

Sea food, eat food...

Fish is a perennial favourite on UAE menus. That's great - it's healthy and provides great scope for chefs' creativity. The not great news is that a number of local species are being heavily over-fished, leading to the Emirates Wildlife Society's Choose Wisely campaign to get us to change our fish preferences. The issue of seafood sustainability is global too, of course.





Market focus

There's a mixtures of approaches that the restaurants in the UAE take towards seafood. Some make good mileage out of using on local, sustainable seafood; some serve only sustainable seafood, despite the origin; some ignore the issue; and some seem to label all sorts of fish as 'hammour' in order to increase sales.

However, the issue here is too serious to ignore. Taking the case of local favourite, hammour, its current fishing is estimated to be at seven times the quantity that would mean that the species remains sustainable. Local fishing practices too are having a major impact, with too many young fish being taken. It's claimed that over half the locally caught fish is unsustainable, species are endangered and, with around two-thirds of us eating fish at least once a week, we'll soon have to take action.

Lisa Perry, who is the programme director of the EWS-WWF's Choose Wisely campaign, receives information from the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi, which assesses studies on fish stock, which includes fishing effort, total catch, fish age and fish size of fish, all measured against previous years' figures. An important part of the Agency's work is analysing any potential decrease in adult numbers, as they are the ones key for future generations.

As she explained in response to a number of questions, "Since 1978, the UAE has seen an overall decline of 80% in the average stock size for all commercial species. This problem is serious. We have now reached a point where selected some species including the Hammour, Kingfish, Shaari and Orange Spotted Grouper are being overfished or removed too early in their lifespan. This is now happening at such a rate that these species do not reach their potential."

The Choose Wisely campaign is unique to the UAE and is connected to the EWS-WWF Sustainable Fisheries Project, which was launched after fish stock assessment studies carried out by the capital based EAD (Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi) showed a severe decline in important commercial fish stocks in the past 30 years. "There are some other WWF offices around the world implementing sustainable seafood and fishing campaigns such as Finland, Norway, South Africa and Australia to name just a few," Perry notes. However, at present, there is no general GCC co-operation because, as she explains, "the campaign wishes to achieve its goals by engaging with the retail, gastronomy, tourism and corporate sector in promoting sustainable options of fish and communicating the issue to customers in the UAE".

The consumer guide was first published in 2010 and has since been updated twice. The last update was in July 2012, with two new fish species - The Giant Sea Catfish (locally known as Khan) and the Yellow Tail Scad (locally known as Durduman) - added to the green category, meaning that they are fished within sustainable levels and their stock is not now experiencing heavy fishing pressure.

Perry is reasonably optimistic about the future. "The EWS-WWF believes sustainable fisheries are achievable in the UAE and that consumer awareness can play a key role in stimulating change and thus achieving the goal of the project," she claims. "Fish are a staple of the Emirati diet and the UAE has a

SUSTAINABLE FISH CONSUMER GUIDE

GO FOR IT!	GOOD CHOICE NUT THERE IS BETTER	THINK AGAIN! (OVERFISHED)
ORANGE-SPOTTED TREVALLY TWO-BAR SEABREAM BLACK-STREAKED MONOCLE BREAM YELLOW BAR ANGELFISH PINK EAR EMPEROR SORDID SWEETLIPS EHRENBERGS' SNAPPER YELLOW FIN SEABREAM BLACKSPOTTED RUBBERLIP GIANT SEA CATFISH YELLOW TAIL SCAD	LONGTAIL SILVER BIDDY SMALL TOOTH EMPEROR BLACK SPOT SNAPPER KING SOLDIER BREAM BLUE SPOT MULLET	ORANGE-SPOTTED GROUPE SPANGLED EMPEROR PAINTED SWEETLIPS KINGFISH GOLDEN TREVALLY SNUB NOSE EMPEROR WHITE-SPOTTED SPINEFOOT GOLDLINED SEABREAM

DOWNLOAD THE GUIDE TO SUSTAINABLE FISH BY VISITING WWW.CHOOSSEWISELY.AE



Khan



Great dish with sustainable fish

“MY MOTTO IS IF WE DON’T USE IT, GUESTS CAN’T HAVE IT AND HOPEFULLY WILL CHOOSE SOMETHING ELSE. THERE ARE LOTS OF OTHER FISH AVAILABLE AND WE USE THEM ON THE WEEKLY LUNCH MENU IN GLASSHOUSE.”

- Scott Price, Executive Chef, Hilton Dubai Creek

long-standing fishing tradition. So the protection of fish resources holds both cultural significance and the inherent benefit to marine ecosystems and biodiversity. EWS-WWF believes that with joint local efforts and high level of awareness among the public, creating a market for environmentally sustainable fish and seafood products is possible.”

