

# DEALERS' CHALLENGE: MATCHING SUPPLY, DEMAND FOR OLD FAVORITES, NEWLY PLENTIFUL FISH

By Judy Benson

In the refrigerated warehouse of her wholesale seafood company, Alene Whipple opened a box and used her bare hand to tunnel through the top layer of crushed ice and expose the silvery checkered fish underneath.

“These are my favorite,” said Whipple, who owns the Stonington-based Sea Well Seafood with her husband Ted, as she bent over the box and lifted out one of the fish.

In singling out black sea bass over the monkfish, clams, scallops, flounder and other species that filled the cold chamber

that day, Whipple endorsed a kind of fish newly deserving of unique local appeal. Once more common in the mid-Atlantic than Long Island Sound and southern New England, black sea bass are ending up in the holds of the state’s commercial fishing boats and on the hooks of recreational anglers as never before in recent memory, brought north by warming marine waters.

“Black sea bass are extremely abundant now, whereas seven or eight years ago the center of abundance was much farther south,” said Mark Alexander, who recently retired as director of marine fisheries at the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. “It’s become a very important fish for our charter and party boat industry.”

While commercial fishermen are bringing increasing numbers of black sea bass to market, he added, they are limited from catching more by quotas set by interstate regulators that haven’t kept pace with changing conditions.

“It would be nice to get a bigger quota,” said Alexander, noting that the commercial quota for black seabass stood at 41,204 pounds in 2017, while recreational landings that year topped 600,000 pounds. That mismatch, he said, indicates that fishery could be sustainably increased.

The condition of the black sea bass fishery is just one example of the seemingly contradictory forces at play in the world of Connecticut seafood. At a time of growing consumer demand for locally sourced foods, sellers and growers of fish and shellfish landed and harvested in Connecticut aren’t able to take full advantage, for a variety of reasons. At the same time, new abundance of species such as black sea bass and porgies – also called scup – isn’t meshing with outdated regulations, and demand for them from restaurant chefs and consumers hasn’t fully caught up either.

“We tried very hard last year to sell porgies, but it’s still a very hard sell,” said Chad Simoneaux, owner with his wife Camille of Gulf Shrimp Co., a Southington seafood wholesaler.

Porgies are usually sold and cooked whole because of their relatively small size, and diners used to uniform fillets can be reluctant to pick through the bones to find the mild white meat of a porgy.

“They’re a lot of work, even though they’re tasty,” said Ralph Pagano, vice president and general manager of Pagano’s Seafood, a Norwalk wholesaler.

Also, many home cooks just don’t know how to prepare them. Still, wholesalers aren’t giving up.

“You have to find the customer for porgies,” said Michael Dowie, general manager of Connecticut Shellfish Co., a

CONNECTICUT PRODUCTS	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
<b>MOLLUSCAN SHELLFISH</b>												
Hard Clams												
Hard Clams (shucked)												
Oysters												
Oysters (shucked)												
Sea Scallops												
Blue Mussels												
Conch / Whelk												
Squid												
<b>CRUSTACEAN SHELLFISH</b>												
American Lobster												
Blue Crab												
Jonah Crab												
Royal Red Shrimp												
<b>SEA VEGETABLES</b>												
Kelp (fresh)												
Kelp (frozen)												
<b>FINFISH</b>												
Blackfish / Tautog												
Bluefish												
Butterfish												
Codfish												
Dogfish, Smooth												
Dogfish, Spiny												
Flounder, Summer (Fluke)												
Flounder, Winter												
Flounder, Yellowtail												
Hake												
Herring												
Mackerel												
Monkfish												
Porgy / Scup												
Sea Bass, Black												
Shad												
Skate												
Whiting												

This chart, newly updated by Connecticut Sea Grant and the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection’s Marine Fisheries Division, shows the seasonal availability of local shellfish, seaweed and finfish.



Joan Rojas, fish counter manager at NSA Supermarket, prepares porgies (also called scup) for sale at the New London grocery store on Jan. 27. Photo: Judy Benson



Local oysters and clams are among the offerings for sale at the retail market at Pagano's Seafood in Norwalk. Photo: Judy Benson



Black sea bass like these at Sea Well Seafood are a newly abundant species being caught by Connecticut fishermen and starting to become popular with restaurant chefs. Photo: Judy Benson

Branford wholesaler. Markets with a large Hispanic customer base, for example, are good outlets for porgies, he said, because those cultures are more accustomed to eating them.

All four wholesalers interviewed for this article said they've had more success selling black sea bass than porgies, but are hoping that will change. Larger and easier to fillet than porgies, black seabass "are now being served in restaurants," Dowie noted.

Like the situation with those two species, the story of other fish and shellfish from Connecticut waters is also a mixed bag. The wholesalers say they try to sell as much local seafood to restaurants and retail stores as possible, but supplies and market realities aren't always compatible with that goal.

"We try to buy as much local seafood as possible," said Simoneaux of Gulf Shrimp Co., which even created its own "Connecticut Caught – Catch On" logo for its delivery trucks. "We try to promote anything from Connecticut, and we'll even give the name of the fishermen's boat so chefs can put it on their menus."

Like Simoneaux, Whipple said Sea Well buys directly from several Connecticut commercial boats, and tries to find markets for whatever they bring in – even if it's a relatively unknown species like sea robin.

