

Creative chefs, retailers and savvy customers seek more Connecticut seafood

By Ann Baldelli

When an older gentleman saw sea robin on the menu at the highly acclaimed Mystic Oyster Club last summer, he sought out owner Dan Meiser and berated him.

An avid fisherman, the customer accused the owner of selling garbage fish.

"So, I told him, 'Order it and if you don't like it I'll pay for your meal,'" said Meiser.

"Well, the old-timer ordered the sea robin and he really enjoyed it," said the restaurant owner. "He told me, 'I wish all the years I've been fishing and throwing it back in that I'd kept it.'"

At Mystic Oyster Club, voted one of America's top 101 restaurants by *The Daily Meal* in 2016, fresh fish and shellfish harvested from Long Island Sound is bought every single day. This is just one example of how the increasing demand for local foods is expanding beyond traditional farm-raised products to seafood. In Connecticut that means clams, oysters and fish from Long Island Sound or caught offshore and landed at commercial docks in Stonington and other shoreline towns.

At the Oyster Club, ask Chef James Wayman what is on the menu on a given night. That may prompt him to check his cell phone, to read his daily text from Sea Well Seafood wholesalers at the Stonington Town Dock to see what will be delivered in the afternoon.

"Tonight, it's squid, fluke and whole whiting," he said on a mid-winter day after checking his phone, explaining, "We don't care what it is, what we ask from them is, 'Tell us what are the two best and freshest fish that you have today.'"

There's a pride at Oyster Club that comes with preparing locally sourced foods.

"The fact that we use and serve sea robin on the Oyster Club menu should be shocking because no one uses it except for bait," said Meiser. "But really, it is one of the coolest presentations."

Wayman was the chef who prepared the sea robin for the leery customer last summer, removing the scales, scoring

the sides, seasoning the fish in a marinade, dredging it in corn starch, and then flash-frying it.

"It's delicious," Wayman said. "And the wings are delicacies, too. They are like eating little potato chips."

In the colder months, he does something very similar with whiting, a fish that is caught offshore and landed at Connecticut ports, that other chefs might be less inclined to put on their menus. Oftentimes, diners eating out will see salmon from Canada, tuna from Brazil, or tilapia from Costa Rica on the menus of other restaurants.

But Mystic Oyster Club prides itself on not just farm-to-table cuisine, but Long Island Sound-fish-and-shellfish-to-table, too. At various times, depending on the season, chefs there have prepared and served dogfish, Conger eel, moon snails, mackerel, and porgies, as well as the more standard fluke and flounder, bluefish, black fish, squid, oysters and clams.

"If it lives in the ocean, we will try it," said Wayman.

Alene Whipple at Sea Well Seafood supplies some of what Wayman and Meiser serve. She and her husband, Ted, operate the wholesale market and lobster pound at the Town Dock and two – soon to be three – retail fish markets in the region.

"James' sea robin is incredible," said Whipple, explaining that many chefs shy away from the non-traditional fish in favor of the staples that have been on Connecticut menus for years. "But James, he thinks outside the box. He's innovative, he's one of a kind. I wish I had 10 of him, he's that incredible."

There are only a handful of other chefs willing to work with the less restaurant-menu-friendly-species from Long Island Sound, said Whipple, adding, "These are not farmed products they are working with, they're wild, and that's more difficult."

At Cavey's in Manchester, the Polish born chef George Janus was serving monkfish and black sea bass on his menu in late March.

"I suit the menu to the season," he said. "Whatever is caught at that time of year."

He serves the monkfish over spaetzle with his house-

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Scallop Crudo is one of the entrees served at the Mystic Oyster Club using locally caught seafood. Scallops are the most lucrative seafood landed in Connecticut among the top 12 species in volume and dollar value. To see a chart of the state's top dozen commercial species in 2016, visit: <https://seagrant.uconn.edu/publications/wrack-lines/>
Photo: Mystic Oyster Club

cured pancetta and a sauce made of squid ink and lobster. The black sea bass is served nestled on a creamy mix of potatoes and fennel, almost like a risotto, and topped with black trumpet morel mushrooms.

Customers today are savvy about food, Janus said, noting that many of them watch the Food Network and are willing to try different things. They like to eat locally sourced foods and want to know where items come from, prompting Janus to list Stonington Black Bass and Stonington Red Shrimp (also called royal red shrimp) on Cavey's menu.

The red shrimp don't thrive in Long Island Sound but offshore, and are landed by Stonington Seafood Harvesters. The Bomster family runs the boats and business and is widely known for the shrimp and scallops they flash-freeze at sea and market from their business near the Town Dock in Stonington.