However, many think that the campaign, although a great start, needs to be supported in other ways: such as better education of the local fishermen, involvement of fish suppliers, co-operation of non-fine dining restaurants and even federal legislation. Perry, in part, agrees: “It is increasingly important to work closely with the fishing industry to address this issue.”

What is clearly important in all this is educating consumers. We believe chefs have a responsibility not only to source ethically but also to educate their diners. Across far too many restaurants in the Emirates you can still see unlabelled fish - chefs should make clear what they’re serving. As Chef Uwe Micheel, President of the Emirates Culinary Guild and Head of Kitchens, Radisson Blu Hotel, Dubai Deira Creek, says: “If guests ask now for hammour, I say to them ‘We want our children to enjoy it in the future’. There are lots of great sustainable fish in the market.”

And, whilst it’s great that a number of high profile chefs and hotels have adopted a sustainable approach to seafood, too many still pay lip service to the idea but cannot deliver a firm deadline for the removal of hammour from menus. Of course, that’s not the only fish we should be concerned about. Okku Executive Chef Hugh Sato Gardiner uses sustainable species and takes in being the first Japanese restaurant in the region to take blue-fin tuna off his menu.

The problem: however much chefs and consumers commit to sustainability, time is running out for many fish locally. The more we love them now, the less chance we’ll be able to love them in the future.

SOME OF THE UAE HOTELS SUPPORTING CHOOSE WISELY:

Abu Dhabi:

- Sheraton Corniche Abu Dhabi
- Le Meridien Abu Dhabi
- Le Royal Meridien Abu Dhabi
- Aloft Abu Dhabi
- Sheraton Khalidiya
- Radisson Blu (Yas)
- Fairmount Bab Al Bahr
- Grand Millenium Al Wadha

Dubai:

- Hilton Dubai Creek
- Grand Hyatt
- Radisson Blu, Deira Creek
- Radisson Blu, Media City
- JW Marriott
- Sheraton Dubai Creek

Fujairah:

- Meridien Al Aqqa



Fish focus

We got together a small group of well known local fish enthusiasts to give their comments on sustainability. They are:

- John Cordeaux, Executive Chef, Fairmont Palm Jumeirah
- Thomas Pendarovski, Executive Chef, Sofitel Dubai Jumeirah Beach
- Mark Allan, Managing Director, Wet Fish
- Samantha Wood, Founder of FooDiva

How far do you follow a policy of using, selling or eating only fish species that are sustainable?

John Cordeaux: As a member of the Fairmont hotels team of Executive Chefs for many years, we have strived to be sustainable in all areas and this is a very important area where we have been taking a leadership position for sometime now.

Thomas Pendarovski: For me, it is really important that the policy is being followed to a T. I think that seasonality works together with sustainability. It is a win-win for all species.

Mark Allan: From a company perspective, we avoid

selling species that are in the danger zone. There are several responsible fisheries throughout the world, especially in Nordic countries, which work dilligently both on their fishing techniques - lines not trawls - and on quotas. A number of seasonal fishing patterns are adopted where fish are hunted during times of abundance and avoided during the spawning seasons. Unfortunately this hasn't spread as much to mid and south European nations, who are not distinguishing on catch species as much.

We have established links with primary processors in these countries and work on seasonality which ensure we are receiving species caught sustainably, legally and by proper methods. And we advise our clients on what is seasonal, for example.

Samantha Wood: When grocery shopping, I always buy sustainable seafood where I can, also locally fished. The pink ear emperor (shaari eshkeli) and orange-spotted trevally (jesh um al hala) are favou-

rites. However, there's only a handful of restaurants here that serve sustainable seafood which would be my first choice if opting for a fish course.

Is that in response to your personal concerns or from customer demand?

Cordeaux: It is my personal concerns and also the growing concern of all clients throughout the world who are concerned about the enviroment.

Pendarovski: I think, firstly, it's a personal concern, My goal is for all my guests to be educated about what is happening to the fish population and how we can make a difference together.

Allan: Having been in the industry for over 25 years, I have become acutely aware of the plight of certain fish stocks. The days of sourcing from a market like Billingsgate or Rungis are long gone in my opinion. There's simply no traceability. I am proud that I have developed a supplier network in tune with nature in the industry. The consumer has a right to ask where fish are coming from; it's the supplier's duty to have the answers.

Wood: We all have a responsibility to sustain our planet, so why eat overfished, endangered species when there's plenty of other flavoursome fish out there? By choosing to buy sustainable seafood only, we can each do our bit to lower the demand for threatened species.