"We try to buy local and sell local as much as possible, because it's fresher and cheaper, and keeps the money in our own community," Whipple said.

But much of the fish caught or landed in Connecticut waters – whether it's flounder, monkfish, whiting or skate – goes to big wholesale markets in Boston and New York City, where the smaller wholesalers must travel regularly to ensure they have a consistent supply for their customers. That means many of the fish caught and landed in Connecticut get shipped to Massachusetts or New York and offered for sale there, and then end up getting trucked back to a Connecticut wholesaler's warehouse.



Michael Dowie, general manager of the Connecticut Shellfish Co. in Branford, shows some of the Long Island Sound oysters his wholesale business will deliver to restaurants and retail markets. Photo: Judy Benson



A delivery truck from Connecticut Shellfish Co. brings a shipment of fresh porgies (scup), salmon heads, steamer clams, whole snapper and croakers to NSA Grocery in New London on Jan. 27. Photo: Judy Benson

“A lot of the product goes there before it comes back here,” said Simoneaux.

And since labeling at the big city markets can be inconsistent or use a general term like “New England” or “U.S.,” buyers can’t always tell whether the flounder or monkfish originated in their home state. And even if the labeling were clearer, wholesalers said they couldn’t rely on Connecticut to supply all the seafood their customers want. There is an international trade, with products coming from all corners of the world far outnumbering what’s available in state.

“We get mahi mahi and grouper and red snapper from dealers in Miami and Louisiana, and tilapia direct from Ecuador and salmon from Canada and Norway and Scotland,” said Pagano. “Salmon, both wild caught and farmed, is far and away our highest requested item, because of the consistency and stable pricing.”

Overall, about 10 to 35 percent of their sales are from Connecticut products, the wholesalers said. Some of the offerings, like Stonington red shrimp and winter flounder, are only available seasonally, though limited quantities are being frozen and offered for sale that way.

“Fish becomes a staple when there’s a consistent supply, when people can always find it,” said Alexander of DEEP. “When the supply is erratic, it affects the marketability of that fish.”

Most of the Connecticut seafood the wholesalers deliver consists of shellfish – clams, oysters and scallops. Scallops are brought in from boats that fish offshore that dock mainly in Stonington and New London. Clams and oysters are raised through aquaculture in designated beds in Long Island Sound leased by farmers from the state and from shoreline towns.

“Ninety percent of what we sell from Connecticut is clams and oysters,” Dowie said. “And I can’t get enough of those to meet the demand.” To meet some of the unanswered demand for local shellfish, Dowie’s company is expanding to grow its own oysters in a five-acre area of Branford harbor it will lease from the state.

Connecticut’s 45 licensed shellfish harvesters sell about \$30 million annually worth of clams and oysters. Much of that ends up getting sold out of state, where growers can demand a higher price.

“I sell to Rodney’s Oyster House in Toronto and at the Greenpoint fish market



Ralph Pagano, vice president and general manager of Pagano’s Seafood, lifts a whole Icelandic cod out of ice in the company’s warehouse. It is one of the many international products the Norwalk wholesaler offers along with Connecticut fish and shellfish. Photo: Judy Benson

in Brooklyn, and I have a couple of large restaurant accounts and a couple of other wholesale accounts,” said Steve Plant, owner with his wife Jill of Connecticut Cultivated Oysters in Stonington. “I have very stable demand.”

A former hedge fund manager who took up oyster farming 17 years ago, Plant sells about 250,000 oysters per year and is hoping to double that amount over the next few years.

“I’m trying to get to the next level of production, because the demand is there,” he said.

Tim Londregan, owner of the Niantic Bay Shellfish Farm, is also looking to expand his oyster production into beds in the Niantic River, just north of the areas in Niantic Bay where he now harvests about 250,000 oysters annually. In the river, he hopes to be growing seed oysters for other producers as well as bay scallops. He first got into shellfish aquaculture in 2013 working at the Fishers Island Oyster Farm, then began selling his own product in 2016.

“I got into this because I wanted to do something good for the environment,” said Londregan, referring to the benefits of shellfish aquaculture on improving water quality.

One of the state’s largest clam producers is Atlantic Clam Co., which is also seeing growing demand for its product. The company currently harvests from about 2,400 acres in Greenwich harbor, the farthest a 15-minute trip from where Atlantic Clam’s two pontoon boats are docked.

“We’re expanding into two beds in Stamford harbor,” said Ed Stilwagen, owner of Atlantic Clam since 1999. In 2017, he said, the company harvested and sold 13.5 million clams of three sizes – cherrystones, top necks and chowder clams, also called quahogs. Located on the New York border, much of the company’s product is sold in that state, although it also supplies fish markets, restaurants and wholesalers in the southwest corner of Connecticut.

With shellfish farmers like Plant, Londregan and Stilwagen looking to grow more clams and oysters, the outlook for an increasing supply of Connecticut shellfish looks promising.

But wholesalers like Whipple are also eager for an easing of the bottlenecks restricting the supply of the locally caught fish more of their customers want.

“I would love to buy more fish and shellfish from Long Island Sound, but it’s just not always available,” said Whipple. “We’ve always tried to promote local products over everything else, and I’ve definitely seen more customers asking for it over the last five to six years.”