

ETHICAL EATING: FARMED V. WILD

# C Restaurant swims against the current on salmon

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VANCOUVER -- In a province where summer means sockeye the same way that fall means rain, salmon is not just a menu option; it's part of the British Columbian identity. To suggest taking wild salmon off restaurant menus is not just a radical idea, it's a challenge to deeply held social and political mores.

Yet that's exactly what Harry Kambolis, owner of C Restaurant, Raincity Grill and Nu and his executive chef Robert Clark are considering. "We may never sell another piece of wild Pacific salmon again," Mr. Kambolis said.

What's more, Mr. Clark said, he has looked into putting farmed salmon on the menu.

When Vancouver's sustainable-seafood guru speaks, other restaurateurs listen. Mr. Clark campaigned against ocean-farmed Atlantic salmon when every restaurant in Vancouver had it on the menu, and was instrumental in raising awareness about the wider crisis facing fish.

Two years ago, he removed wild sockeye - widely regarded as the most desirable salmon - from C's menu because of its precarious status, serving pink and chum instead.

Now, Mr. Clark says that he can not only see a point where it will be necessary to remove all wild salmon from the restaurant's menu, but he and Mr. Kambolis may make that decision this year.

Any such move could force a major shift in B.C. menu offerings.

Mr. Clark's decision to remove sockeye proved prescient. Now the industry is at the point where "this may be the last year for wild B.C. sockeye," he said.

There are widespread fishing closures in Washington, Oregon and California because of concern about salmon stocks. Some rivers and ocean areas - such as Alaskan waters - remain open to harvest, however, where local stocks are in good shape.

In British Columbia, it is a mixed picture. Of 89 stock groups assessed by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, 34 were considered of conservation concern, which means numbers are so low all fishing for them will probably be curtailed.

At the same time, 34 stocks were considered strong enough to support fishing harvests. The remaining 21 stocks were rated as having "mixed status levels."

One of the weakest runs of salmon in the province this year is expected to be the sockeye return to the Fraser River, where a run of about two million fish is predicted - well below the historical average of 4.4 million.

Wild spring, chum and pink salmon are regarded as more sustainable choices, but even these species are under threat, Mr. Clark said.

The sustainability of seafood is categorized by the environmental coalition SeaChoice into green (best choice), yellow (some concerns) and red (avoid). Currently wild Pacific salmon is listed as yellow, although certain species found in specific areas - which vary from year to year - are considered to be sustainable and sound.

While Mr. Clark has access to those sources, many other restaurateurs don't.

That's one of the reasons he doesn't serve rockfish, another iffy fish for which he has a sustainable source. "Other places will say, 'If C has it, we can sell it,' and they'll go get any old rockfish."

The significance of sourcing is clear. The 2007 recommendation was to avoid wild B.C. sockeye and choose other species. Where wild B.C. sockeye was chosen, the advice was to source it from the Skeena and Nass rivers.

This year, predictions for both the Skeena and Nass are less optimistic and the recommendations could change in response.

Taras Grescoe, who examines ethics and sustainability in the seafood industry in his new book, *Bottomfeeder*, says Mr. Clark is "taking the high road. He is acknowledging that chefs set an example."

He points to monkfish and Chilean sea bass, fish that became fashionable after being prepared by top chefs and whose supplies are in dangerous condition as a result.

"It took only 15 years for Chilean sea bass to be driven close to commercial extinction," says Mr. Grescoe.

Asked to clarify what time period may see wild salmon pulled from his menu, Mr. Clark said, "It could be this year."

In the meantime, he is considering serving farmed salmon. The new "F-word," farmed fish is currently so vilified that many restaurateurs would find it a tough sell.

What is important to establish, Mr. Clark explained, is the difference between ocean-based and closed-system, land-based aquaculture. Land-based aquaculture raises fish in lakes rather than rivers and the ocean, and does not harm wild fish.

Already, haute organic restaurant Bishop's serves land-based farmed coho from Swift Aquaculture in Agassiz. The Cactus Club chain removed wild salmon from its menu two years ago, replacing it with land-based farmed steelhead trout from Lois Lake near Powell River.

Mr. Clark is exploring similar options. "We are building relationships with two land-based salmon farms - because very soon they may be the only friends we have."

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### **Selecting salmon**

Currently, Pacific wild salmon is rated yellow - "some concerns" - by environmental advisory groups Ocean Wise, Sea Choice and Blue Ocean Institute. Recommendations about which species and which sources are considered good choices this season are expected to be made by early June. Right now, wild Alaskan salmon and pink salmon are predicted to be the most abundant. Almost all farmed salmon on the market is ocean-based farmed Atlantic salmon and consumers are advised to avoid it.