America today is a mix of cultures and ethnicities, and Janus said that diversity brings different and varied cuisines. Wayman, the chef at Mystic Oyster Club, agrees.

"What people think is good is cultural," he said. "They think it's weird here to serve dog fish, but in England, it is what they use in fish and chips."

When he visits Mexico, Wayman said he enjoys grasshopper, which is roasted over a wood fire and served smoky and crunchy.

"It is a curiosity for me and my (restaurant) team," he said, of the sea robin, whiting and porgies that they prepare. "That cultural identity about what's good and what's not good, if you adhere to that, you won't grow."

He makes a General Tso's dish with the Conger eel, substituting the usual chicken for eel, he said.

Jacques Pepin, the celebrity chef who has written more than 20 cookbooks, had a long-running column in the *New York Times*, contributes to *Food & Wine* magazine, has been a guest judge on the Bravo series *Top Chef*, and has hosted or appeared on many television food shows, makes his home in Madison. Nearby is

the local fish market where he shops, in Guilford.

He also receives fish and oysters from friends, who bring him their bounty, including bluefish, porgies (also called scup), blowfish, skate, and whiting. The porgies he fillets himself and uses to make ceviche, he said. At Star Fish Market in Guilford, he said he always asks for a recommendation.

"I say, 'What is very fresh, what do you have here that is very fresh today?'"

Sometimes he gets skate wings and fixes them with vinegar and capers, poaches them, and serves them with melted butter. When a friend brings him blackfish (also called tautog), or bluefish, he always enjoys it.

"People say bluefish is strong, but it is one of the best fish broiled or grilled. When it is very fresh, it is very good," he said.

A favorite summertime pastime for Pepin is something he did growing up as a boy in France. He and a friend will pull a rectangular net along the shoreline on an outgoing tide to catch whitebait – immature or tiny fish – that he guts by pressing on the belly. He then washes the fish, dips them in milk, dusts with flour, and fries them.



"It is a summer ritual," he said. "And you pay a price for those in France, from the Rhone River."

Like the guys at the Mystic Oyster Club, Pepin believes restaurants and chefs should give the bounty from Long Island Sound more of a chance.

"All the things that people throw back in the water, if they kept them, you'd have more fish than you know what to do with," Pepin said.

Fred Papp, the seafood manager at Stew Leonard's supermarket in Norwalk for the past 30 years, looks at the availability situation from a different perspective. He can get clams and oysters from Long

Island Sound, but not enough finfish for the busy supermarket.

Local for Papp is within a 500 to 600-mile radius and trucked in daily. On an average day, he boasts 26 kinds of fresh fish in his display cases and said Connecticut fishermen cannot supply the volume he needs.

"We go to the daily auction and it is whatever we can get local and big quantities that we can blow out," he said. "They just don't have the volume."

He does get Copps Island oysters from Norm Bloom & Son Oyster of Norwalk, what he calls "One of the best oysters I've ever eaten, perfect size, briny taste with a smooth finish." And, he buys little neck clams from another local concern that he identified as Sea Star. Occasionally, he will buy a box of porgies and sell them whole, but for the most part, his inventory comes from elsewhere in New England and beyond, not Long Island Sound.

Several years ago, Matt Lariviere of Westbrook Lobster Restaurant and Bar closed his fish market in the face of competition from chain supermarkets and big box stores and used the space to enlarge his popular seafood restaurant.

But there are still a handful of things on his menu – all shellfish – that come from Long Island Sound: some of the oysters, littleneck clams and quahogs. He gets those from Connecticut Shellfish Company in Branford, but most everything else that he considers local comes to him from Rhode Island.

"We do advertise that our oysters and clams are out of Long Island Sound," he said, and added, if he could he would buy fish from the Sound, too.

The suppliers he uses do not offer fish from Long Island Sound, but if they did, he said, he would buy and serve it.

In Willimantic at The Fish Market, owner Terry Hovey-Hussey said at various times of the year, she sells a variety



of fish from Long Island Sound, including fluke, flounder, black sea bass, blackfish, scup, monkfish, mackerel, squid and skate wings. She buys from Gambardella and Sea Well, both at the Stonington Town Dock. She also gets clams and oysters from purveyors along the Mystic River, both Noank Aquaculture and Aeros Cultured Oyster Co. In her bright, big, clean display case, she advertises both Ram Island and Mystic oysters, and local little neck and cherrystone clams.

She has a good variety in her prepared food line, but only her very popular stuffed quahogs, made with a secret recipe, use bounty from Long Island Sound. Customers like the convenience of tasty, readymade seafood, but the crab cakes, seafood salad and yellowfin tuna salad at The Fish Market are made with fish and shellfish from beyond local waters. But whatever she can get that's local, she does.

