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Here's the Catch

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The best idea to help small fisheries might come from your local vegetable farm.

By Nancy Harmon Jenkins
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PORT CLYDE, Maine -- The idea of a community-supported fishery seems so obvious, you have to wonder why it took so long. The equivalent approach to farming, after all, is nothing new and has seen explosive growth in recent years, as farmers appreciate an upfront infusion of cash when they need it most, from consumers who get a guaranteed stream of produce throughout the season.

Maybe it took this long for fishermen to try the same thing for one simple reason: They may be geniuses at harvesting from the sea, but they haven't until recently given much thought to marketing what they catch.

To survive, though, they must sell at a decent price, and that's where the community-supported fishery (CSF) idea comes in. Similar efforts are happening in other coastal areas around the country, but the purest expression of the concept may be taking shape in this sweet little port on the southwestern shore of Maine's Penobscot Bay, where the fishermen have organized Port Clyde Fresh Catch, a novel way to buy fish and to market the catch of the Midcoast Fishermen's Association's 24 fishing members.

In summer they fish for cod, haddock, hake and the like (conventionally called groundfish) out in the Gulf of Maine, but at this midwinter point, the Port Clyders work closer to shore, harvesting shrimp. And not just any shrimp, but boatloads of small, sweet, pink Maine shrimp, a little-known seafood that is as much a gustatory joy of this state's winters as lobster is in summer.

As delicious a product as it is, in the past the fishermen have been paid as little as 25 cents a pound for it, a price that doesn't even begin to cover the cost of a fishing trip. Clearly, something had to happen, or there would be no more fishermen in Port Clyde.

Incredible as it seems, this community of just over 1,000 is the second-largest fishing port in Maine and the seventh-largest north of New Jersey. That's an indication of the extent to which East Coast fisheries have failed in recent decades, their decline caused by the collapse of stocks in the North Atlantic and, fishermen say, by stringent environmental regulations aimed at rebuilding them. Many fishing grounds have been put completely off limits, and fishing gear, catch allotments and days at sea are severely limited and monitored. And still, regulators say, fishing stocks are in peril.

Fishermen, and their many defenders, say the rules are overly restrictive, ultimately futile and perhaps even part of the problem. The regulation, they say, has had an unintended consequence: driving out community-based fishermen, who are more attuned to the resources and the need to protect them, in favor of less-sensitive commercial trawlers. According to Philip Conkling, director of the Island Institute, a nonprofit organization in nearby Rockland that works to sustain communities around the Gulf of Maine, the system "rewards the biggest, least-conservation-oriented vessels that can roam throughout the gulf and to the outer banks, at the expense of community-based vessels that lack political representation at the decision-making level" of fisheries management.

Whether fishing for shrimp or groundfish, Port Clyde fishermen are committed, in the words of their association's mission statement, to enhancing "ecological and financial sustainability of the fishery while minimizing habitat impacts with alternative fishing practices." They use environmentally friendly gear developed in collaboration with the Gulf of Maine Research Institute in Portland.

"It's what's called a raised foot rope trawl," explained Glen Libby, chairman of the fishermen's association. The technology, he said, "keeps the ground line or foot rope off the bottom. The sweep does touch bottom, but only every two or three feet of the length of the sweep due to the way it is designed." Unlike conventional draggers that scrape the bottom barren, like clear-cutting a swath of forest, this technique is "very clean -- as in low-bycatch, low-habitat-impact," Libby says. "We also use a fish excluder device called a Nordmore grate that eliminates most of the bycatch of fish, lobsters, et cetera."

Ultimately, the effort is about sustaining not just the fish but also a generations-old tradition that is rapidly disappearing along the Maine coast. And that effort is all about the ability to make a living. If he's lucky, a Port Clyde fisherman who sells groundfish to a wholesale dealer might get 50 cents a pound for his fresh catch; selling through the CSF directly to consumers, whether individuals or restaurants, he's paid about \$3 a pound. That's something a man can live on, raise a family on, use to pay off the mortgage on house or boat. (I say "man" because the Port Clyde fishermen are all guys, though ably assisted on shore by girlfriends, mothers, daughters and wives; Kim Libby, married to Glen's brother Gary, is business manager of Port Clyde Fresh Catch.)

The idea behind the CSF goes back to the Libby brothers' sense, in Glen's words, that "30 years ago there was a lot more fish, and the gear was a lot less high-tech. So maybe we should take a step back and lighten things up." They were convinced that the only way to save the fishery was to fish more sustainably, which meant harvesting fewer fish but better-quality ones that would command a higher price from savvy consumers.

