

The case for backing 'Community Supported Fisheries'

Tastes of Our Cape

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It's counter-intuitive.

Peer into the cases of fish shops around the North Shore, whose waters are renowned for lobster, cod, pollock and haddock, and you're likely to see tilapia from Costa Rica, salmon from Norway, and cod and haddock from Iceland.

Local fish, and the fishermen who catch them, are caught up in a complicated net of circumstances that's scattering much of the fish caught in local waters far afield, from across the country to around the world. Restrictive governmental regulations, soaring fuel costs, and low prices at the auctions are just a few of the conditions preventing local consumers from doing the logical thing: purchasing local fish.

The Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA) is out to change all that with a program called Community Supported Fisheries, or CSF. And it's slowly building recognition for CSF right where we feel it most profoundly: on our dinner plates.

At the Cape Ann Farmer's Market this summer, NAMA has been hosting a popular event called the "Seafood Throwdown". A secret seafood — last week it was ocean catfish — is assigned to two local contestant chefs, who are then given \$25 and 15 minutes to shop the market for additional ingredients. The chefs are allotted one hour to prepare, cook, and plate samples for a panel of judges.

Watching two cooks shop for the same ingredients you can also buy, and prepare them in ways you can also prepare them, is dramatic and engaging and fun. It makes for very good entertainment. But for NAMA and its organizers, what matters more is the message.

NAMA is aiming to launch a Community Supported Fisheries program this winter, involving fishermen and consumers from Gloucester and surrounding communities. A CSF is modeled after Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs around the state and the country, where consumers purchase a share of a local farm's produce and collect their share once a week, normally throughout the summer.

A CSF brings freshly caught local seafood directly to consumers while also providing fishermen with a better price on less catch. CSF members provide financial support to fishermen in advance, and in turn the fishermen provide a weekly share of locally caught seafood to their shareholders.

Several local fishermen hovered around the cooking tents at last week's Seafood Throwdown, critiquing the freshness and quality of the catfish as well as the benefits and drawbacks to a CSF program.

With a CSF, fish gets to the consumer faster, usually within a day from the time it's caught.

Fishermen have more control over the price of fish with a CSF than they do if they're selling their catch at auction. And a local CSF, where participants may receive five to eight pounds of fish per week, would need a significant number of community shareholders in order to make it worth the fishermen's while from an economic perspective.

For the consumer, the appeal of a CSF lies in a guaranteed supply of locally caught seafood. For fishermen, the appeal lies in consistent fair prices for their catch. For everyone involved, it's a closer connection between local food, the local economy, and local consumption.

So is a CSF a good idea? Seems like a no-brainer.

The only question left for me is — what wine goes with my lobster?

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