPLORES SEAFOOD SUSTAINABILITY

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***"I have a new appreciation for the people in the Cooke Aquaculture Inc. processing facility in St. George: they are very skilled and we "butchered" our fish!"***

Science, the culinary arts, health, local food and tourism converged in Rhode Island in June, attracting the attention of scientists, chefs, seafood suppliers, farmers, journalists, bloggers, environmental groups and state and federal government officials as they explored the complex issue of the sustainability of our seafood supply.

Among the 90 participants in the 10th Ronald C. Baird Sea Grant Science Symposium were Andrew Lively, Marketing Communications Manager with Cooke Aquaculture/True North Salmon, Chef Chris Aerni, owner of the Rossmount Inn in Chamcook, N.B., and myself. This year's edition was quite special and involved more than science, at least in the sense we generally use this term.

This year the Baird Symposium took place in Providence and was co-hosted by the Rhode Island Sea Grant Program, the University of Rhode Island (URI) and the Johnson & Wales University. This year's theme was "Developing the Rhode Island Seafood Knowledge Economy: Perspectives on Seafood Sustainability" and having the Symposium at the Culinary Arts Museum and the Center for Culinary Excellence of the Johnson & Wales University allowed participants to not only discuss seafood issues but get in the kitchen and work with their subject matter.

Dr. Cathy Roheim, Professor of Environmental and Natural Resource Economics at URI, spoke well about the environmental and economic perspectives of "sustainable seafood" and its many dimensions – environmental, economic, social and health.

I was very pleased to hear Cathy Roheim say that sustainability should be viewed as a path/a trajectory that can always be improved and not an end point/a threshold to be reached once.

That has been my issue with some ENGOs and their standards. One of the problems is that some of these standards are passing or failing grades, with no incentives for continuous improvement from a minimal baseline, yet to be decided, followed by a tiered approach. Some argue that it would certify companies at a very low level. However, putting the bar too high is not a recipe for gradual improvement for everybody involved, to progress and gradually reach the ultimate goal, although admittedly not overnight. If 20 per cent of the global farmed seafood producers are certified at the highest threshold, what happens to the remaining 80 per cent and the chance of incentivizing them to improve their practices?

At the College of Culinary Arts, with its beautiful view of the Narragansett Bay, participants broke into groups to learn more about haddock, summer flounder and scup, and Atlantic salmon.

I gave a presentation on Integrated Multi-Trophic Aquaculture (IMTA) and explained how IMTA salmon went commercial a few months ago as WiseSource™ Salmon sold by Loblaw Companies Ltd., which addresses sustainability as a journey of continuous improvement. Companies trying to do the right thing should be rewarded and differentiated, which should create incentives for others to improve.



**Chef Chris Aerni preparing the salmon and avocado for the tartare with the help of Apprentice Chef Cathy Roheim.**

I believe seafood choices cannot be reduced to a traffic light system in over-simplified seafood pocket guides. It is not the species that should be colored red, yellow or green... they did not do anything, it is not their fault! It is the fishing and farming practices designed by humans that need to be evaluated. The reality is a complex mosaic of colours based on practices, not species.

The market will ultimately decide which certifying logo(s) and seafood pocket guides will be trusted by the general public, but we still have several years of confusion ahead of us.

Chef Chris Aerni spoke about how they approach sustainability at the Rossmount Inn, a well-known culinary destination in Eastern Canada. Chris said his food concept is local, fresh, seasonal, organic, wild, regional, honest and sustainable.

He said he has no reservations about serving locally-farmed and fresh salmon, especially from a company such as Cooke Aquaculture Inc., which is developing better farming practices with the help of scientists.

For him, locally grown salmon raised using ecologically sound practices is more sustainable than importing so-called "wild-caught" or "organic" species from far away with a considerable carbon



**Apprentice Chef Thierry Chopin inspecting his salmon.**

footprint. That is why you will not see Pacific shrimp or salmon on his menu. He, in fact, likes to write IMTA in his menus: this triggers the curiosity of his guests and is a wonderful way to engage the conversation on how he is sourcing his kitchen and sustainability, an overused term.

After the presentations, we got into the real thing! We prepared a collaborative dinner using all the fish we had been talking about! Cooke Aquaculture Inc. donated wonderful, very large salmon.

Chris showed us how to properly fillet a salmon and we all thought it would be a "piece of fishcake" until we reached our respective lab working spaces, put our aprons and hats on and started to work with our knives! Well, I have a new appreciation for the people in the Cooke Aquaculture Inc. processing facility in St. George: they are very skilled and we "butchered" our fish! As Chris mentioned, apprentice chefs generally start practicing their skills by cutting vegetables... we went right to filleting fish, and, moreover, big fish! With a smile, Chris said he was getting a lot of material for his salmon tartar.

The next day, Ann Cook, founder and owner of The Local Catch, highlighted the similarities and differences of the sustainable and local movements. One aspect that the sustainable movement is not addressing is how to reduce the "carbon footprint" of non-local seafood.

The local movement is all about known farms, soils, and precise locations of origin, agricultural practices and freshness. Some pelagic fish can have very long migratory routes during their lifecycle and are only temporarily "local" at any particular location. From attitudinal surveys conducted by Sam Grimley and Cathy Roheim, it becomes clear that what the public calls "local fish" is, in fact, fish caught not too far from their selling point (around 50 kilometres) and by local fishers. So, what is really "local" is the fishing activity, not the fish, and that is not necessarily the

same... maybe the common denominator is a quest for freshness.

I am glad I participated in this very unconventional conference that triggered a lot of thinking in a remarkably cordial and bon vivant atmosphere, conducive to a lot of genuine exchanges. An experience to renew!

For a full report on the 10th Baird Symposium, visit my website at: [http://www.unbsj.ca/sase/biology/chopinlab/imta/news/ronald\\_baird/index.html](http://www.unbsj.ca/sase/biology/chopinlab/imta/news/ronald_baird/index.html)



**Salmon tartare with avocado, cilantro and radish ready to be taken to the dining room.**



**Apprentice Chefs Thierry Chopin, Kifle Hagos and Barry Costa-Pierce cooking salmon lightly in olive oil.**