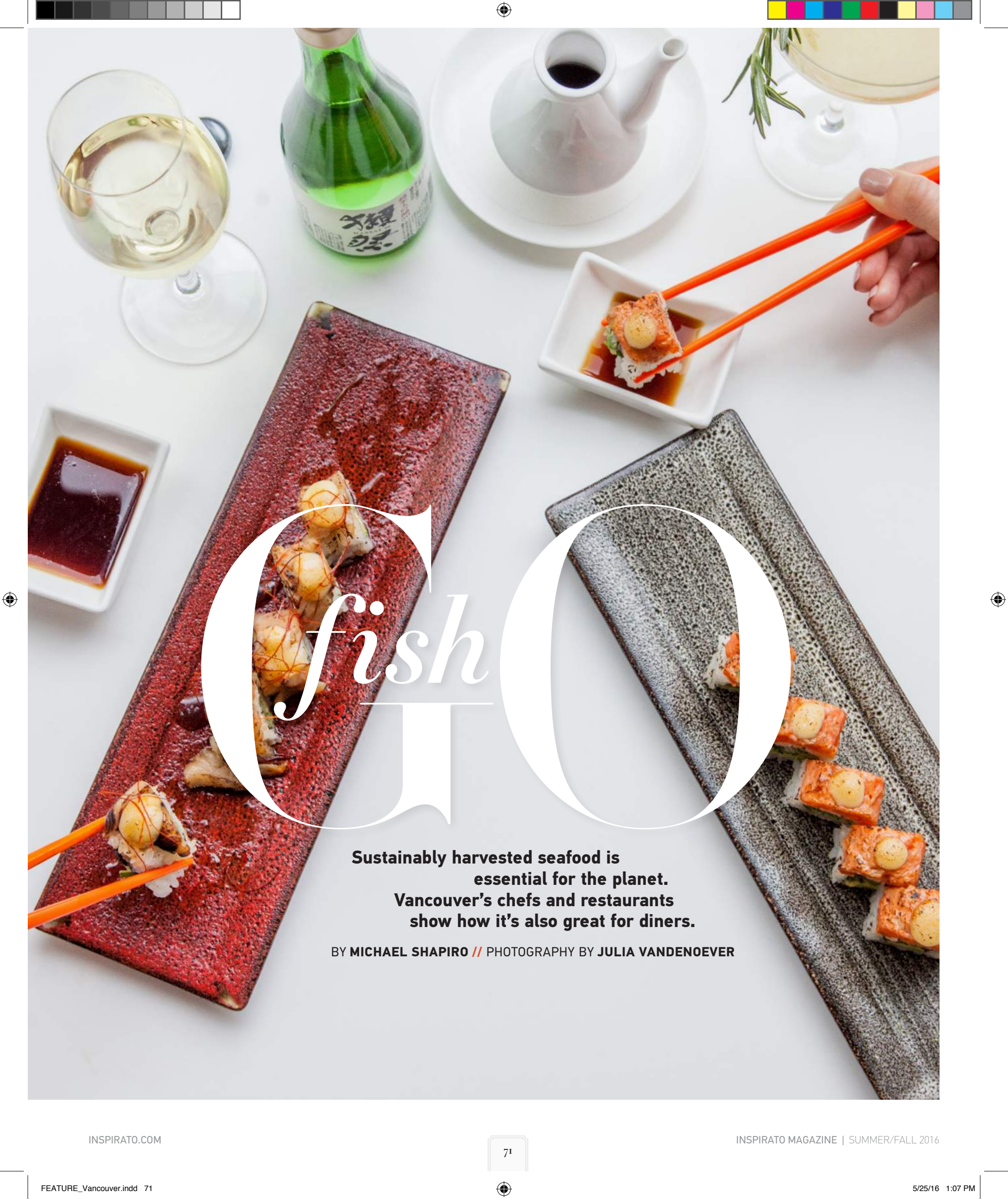




SUSHI STARS

(This page) Chef Taka Omi of the Fairmont Pacific Rim's RawBar holds uni, steelhead, albacore tuna and sockeye salmon sashimi; (Opposite) RawBar's Salmon Motoyaki and Sablefish Motoyaki rolls.





fish O

Sustainably harvested seafood is essential for the planet. Vancouver's chefs and restaurants show how it's also great for diners.

BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO // PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIA VANDENOEVER



VETERAN FISHERMAN Peter Muursepp has just docked at Fisherman's Wharf in Vancouver with a haul of albacore tuna. The Pacific Ocean shimmers in the bright morning sunlight; just across False Creek, less than a mile away, rise the skyscrapers of the city. Ned Bell, executive chef at the Four Seasons Hotel Vancouver, bolts out of his shiny white Prius and trots over to Muursepp's fishing boat, takes one look at his catch and says, "Peter, your tuna is going to be served at YEW (the Four Seasons' flagship restaurant) tonight."

This intimate connection between fishermen and chefs is a key part of Vancouver's burgeoning sustainable seafood movement. Fishermen do their best to catch responsibly, and chefs work directly with them to put fresh, local and remarkably flavorful seafood on their diners' plates.

"The lucky thing for us as chefs in Vancouver is that we have Fisherman's Wharf right here (in the city)," Bell says. "The boats go out and come back with their catch, and they bring it right to our restaurant kitchens; it's on the plate that night."

Muursepp, with twinkling eyes and an unkempt white beard, looks like a fisherman from a bygone era. He says his goal is to leave the fishery intact for generations to come. "I don't want to leave too big a mess behind—I want it to last," he says, noting that oceans have been overfished for decades and some stocks are nearing collapse. He's gratified to be working with Bell, who has become a leader of Vancouver's sustainable seafood movement.

The goal, Bell says, is "wild, well-managed fisheries and responsible aquaculture." Canada's movement toward sustainable seafood began in Vancouver in the early 2000s when marine advocates and chefs sought solutions to overfishing worldwide. In 2005, the Vancouver Aquarium partnered with local chefs to launch the Ocean Wise conservation program (oceanwise.ca), modeled on the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch, a guide to sustainable fish consumption.

"Vancouver was the natural birthplace for the sustainable seafood movement," says Teddie Geach, seafood specialist for Ocean Wise. Most Vancouverites are environmentally conscious, she says, and "the ocean is right there on our doorstep. Sustainability is just good business strategy for a lot of these chefs." Of Ocean Wise's 650 partners, which range from restaurants to fish sellers, universities and private clubs, 168 are in Vancouver, she says, more than three times as many as Toronto, second on the list.

Chef Rob Gentile, the executive chef of the Buca restaurants that set the culinary standard in Toronto, credits Vancouver with leading the way toward a more sustainable seafood ethic in Canada. "Vancouver has always been a leader in educating the public," he says. "Between the incredible work of (chef) Robert Clark and now Ned Bell they have really got the attention of many important people that can truly make a difference in what is brought to our tables."

Though Bell is now the face of the movement, he says no one has done more to promote sustainable seafood in Canada than Clark, the "godfather" of the effort. "It's on his shoulders that I stand."

When Ocean Wise launched a decade ago, sustainable seafood wasn't "fashionable," says Clark, co-owner of The Fish Counter and founding chef/partner of Ocean Wise. In 2013, Clark, the former executive chef at the highly lauded C restaurant (which closed after he left) opened The Fish Counter with former Ocean Wise manager Mike McDermid.

In a recent *Vancouver Sun* profile, Clark is credited with "making Vancouver the strongest sustainable seafood city in Canada, setting examples for other cities." Clark consulted with the Vancouver Aquarium since before Ocean Wise launched, McDermid says, as he slices fresh salmon on a wooden cutting board at The Fish Counter. "Rob and I worked to build awareness about sustainable seafood. We started with a few local restaurants and now have a national network."



OCEAN TO TABLE

(Opposite) Dungeness crab traps; Mike McDermid (right) and Robert Clark (left) of The Fish Counter. (This page, left to right) The menu at The Fish Counter; sablefish at Blue Water Cafe; Blue Water Cafe's chef Frank Pabst.



The Fish Counter is a neighborhood place where you can get a plate of sizzling fish and chips (try the lingcod) or buy raw halibut to cook at home. Feisty and cantankerous, Clark came to Vancouver from Quebec in 1993. Despite Vancouver's close proximity to the ocean, "the fish was crap here in 1993—the best fish used to be exported," he says. He discovered that the salmon served in restaurants was mainly farmed Atlantic, and not the wild species for which British Columbia is famous. In the past decade there's been a sea change in Canada, with Vancouver leading the way, as more diners have come to appreciate local fish in season. Palates have become more

sophisticated, Clark says; patrons at fine restaurants as well as shoppers buying fish to cook at home have developed a taste for high-quality seafood.

