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Maine's Seafood Industry: From the Outside Looking In

by Catherine Schmitt

BOSTON: Salmon sliders. Fish eggs in a rainbow of colors. Stacks of green-black squares of nori. Louisiana shrimp, Wellfleet oysters, Alaskan sablefish.



This year's Boston Seafood Show was the usual dizzying maze of over 2,000 exhibit booths. Wandering the floor, I explored the samples galore—a crabcake here, a bite of juicy grilled barramundi there. With each bite, a question echoed in my mind: *Where is Maine?*

Last year, Maine exported \$197 million in seafood, our fourth-largest export in value. I counted eight Maine companies out of more than 800 at the show. For a state known worldwide for lobster and a rugged fishing image, we were glaringly absent.

Frustrated by this apparent inconsistency, I wanted to find out what happened to Maine's seafood industry, to state and federal marketing programs, and to our image around the world, and what could be done to get Maine seafood the credit it deserved.

I knew things weren't always this way. Thirty years ago, the Maine Department of Marine Resources was promoting Maine seafood at summer festivals, in film and on the radio, in local supermarkets and, briefly, even Colorado. In the 1970s, many people disliked fish because they hadn't experienced properly prepared seafood. Educational materials and recipe books produced by the state explained how to buy, store, and cook fish, and touted the health benefits.

Most of Maine's fish stayed local, only traveling as far as Boston or New York. The Gulf of Maine fishery was dominated by fleets of foreign fishing vessels, factories at sea that fished harder than anyone before. Even at Gorton's in Gloucester, MA, 40% of the cod came from plants in Poland that were processing product caught off the U.S. coast by Polish boats.

Things changed in 1976, when the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act extended the U.S. exclusive economic zone to 200 miles. The exclusion of foreign boats created a worldwide dislocation of supply and drastically altered how fish were harvested, processed, and distributed.

"The Gulf of Maine fishery was returned to the US," explained Penn Estabrook, former DMR deputy commissioner, "and the stocks were



healthy." Federal investment and development helped the New England groundfish fleet double in size between 1977 and 1982, and landings increased.

Problem was, no one knew what to do with all that fish.

The state focused on establishing standards for handling, processing, shipping, and selling seafood; setting up a system of state inspections with participating processors; and creating a groundfish industry development task force.



But, Estabrook explained, "the industry was more interested in fishing than planning." As interest waned, so did the product. By the early 1990s, declining fish stocks coincided with changing government and economics (DMR lost support from the state's General Fund). Funding for inspections, market development, and promotion dried up.

"We're concentrating our resources on protecting public health and managing for abundant, safe, sustainable resources. We don't have the luxury to concentrate on marketing right now," said DMR Commissioner George Lapointe.

"There is growing recognition that to do well in the world marketplace, you have to do promotion. The question is, who can do it best and most efficiently? You have to know what kind of effort and investment is required before you start," said Lapointe.

Still, the Seafood Show got me wondering, what are other places doing that Maine is not?

Does Maine have an equivalent to "Wild American Shrimp" or Alaska's "Copper River Salmon?" According to Beth Poole, Executive Director of Copper River Marketing, area fishermen were concerned about processors controlling the market. State legislation in 2004 enabled them to form their own Regional Seafood Development Association and assess a 1% regional seafood development tax on the drift gillnet fleet to fund the Copper River Marketing Association in 2005. Three years later, the fish is described as "legendary" with a "frenzied loyalty" that has some wondering whether the fish is "overhyped." Yes, Alaska's industry, which supplies almost half of the seafood consumed in the U.S., is very different than Maine, but the point is that the marketing worked.

We have "Maine lobster," an iconic brand that sells itself, said Nick Branchina, Director of Marketing for Browne Trading Company in Portland. Lobster has always been a bit of a different story. Lobstermen formed their own Promotion Council, established by the legislature in 1991 and funded primarily by lobster license holders. Many believe the current efforts to certify the Maine lobster fishery with the Marine Stewardship Council will help the industry.



Thinking globally

Most of Maine's seafood exports go to Europe and Asia. "We're best known for lobster, but our shrimp has gotten more attention in Europe," explained Maine International Trade Center president Janine Cary, citing some of the larger seafood processors like Cozy Harbor and Portland Shellfish.



