

# A changing tide: ‘There’s no fish that you can’t make delicious.’

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As many as 100 edible fish populate the waters of the northwest Atlantic. New Englanders, however, ‘tend to favor just a few.’ The industry is trying to change that.



**Monkfish Picatta at Orfano in Boston. Left: Stuart Meltzer at Fearless Fish, a small market in Providence.**



**Dogfish ready to be off-loaded at the Chatham Fish Pier.**

Walking into Fearless Fish, a small market in Providence specializing in local seafood, is like walking into Tiffany's. The showcases dazzle the eye.

There's familiar fare, like Atlantic salmon, haddock, and sea scallops. There's also a riveting range of fish that are relatively mysterious, curios like scup, butterfish, pollack, Acadian redfish, conger eel, and monkfish. While abundant in our waters, these so-called "underutilized" species — less known to New Englanders, less tasted, less in demand — are often exported to countries that apparently appreciate them much more than we do.

Most of the region's Atlantic dogfish, for instance, goes to England for fish and chips. "It's crazy," said Chris Cronin, the chef at Union Flats Seafood in New Bedford, who prefers "unique" fish to the familiar. "Dogfish is pretty mild, slightly sweet with a flaky texture comparable to haddock. It takes on other flavors, and I like to serve it with citrus notes."

Since Fearless Fish opened in early 2019, owner Stuart Meltzer's main aim has been to try and broaden the consumer palate. "We want to help people become more confident, to try new fish," he said one noontime, as mostly younger customers streamed through the door. The pandemic-driven interest in local foods has been good for sales, he noted, inspiring more daring in home kitchens. Skate piccata? Roasted mackerel with chimichurri? The store's online recipes and cooking lessons help to demystify lesser-known fish, as does its disclosure of catch site and means. "Fluke, Pt. Judith, dragger." "Monkfish, Gulf of Maine, dragger."

"It's important to me, and shared by customers, that the product is local," said Meltzer.

Local seafood is easier to source than ever, according to Kate Masury, director of Eating with the Ecosystem, a nonprofit that promotes the ecological benefits of eating a diversity of fish. With the shift to local, Masury is glad to see less familiar species increasingly in evidence in markets and online businesses, at dock sales and on restaurant menus. Some, like monkfish, "the poor man's lobster," are even crossing into familiar territory.

If fishermen harvest diverse species that the marine world is naturally producing at any given time, notes Masury, it's better for the health of the ecosystem as opposed to cherry-picking individual species, which can deplete a species, effect its predators, and send the whole system out of balance. "Supply needs to drive demand, when a lot of times our demand drives supply," said Masury.



A grilled monkfish bathed in smoked tomato brodo is one of Union Flat's most popular dishes. Cronin extols this intimidating looking fish for its hearty texture and taste. "Monkfish have teeth and eat a wide assortment of shellfish — clams, crabs, and oysters — which gives it a great flavor." For fish and chips, Cronin uses hake, a flaky white fish that serves as a perfect stand-in for cod.

As many as 100 edible fish populate the waters of the northwest Atlantic. New Englanders, however, "tend to favor just a few," said Masury — lobster, cod, scallops, haddock, and softshell clams are our top favorites — when "so many others are delicious."

With fish consumption on the rise, underfished fisheries are bound to be tapped more and more. Recently, the online store of Portland-based True Fin sold out of its "Curated Adventure Box," a Gulf of Maine sampler of cusk fillet, dogfish steaks, tuna mince, monkfish, and Atlantic mackerel. True Fin's online window, added last summer, "is making less common fish species accessible to people who can't find them in the store," said CEO Jen Levin.

Levin launched True Fin in 2019, believing that if more underfished species in the Gulf of Maine were harvested, it could improve fishermen's wages and also capture sales from higher-end restaurants. Her vision is paying off. True Fin now ships multiple species to restaurants across the country, and chefs, Levin points out, are apt to prize Atlantic mackerel, for instance, a species that has never garnered much respect, as much as they do Alaskan king crab.

While True Fin is selling mackerel, dogfish, hake, and other less-used types to distributors and restaurants, Levin allows that those sales "aren't yet at the volume we really need to make a difference to the fishermen." For that reason, "we're really grateful to those chefs who say, OK, we'll give it a try."

According to NOAA, the United States imports 70 percent to 85 percent of its seafood, and exports large volumes as well. With more and more community-based fishermen networks springing up, it's predicted that more seafood will stay in the community. Thus more diners might be persuaded to give the underdogs, say triggerfish or tautog, a taste.

If a fish store "puts skate in its case and no one buys it, they have to throw it out and waste fish and money. At the same time, consumers can't buy it if it's not available. Consumers need to be willing to try different species," said Masury.

Like Masury, Jamey Lionette, who directs Red's Best Sustainable Seafood program, advocates a radical shift, that supply needs to dictate demand and not the other way

around. “What the local fleet shows up with every day is what we should be eating.”

For years, Red’s Best has followed this model, sending whatever fishermen land to thousands of K-12 and university students in New England and New York. “If 1,000 pounds of hake comes in one day, that’s what get delivers. If pollack comes in, that gets sent,” said Lionette. “The chefs don’t know what they’re going to get.”

This logical fish-before-the-cart system can provide fishermen with a steadier income, Lionette said. “And when I tell them, ‘You know what? The New Bedford schools are serving your fish tomorrow,’ they get so much more pride from that. More than if their fish was going to a four-star Michelin restaurant.” Red’s Best seafood program launched in New Bedford in February.

Chris Cronin refers to it as “eating in the moment.” “I tell fishermen, you tell me what you’re catching, and I’ll figure out how to cook it. It’s much more fun that way. There’s no fish that you can’t make delicious.”

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