Consumers want to know more about where their food is coming from, Geach says, "how it's being harvested and how it's being caught or farmed. Chefs are in a unique position to tell that story." Frank Pabst, executive chef at the city's Blue Water Cafe, presents an "Unsung Heroes" menu every February featuring unusual or underutilized species, like sea cucumber or jellyfish or sturgeon liver.

Because chefs have become so influential, says Ocean Wise's Geach, they're able "to challenge our palate and

INSPIRATO RECOMMENDS



Vancouver

Inspirato Members stay in the middle of the city and right on the water at the Fairmont Pacific Rim.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INSPIRATO'S VANCOUVER ACCOMMODATIONS, GO TO INSPIRATO.COM/DESTINATIONS.



Ivonne Mayne's picks
Concierge, Fairmont Pacific Rim

NATURAL SPLENDOR:

Hop on a complimentary bike at the Fairmont and head along the Seawall. The easy ride won't take your breath away, but the views of the city, bay and mountains will. Make a day of it with a visit to the Vancouver Aquarium including the beluga whale show.

Explore the hiking paths of the beautiful Lynn Valley Canyon on the North Shore of the city—you'll have a chance to walk across one of the longest pedestrian suspension bridges in North America.

VIEW FROM THE TOP:

Head to Harbour Centre and take the elevator up to The Lookout for a 360-degree view of the city.

The Skyride gondola climbs Grouse Mountain and rewards passengers with views of the surrounding peaks and sea. Or, earn the right to eat through Vancouver's culinary delights by hiking up the mountain.

GRANVILLE ISLAND PUBLIC MARKET:

The fresh bounty of western Canada is on display at this legendary market.

July 23, 27, 30, 2016

HONDA CELEBRATION OF LIGHT

Ever seen a fireworks competition? A different country lights up the night on each date, synchronizing their pyrotechnic displays to music broadcast on a local FM station.

Aug. 18, 2016

DÎNER EN BLANC

Thousands dress in white and descend on the city for a picnic dinner complete with table and chairs at location that's revealed at the last minute.

EATING WHAT THE OCEAN PROVIDES

(Left to right) Fisherman's Wharf on Granville Island; Eating sushi at Fairmont Pacific Rim's RawBar; Horseshoe Bay. (Opposite page) A selection of seafood served at the Four Seasons.



We are very fortunate to be able to eat the last wild protein on the planet. When is the last time you had wild chicken, wild beef or wild pig? You don't, you eat farmed animals.

—Four Seasons executive chef Ned Bell

introduce us to new and different things that we wouldn't necessarily try at home. These are things I definitely would not cook at home, but when I go out to a restaurant I know that the chef is going to make something amazing out of it. So I step outside of my comfort zone and try something new and discover something delicious."

Even sushi chefs at major hotels are getting into the game. A native of Japan, Taka Omi worked for several years in Toronto before moving to Vancouver's Fairmont Pacific Rim hotel. He was drawn by the wide variety of local fish in the coastal city. "So many choices we have," the sushi chef says, citing albacore tuna, sablefish, scallops and prawns. "I think we have more variety than anybody else."

At the Fairmont Pacific Rim's RawBar in the Lobby Lounge, Omi has long had an interest in preserving fish stocks. In 2014, RawBar went from simply featuring responsibly harvested fish to serving only Ocean Wise-approved seafood. It became Vancouver's first sushi restaurant to do so. The Pacific Rim's executive chef Nathan Brown fully supports Omi's vision. "If a supplier says, 'Sorry, it's not Ocean Wise,' then I reply, 'Sorry, then we won't be buying it.' It's as simple as that."

After working as a chef in Toronto and Calgary, The Four Seasons' Bell moved to Vancouver with his young family in 2010 and "started to hyper-focus" on sustainable seafood. "I thought that if I am going to do a seafood restaurant, it's going to be 100 percent sustainable. It's really the only seafood we should be consuming," he says. Boyish and exuberant, Bell, 42, is so passionate about consuming seafood responsibly that he founded the advocacy group Chefs for Oceans (chefsforoceans.com) and rode his bicycle 5,400 miles across Canada, hosting 24 events along the way, to raise awareness about the issue.

