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Say bye-bye to bluefin

Bamboo Sushi says it's first sustainable sushi restaurant in nation

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Bluefin tuna is endangered. Salmon farms pollute the ocean. The methods for fishing freshwater eels destroy other river species.

In other words, a sushi lover who cares about the environment has to navigate some pretty murky waters.

That conclusion led Kristofor Lofgren, an idealistic 26-year-old Portland restaurateur, to establish Bamboo Sushi, billed as America's first certified sustainable sushi restaurant.

The kitchen is certified by the Marine Stewardship Council for bay scallops, salmon, halibut, black cod and albacore. Lofgren relies on the findings of several other well-respected organizations, including the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch Program and the Blue Ocean Institute to assess other seafood.

"We'll know where it was caught, when it was caught, who caught it, how it was caught, and how it long it's taken to get to us," Lofgren says. "Most restaurants can't tell you half those things."

Most dine out for seafood

Lofgren grew up in Los Angeles. His parents raised him with an awareness of environmental issues and an appreciation for the outdoors, he says. His father, a television producer and director, made a number of environmental documentaries. His mother moved to Portland in the early 1990s.

After graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, Lofgren planned to study environmental law at Lewis & Clark College. He had visited Portland often, and even invested in the Pearl District.

His mom introduced him to the downtown sushi restaurant Masu (406 S.W. 13th Ave.) Impressed, he got involved in funding the spot's second location, Masu East (310 S.E. 28th Ave.), in 2006.

Around this time Lofgren began thinking about how long it was going to take from the first year of law school to the time when he could make a real impact on the world.

"I was like, 'Screw this!'" he says. "I want to do something where I can effect change now."

That possibility, he realized, existed in the business world, where he already had a stake. About 70 percent of seafood in the United States is consumed in restaurants, Lofgren says, so he figured that if he created a viable template for sustainable seafood, he could literally change the world.

"If you can make a restaurant that basically sets a new model that no one's ever seen before, you could really change things very quickly," he says. "So that's the mission."

Lofgren bought out his partner's shares in Masu East, where he and chef Brandon Hill already had begun to make the menu greener. They switched to wild salmon from farmed about a year ago, and stopped serving bluefin toro about eight months ago. The official name change to Bamboo Sushi occurred on Nov. 7.

Only time will tell whether the enterprise, with an approach that is both more costly and less flexible



JONATHAN HOUSE / PAMPLIN MEDIA GROUP
Head chef Brandon Hill (right) and Brian Keney prepare a meal at the newly opened Bamboo Sushi. Customers will be both well-fed and well-informed.

than that of a typical restaurant, will succeed.

Lofgren admits that the switch to a more sustainable model is driven more by his own ideals than by consumer demand. Customer reaction, he says, is more along the lines of, "I didn't even know you could do that."

Quality is king

"I would certainly support anyone going out and making a 100 percent commitment to sustainable seafood," says Bill King, the vice president for culinary development for McCormick & Schmick's restaurants, the national company that is based in Portland.

"That's going to restrict what he serves," he adds. "That's going to be interesting to watch."

King, a 38-year restaurant industry veteran, agrees that if it's going to work, Oregon's the right place to start.

"Particularly in Portland, the interest in sustainability and the importance of it to our community is probably as high as it is anywhere in the United States," he says. "For us, when we go out of our way to promote or recognize or celebrate sustainability, we get a lot more bang for that buck on the West Coast than we do anywhere else in the United States."

On any given day, McCormick & Schmick's nationally has about 60 different species of seafood on its menus. King estimates that about 80 percent is certified sustainable or recognized as a good choice by Seafood Watch. Customer expectations also are a priority.

"With the exception of a small group of individuals who may have a deep, deep commitment to any particular issue, the foremost determinate for where someone's going to eat is, 'Is it good?'" King says. That, he predicts, will be the bottom line for Lofgren.

"If his food is marginal," he says, "I don't care how politically correct it is, it won't succeed."

Trade-offs are necessary

"We had to be able to have some sacrifices made," Lofgren says. There are certain things that sushi fans crave that will never be served at Bamboo: bluefin, farmed salmon, octopus, snapper and freshwater eel (unagi).

Lofgren tries to steer unagi fanatics toward sea eel, which has a different texture but which, in Japan, is considered the greater delicacy. "We're trying to get ahead of the curve," he says, "and show people fish they may have never thought of before."

Bamboo has a line on barramundi, an Australian fish, and kampachi, which lives in Hawaiian waters. It also includes rarer types of familiar fish.

"You can get hamachi in pretty much every sushi restaurant in the city," he says, "but we're probably going to be the only one that is serving it wild."

Bamboo employs about 10 different seafood distributors; one or two would be typical for a mainstream sushi place.

The novel approach is getting attention, with "hintings" of interest, Lofgren says, from Gourmet, Saveur and The New York Times.

He welcomes the attention, in part because he wants other investors to see it can be done.

"I want other people to try to copy us," he says. "I want sustainability to become mainstream. I want people who don't care about sustainability to say, 'Hey, I can be sustainable now because it can be profitable.'"

On the Web

For information about sustainable sushi and seafood, visit

the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program at www.tinyurl.com/6sa84l

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