How far do you think the food community has a responsibility to make ethical sourcing a priority,

despite chefs wanting to play with as many flavour combinations as possible?

Cordeaux: We certainly have a responsibility to educate and guide the consumer and if we don't we might not have any wonderful fish and seafood products to play with in the future.

Pendarovski: It is vital, for all chefs to take the lead on this matter. It starts from the kitchen and works its way to the guests. You can still be able to play with flavours, just use them more wisely!

Allan: Of course it has responsibility but the market here is being driven by demand. Many menus are composed often months in advance with the focus on a 'wow' factor rather than ethics. It is certainly not a priority now but I am certain that given the innovation of the region, it will develop with the right drivers behind it.

Wood: Along with local municipalities, I think that responsibility has to sit with chefs - they need to set the example for the F&B industry, educating their procurement departments and suppliers, as well as their customers so that they start demanding sustainable species.

Do you see a change in customer understanding of sustainability issues? Should chefs and suppliers take more of an educational role in promoting ethical sourcing and explain to customers why, for example, the local favourite hammour should not be eaten into extinction?

Cordeaux: Slowly, I think, customers are making informed decisions but we have a long way to go and, yes, of course we chefs should be part of the educational solution.

Pendarovski: Absolutely. These last ten plus years, people have seen what is going on with our fishing industry. I believe that guests are more in tune with food channels and magazines. We as chefs should be the voice for all our guests.

Allan: Personally, no. Yes, I do believe it's the industry's responsibility to promote the awareness of ethical sourcing especially through the medium of the concerned press. The supplier more often than not has to work within the parameters of his client's demands, unless that supplier can force the issue and push awareness. Otherwise, the mentality of supply and demand will continue unabated.

Wood: I think the consumer is wising up, but there's still plenty of work required to change consumer behaviour.

Do you accept at all the argument that eating of some local species is part of the culture and so it should be allowed to continue?

Cordeaux: With respect to the local customs and culture, no I do not. Being Canadian we know what happened to cod fishing on the east coast - the lack of control and over fishing caused the complete destruction of the cod fishing industry. It would be a real shame if this would happen to the fishing industry here with the challenge facing the hammour, for example.

Pendarovski: Not at all, this just tells me that some of the chefs are just not concerned with what is happening to our fish industry. Take hammour for an example - there are other types of fish that are in season and have a similar taste. This is what



Think before you design a menu

chefs should be doing: educating the client.

Allan: Hammour is considered to be the local speciality but many hotels have made a conscious decision to remove it from their menus which is to be applauded. However, it's still just a few. It will take proper policing of fishing stocks to bring home awareness that hammour is scarce. But let's be clear: 'local' fish are mostly caught in waters closer to Iran than the UAE and the greater bulk of hammour is arriving from Oman on a daily basis. We are certainly not going to see a blanket ban on hammour fishing but perhaps the establishment of a fishing season?

Wood: I've not heard this argument before!

Do you think there should be some action from the Municipality or Government to ban the use of some species?

Cordeaux: If it means that by taking a stand on overfishing and so certain species will survive, to be fished by future generations, then yes.



Durduman

Pendarovski: Without a doubt. In this day and age, we should all take responsibility. It starts from the top level.

Allan: In theory, yes, but it would take a great deal of resource, manpower and importantly training. There's also the issue to consider of the fishing methods themselves which probably haven't changed for hundreds of years. How can a vessel which is economically reliant on fishing, go out and just catch a particular species and not another? The cost would be enormous but, if any region could achieve this...

Wood: Most definitely - I believe it needs to start with fishing laws.

If a fish has been caught, then it makes more sense to eat it than just throw it away. Do you agree or do you disagree?

Cordeaux: We should never waste food products of any sort, so if a variety of fish is caught as a by product of fishing for other species then we should use it appropriately.

Pendarovski: Good question, I think it depends on what type of fish it may be and, if it still alive, throw it back in the water.

Allan: When a fish - more especially a large deep water fish like hammour - is pulled up through the water in a net, it dies of decompression. It is dead before it has surfaced. This is one of the harsh facts of fishing. The idea of smaller fish in the same net which become the by-catch is certainly a more emotive issue. Can this be avoided? Larger nets for the smaller fish to escape through and so on? I would have to say in fairness that once caught, under the right conditions, it should be eaten.

Wood: I disagree - I believe you have to look at this longterm. Perhaps there will be some level of initial wastage but, if restaurants and supermarkets don't sell the overfished species, they will no longer order it, whilst putting pressure on suppliers for alternative sustainable solutions.