"Customers come to us because we buy a lot of local," she said, adding that both Bomster scallops and red shrimp, which she carries when available, are a big draw. She uses the scallops for a fried-scallop dinner on her take-out menu.

Several times each week a driver makes the run from Willimantic to Stonington, Mystic and Noank to buy fish and shellfish. In addition to her market, Hovey-Hussey sells at the year-round Ellington Farmers Market, and to a local café. At the farmers market, Hovey-Hussey educates shoppers about what she's selling.

"They look for organic and they want to know where it comes from," she said. "And I tell them, 'That's how I eat, I buy

as much local as I can. I like to buy local."

Quotas and regulations may limit the availability of some fish, such as flounder, and that's why Hovey-Hussey has other places, such as Boston, where she gets fish from. While most of the fish she's buying in Boston will be from other states, some fish from her home state is available there.

"If I could get more fish out of Long Island Sound, I'd have no problem selling it," said Whipple, of Sea Well Seafood wholesale operations. "I'm not an expert on the regulations, but I do hear they're limited in what they can catch."

In her seafood markets, Whipple uses what is available not just as fresh fillets or shellfish, but in ready-to-heat-and-serve, value-added products such as lobster bisque, conch salad, bacon wrapped scallops and seafood-stuffed lobster tails.

Other chefs and fishmongers across the state take advantage of the local catch, too. At the University of Connecticut, Robert Landolphi is the assistant director of culinary development, overseeing UConn's catering operation. The university uses oysters and clams on raw bars that have been harvested from waters off Groton, Madison, Milford, and Norwalk by Noank Aquaculture Cooperative, Indian River Shellfish and Norm Bloom & Son. It buys much of its seafood from Hovey-Hussey's fish market, Landolphi said. But when the university serves fish to its students, it buys off the docks in Boston to obtain the quantities it needs.

Catering for retirement parties, receptions or other special occasions is when Landolphi's team will make a smoked bluefish dip, or maybe serve the scallops wrapped in pecan wood-smoked bacon with maple glaze and coarse black pepper on them. Oysters go on the raw bar and the black sea bass is used for ceviche.

Top photo: A sign hangs at The Fish Market in Willimantic, which sells a variety of local seafood. Photo: Ann Baldelli

At the Sheraton Hartford South Hotel, chef Jim Oswald, who is the first vice president of the Connecticut Chefs Association of the American Culinary Federation, said he would like to use more local seafood on his menus. One day in mid-winter, he asked his supplier, City Fish Market in Wethersfield, for a recommendation. That night, flounder was on the menu at the hotel restaurant, The Common House Kitchen & Bar.

"I want to become more involved and buy more fish from Long Island Sound, but it's an education for all of us," he said. "Chefs need to be educated on what's available and how to prepare it, and it's the same for the Connecticut consumer as well. We are all about local. People like to see that."

Oswald said he would also like to do more with seaweed.

"I would love to work with kelp, but where will it come from and how will it get here?" he asked.

Walter Houlihan, the owner and chef at Water Street Café in Stonington, said when he can he buys from the day boats in town. But he lamented the declines in populations of lobsters and other species in the Sound, which he blamed on overuse of lawn chemicals.

"There's not much out there," he said.

When he can get eel, mackerel, or porgies, he takes them, prepares them, and they are delicious, but customers are reluctant to order them.

"No one wants to eat eel, I have to give it away," he said. "And scup, I fry it whole with black beans or something Asian, or fix the fillets with onions or tomatoes, but only people who really know fish want to eat it."

These days, Whipple said there are more markets, restaurants and chefs willing to try the less popular local species, and more consumers who want to try them.

"Every chef is different and some don't want to come out of their comfort zone," she said. "But I'll take anything that comes off a local boat and try to market it."



Alene Whipple, owner with her husband Ted of Sea Well Seafood wholesale and retail markets in Stonington, shows some of the fresh local flounder that will be sold to local restaurants and retail stores. Photo: Judy Benson



Monkfish and stuffed lobster tails are among the local seafood products sold at Sea Well Seafood's retail market in Pawcatuck. Photos: Ann Baldelli



Salad made with locally caught conch is one of the items for sale at Sea Well Seafood market in Pawcatuck. Photo: Ann Baldelli



Christopher Dodge, a volunteer for Eating With the Ecosystem, tallies the offerings at Flanders Fish Market during the nonprofit group's first-ever "Market Blitz." To read about the Market Blitz, visit: <https://seagrant.uconn.edu/publications/wrack-lines/> Photo: Judy Benson