"We are very fortunate to be able to eat the last wild protein

on the planet," Bell says. "When is the last time you had wild chicken, wild beef or wild pig? You don't, you eat farmed animals. We have this wild resource still available to us, although 90 percent of the large ocean predators are overfished, and humans are foolish enough to take until there is no more. But we still have the opportunity to affect change. I recognized that six years ago and wanted to do something about it."

At The Fish Counter, Clark and McDermid practice "transparency and traceability," Clark says. "Our concerns are sustainability, quality and taste. Traceability develops pride in producers and delivers quality to consumers. 'This fish is going to be sold as my fish.'"

"Everyone down the chain of custody has a vested interest in maintaining quality. This brings customers closer to the source of their seafood." And when that happens, fantastic flavor follows, Clark says. "All I've been doing is sourcing the best fish I could and telling people where I got it from." His approach is simple: "Get good food, and do as little as possible with it. All I have to do is buy great fish."

Fresh fish in season is typically the tastiest fish one can get, Clark notes. Because Vancouver's citizens are environmentally aware, the sustainable seafood movement is now so important that chefs have to pay attention, he says. "Chefs who don't think it's relevant soon leave. In some cities it would have been impossible to start a sustainable seafood movement, but here people were open to the idea and concerned about the fisheries."

Sushi chef Omi says unagi, the popular freshwater eel from Japan, came off the RawBar's menu because it's severely threatened. But Omi found a workaround: he lightly smokes sustainable sablefish and prepares it like unagi. Customers enjoy it because the fish is delectable, Omi says, and most of them want to do the right thing. "Ninety-nine percent of customers are happier (with a



CITY ON THE WATER

(This page) Chef Ned Bell at YEW at the Four Seasons. (Opposite) Fisherman Stewart McDonald holding fresh Dungeness crab at Fisherman's Wharf; The view of downtown from Stanley Park.



Every February at Blue Water Cafe is Unsung Heroes month. For 12 years, chef Frank Pabst has presented a menu featuring unusual or underutilized species like stir-fried jellyfish, sturgeon liver mousse and whelk paella. The month is one of the most difficult times to get a reservation.

sustainable menu). So we (chefs and restaurant patrons) can control it. That's the most important thing," he says. "We cannot close our eyes. We have to educate the customer. Our hand has so much responsibility for the future of the fish and ocean."

The Pacific Rim's pièce de résistance is the Ocean Wise Roll, the RawBar's presentation of 15 types of sustainable seafood, says executive chef Brown. "Anything that's in the sushi window that evening gets put into that roll, even Dungeness crab, then you have a piece of salmon, a piece of steelhead," and other fresh local specialties.

The Fairmont has supported executive chef Brown to the point where he can serve bycatch, the unintended fish caught when pursuing other species. In Canada's Pacific waters, fishermen can't legally throw fish back into the ocean so Brown has found ways to use bycatch. "It's a shame if it were to go into the garbage because nobody's buying it," Brown says. "My fish supplier, Steve (Johansen) from Organic Ocean, he's constantly calling me, telling me what he's caught. It allows us more creativity, to (serve) what the ocean is providing for us."

One example of bycatch is a British Columbia rockfish,

Brown says. "It's a little bit meatier. We pan roast it at really high heat then baste it with a lot of butter. It's a very rustic presentation, with crushed potatoes and ratatouille. It tastes great and it's just very country style, like black cod."

Beyond using bycatch, Brown says, he's committed to serving as much of the whole fish as possible. "Everybody wants that perfect fillet, but what do you do with the ends of the fish? We do a bouillabaisse soup, turn them into fish and chips, make fish fingers for kids, handmade so you know you're controlling the ingredients."

Bell, too, believes his commitment to sustainable fisheries does not require any compromise on quality. In YEW's gently lit, wood-paneled dining room, Bell and his crew prepare a medley of fish: the Tackle Box with raw albacore tuna (which reproduce faster than other tuna and thus are more sustainable), spot prawns, oysters and steamed Dungeness crab. Entrees include salmon, sablefish and Arctic char, all plump and moist, bursting with flavor and lightly cooked to perfection. The menu, depending on the season, might also include any of the five types of salmon that live off Canada's west coast.