After the fishermen's association formed in 2006, its members made gear improvements and proposed a seasonal closure on fishing in the Gulf of Maine in winter, when the fish are most vulnerable. The next step was a marketing campaign, branding the catch as Port Clyde fish, an indication of sustainable harvesting. The final pieces of the puzzle fell into place at a Gulf of Maine Research Institute event in fall 2007, when Glen and others heard for the first time about community-supported agriculture.

"On the way home," Glen said, "the light came on."

That winter, during the shrimp harvest, the group tried a limited distribution through the Unitarian church in nearby Rockland, which made its parking lot available for deliveries to people who had signed up for shrimp. With that initial attempt, the Island Institute came on board to help. Laura

Kramar, a senior fellow at the institute, contributed marketing expertise as the group developed the brand and expanded its market. Through the church, local food cooperatives and other organizations, subscribers soon signed up for the groundfish distribution last summer.

Those subscribers get access to the freshest seafood imaginable -- the only thing fresher would be catching it yourself -- at an affordable price. It's also (magic words) locally sourced, with a small carbon footprint. The fish doesn't travel to your kitchen from Hawaii or Chile or New Zealand, and it looks, smells and tastes all the better for it. And it's a good deal cheaper than what you can buy at seafood counters in supermarkets, where, even in Maine, fresh wild fish starts at about \$7 a pound.

Last summer, I paid \$360 for a share in Port Clyde Fresh Catch that entitled me to 10 to 12 pounds of fish, usually whole gutted cod, haddock or hake, sometimes supplemented with smaller fish such as flounder, delivered to me every Sunday for 12 weeks in the church parking lot. It worked out to \$2.50 to \$3 a pound. And yes, I still had to scale it myself and cut it into steaks or fillets, a messy but not unpleasant job that taught me a lot about fish anatomy. (It also taught me a lot about how much fish is inevitably wasted in processing, a waste that in my view could be put to good use developing high-quality feed for salmon aquaculture, among other things.)

Ten to 12 pounds a week is a lot of fish. I made fish stews throughout the summer, starting off with that hearty Maine standby fish chowder but also, drawing on my enthusiasm for the Mediterranean kitchen, bold combinations of Maine fish with tomatoes, saffron, chili peppers and cumin. I baked haddock steaks with Moroccan salt-preserved lemons and black olives, and I grilled chunks of cod, first marinating them in olive oil, lemon juice and a big handful of fresh chopped herbs from the garden. And I froze plenty of fish, including the heads and frames, or skeletons, of all these sea creatures, enough to keep going with even more soups and stews this winter.

I knew that come February, when the days are their dreariest, I'd make a soupe de poisson like the ones they serve in the old town of Nice, combining my fish frames with shrimp heads and shells to make a rich broth, seasoning it with tomato, garlic, fennel and saffron, then straining it and pushing all the fishy juices through a fine mesh and thickening the puree with a dollop of creme fraiche or the garlicky, spicy mayonnaise called rouille.

By the end of the summer, 200 enthusiastic members were in line for the weekly distributions. "The response was phenomenal," Kim Libby told me. As soon as the winter shrimp harvest was announced, most of us signed up again, sending checks for \$105 or \$210, which provided five to 10 super-fresh pounds a week for 12 weeks. That's about \$1.75 a pound, the same price I might pay when buying from the ubiquitous shrimp trucks along the roads in Maine at this time of year; but with Port Clyde Fresh Catch, there's no question about quality.

I started the season with a pre-Christmas shrimp risotto, using the heads and shells of the handsome little critters to make the broth, then stirring the tender shrimp into the rice at the very end of cooking, after I'd taken the risotto off the heat. Just that residual heat of the rice was enough to firm up those babies and turn them a pinker shade of pink, contrasting nicely with the golden tan of the rice and with the deep green of chopped chives from a pot on the south-facing kitchen window.

Do I get tired of a few pounds of shrimp every week? No, not when they're as delicious and satisfyingly fresh as these are. That freshness means I can mimic a dish I was served by friends in Sicily, a refreshing salad of sweet raw shrimp -- or rather, just barely "cooked," as in a sevice, by a bath in citrus juice or vinegar -- tossed with fresh, slightly bitter arugula and fennel. With a stir-fry, I

do the same as with the risotto, sauteing the rest of the ingredients, then stirring in the peeled shrimp off the burner, so they cook in the residual heat of the dish.

Gary and Glen Libby, and the other members of Port Clyde Fresh Catch, are determined to make this work, not just to provide a living for themselves but also to protect a resource that has sustained generations of Maine fishermen and their communities. Perhaps the most heartening outgrowth of their efforts is the sense that the fisheries regulators are starting to pay attention to the opinions and ideas of the experts: in other words, the fishermen themselves. And those fishermen experts are finally taking control of their own future.

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