One way to get more out of less is to develop "value-added" (prepared) products. Leading the way is Linda Bean, who sees herself as the Frank Purdue of Maine lobster. Since buying a Port Clyde lobster wharf and starting Linda Bean's Perfect Maine in 2007, she has bought two more wharves (in Vinalhaven and Tenants Harbor) and a processing facility, landed her product on QVC, franchised her lobster roll shack to seven locations including Delray Beach, FL, and employed 18 people.

A few rows over from Bean at the Seafood Show, John Hathaway of Shucks Maine Lobster and his daughter were busy promoting two new products in their award-winning line marketed primarily in Europe: sushi-grade lobster carpaccio and a lobster ceviche "kit" complete with lime, tomato, and cilantro. Shucks' lobster meat is produced through high-pressure processing which removes the shell without cooking.

"People don't want to cook a live lobster at home. They don't want to re-cook lobster meat. This is a problem the industry is going to be facing more and more," said Hathaway.

Creating ready-to-eat products requires a certain kind of kitchen, as well as expertise in packaging, design, and advertising. "It's hard," Hathaway said, "It takes innovation and innovation always takes time. You have to fail a few times before you find a product that works."

"You have to be really strong in your belief that your vision is correct," said Hathaway. "Linda [Bean] and I were both born in Maine, loved lobster all our lives, but we weren't in the industry, so we could take a step back and have a fresh perspective. The farther you get from Maine, the more valuable this product is. Not only do you have to think outside the box, you have to think outside the state."



Acting locally

While Maine still ships seafood around the world, fishing communities are looking closer to home as concerns about greenhouse gas emissions, food safety, and economic stability converge in the theme of sustainability.

The isolated, and diverse nature of Maine's fishing industry has always been a barrier. Today there little funds available for promotion, and not a lot of fish to market. Fishermen don't want to be salesmen. They love what they do and few have the desire or the capacity to do much else.

Pioneers like Glen Libby in Port Clyde and Will Hopkins in Cobscook Bay are trying to show Maine fishermen that they don't need to look outside the country or even the state. Groups of fishermen can get together and manage the supply from their own bay, delivering fresh, local seafood directly to consumers. These cooperative models hope to profit (or at least survive) with less product by eliminating the middleman.

Most retail businesses can't tolerate wide fluctuations in product availability that result from seasonal, annual, and regulatory variability. By focusing on local, seasonal harvests, the Midcoast and Cobscook Bay fishermen incorporate uncertainty into their business model, building local demand for—and awareness of—Maine seafood.

These efforts fit nicely with the movements toward local organic food as more people pay attention to where their food comes from. New country-of-origin labeling in supermarkets lets consumers know in which country their seafood was grown or processed, but whether seafood is from Maine is still a mystery for the average shopper.

Fishing is part of Maine's coastal heritage—the proportion of Maine workers employed in commercial fishing industries is more than 12 times the national percentage. As their name suggests, community-supported fisheries maintain the fabric of the Maine coast.

Organizations assisting fishermen in these efforts, like the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, Island Institute, Penobscot East Resource Center, Cobscook Bay Resource Center, Gulf of Maine Research Institute, and Maine Sea Grant, have stepped in to fill the void left by state and federal promotion programs. These groups are trying to help boost Maine's seafood industry out of concern for the hollowing out of communities and loss of working waterfront that occurs when fishing declines. As Penn Estabrook reminded me, "We need to get the fish back, but more importantly, we need to maintain the infrastructure so when the fish do come back, we have a place for them."

Meanwhile, Maine's tourism industry is trying to take advantage of the fact that one of the primary reasons people travel anywhere is to eat and drink. The quintessential experience for anyone visiting Maine is still the lobster dinner. "Culinary tourism is a growing faction within the tourism industry, and interest has been heightened recently in Maine, where the tourism industry is looking for ways to expand their efforts," said Fred Cook of Downeast & Acadia Regional Tourism. "We want tourists to experience the resource and, ultimately, understand how important it is to protect it."