The Fairmont's Brown is from the tiny town of Lucan (pop. 1,200) in the province of Ontario and grew up with a close connection to the land. He traded vegetables his family cultivated for neighbors' berries. When he went fishing he got to know other fishermen and learned early that fresh, local food is best. "Bringing that approach to hotels isn't always the easiest," he says, but the Fairmont has backed him all the way.

Bell, executive chef at the Four Seasons, had a rural background too. Growing up in the rustic Okanagan Valley, about 200 miles east of Vancouver, he developed a taste for homegrown food. "The Okanagan is basically orchards and vineyards and farms," he says. Then he moved to Victoria on Vancouver Island, where he'd go fishing with his dad, and later lived in Vancouver. "So being a coastal boy I just always connected to the ocean and the mountains."

The morning I meet Bell at Vancouver's Fisherman's Wharf, he takes a deep breath of the briny air and says: "We are blessed to live on the coast, to live on the ocean. We are really blessed to have relationships with these fishermen and serve their catch the same day, dock to dish."

At the wharf, Bell meets with a longtime partner, fisherman Shaun Strobel. "I'm a little short of pinks (a type of salmon). Can I throw in some sockeye?" asks Strobel. Bell answers, "You can throw in whatever you like." After years of working with Strobel, he knows that whatever the burly fisherman has caught will be flavorful and responsibly harvested. And that night when Bell and his crew work their magic on his catch, YEW's patrons will come away delighted.

After working in Michelin-starred restaurants in Europe, Frank Pabst became the top chef at Blue Water Cafe in 2003 (where he created the Unsung Heroes event). Fish are served only when abundant, he says. "As chefs we want to have species around for generations to come." By paying a premium for sustainable fish, he says, restaurants have helped steer demand toward species that are plentiful or less threatened.

"It started 15 years ago with chefs who wanted to do the right thing with the Chilean sea bass," Pabst says. "Many years ago there wasn't so much information so as chefs we wouldn't be able to know what was sustainably harvested and what was harvested nearly to extinction." But when Chilean

sea bass became nearly extinct, Pabst says, that sounded the alarm for chefs, many of whom felt they had to get involved in preserving wild fisheries.

The sea bass crisis led Pabst to become a founding member of Ocean Wise and commit to serving sustainable fish at Blue Water Cafe. Though this might surprise some diners, sometimes the most sustainable—and succulent—options are responsibly farmed fish and shellfish, Pabst says. The sturgeon and caviar served at the Blue Water Cafe (as at YEW) come from a British Columbia fish farm that eschews antibiotics. And the flavor is so spectacular that, if blindfolded, most patrons would probably be unable to say which is wild and which is farmed.

The Blue Water Cafe dining room is elegant without being formal. A tasting menu there last fall began with the halibut tataki, a sashimi-style starter. A crisp and crunchy Dungeness crab salad with mango, jicama and pumpkin seeds followed. The entrée was miso-glazed sable, paired with a chardonnay, followed by pumpernickel-crusting sturgeon, served with a Russian River pinot noir.

Pabst likens the nascent sustainable seafood movement to the trend toward organics. "Once the public starts demanding sustainable seafood, fishermen can charge a premium. So now the fishermen, at least in Canada, are very eager and keen to make sure their stuff is sustainably caught. That's why it's getting easier for us (chefs) too."

Fairmont sushi chef Omi agrees. His brother is a fisherman in Japan, and they speak frequently about how to enjoy the ocean's bounty without exploiting it. Omi's brother says that if suppliers order threatened fish, the fishermen have to catch those species, so it's up to chefs to educate customers so they can make sustainable choices.

Clark is proud of how far sustainable seafood has come during the past decade. "It's encouraging," he says, not just because The Fish Counter can sell responsibly harvested fish at a neighborhood outlet, but "because Ned (Bell) can do this at the Four Seasons" whose patrons expect nothing but the best. ❖

Michael Shapiro is author of *A Sense of Place*. His most recent story for *Inspirato* was a profile of author Isabel Allende. His feature about Paul Theroux in last summer's issue won a *Solas Gold Award* for best destination story.