

Gonsalves: Get hooked on fresh fish

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Full disclosure: if you fished a tire or boot out of the ocean, I'd probably eat it. That's how much I love seafood — from cod to calamari, and everything in between. Especially shellfish! Red fish, blue fish, raw fish, crawfish. Fish, fish, fish — an appetite I attribute to my Cape Verdean-ness.

OK, so you're familiar with the "local-vore" movement: grow local, buy local, farmer's markets and all that? Of course, with salmonella outbreaks and grocery store recalls announced seemingly every other week, it makes perfect sense. The words of the popular old-school, hip-hop group Public Enemy come to mind: "can't truss it."

But here's something else to sink your chompers in. It's called a "Community Supported Fishery" and it's coming to a harbor near you.

Modeled after community supported agriculture, a "Community Supported Fishery," or CSF, is a relatively new angle in an old-time industry. Think of a co-op of sorts, where individual consumers/shareholders collaborate with local anglers to buy fresh fish for a pre-determined length of time before the finned and shelled delicacies are caught.

There's variations on how individual CSFs can be set up, but basically you have a group of commercial fishermen net a set number of individual "shareholders." They go out and fish, but instead of selling their entire catch to wholesalers, they sell a portion to the "shareholders," who pay a set price in advance for an agreed-upon amount of catch. Once a week, the "shareholders" go to a designated (and permitted) pick-up spot and get their share of fresh fish straight from the folks who caught it.

It's a win for the local commercial fishermen because a CSF can provide a measure of financial stability in an industry where you don't know whether you'll make a profit, break-even or lose money until after you catch the fish. It's a hard and financially precarious living.

Up in Port Clyde, Maine, they've already found that CSFs can help local fishermen stay afloat by allowing them to catch less while still making a decent living.

Ernie Eldredge, who has been fishing out of Chatham for the past 50 years like his father before him, experimented with a pilot CSF earlier this spring out of his family-owned weir in Nantucket Sound. It was a three-week trial run. He lured a handful of shareholders through the Internet. The next week, the number of shareholders doubled, and the following week they doubled again.

"You can actually get more (steady) money for your product, at least for some of it. ... And just the look on people's faces — the appreciation of getting a nice, fresh product. To me, that's really rewarding," Ernie told me.

His daughter, Shannon, who "clammed her way through college" and now sits on the board of directors for the Chatham-based nonprofit Women of Fishing Families, sees CSFs as a way of "sustaining small fishing communities." Women of Fishing Families is establishing a CSF on the Lower Cape, with the hope of seeing it open for business sometime this fall.

Susan Nickerson, a CSF project co-coordinator working with the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, is helping to organize a trial run out of a site in Chatham and one in Barnstable. The 50 shareholder-capacity for the Barnstable CSF sold out within 24 hours, she said. And there's only a handful of shareholder openings left for the Chatham site.

The minimum buy-in is a "regular share," which gets you about a pound and a quarter of fish a week, for five weeks, at a cost of \$60, Nickerson said. That's a deal: about \$11 a pound for a fresh catch, a chance to connect with and learn about the local fishing industry and its practitioners, and helping support the local economy and more sustainable ways of fishing.

Sounds good to me, considering that, at best, you're only paying a few bucks less (or maybe more) at the supermarket for, well, it ain't exactly fresh, and you're certainly not getting front-row access to the Cape's historic local fishing industry.

On the business-side, Nickerson says, "the idea is not to undercut fish markets. We're just hoping we can expand the market niche for local seafood, while getting consumers to become more aware of what's around

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them."

On the consumer side, she says, "it's the quality of the fish — the freshest fish you can get — caught in more sustainable ways. There's also a more indirect benefit, which is helping to foster an appreciation in the community for fishermen, for their livelihood. Plus, there's an educational component. This is a good way for people to really know where their food comes from, and to know what's in-season."

For his part, Ernie sees the potential of CSFs to bring the interests of struggling local fishermen into closer harmony with the interests of more socially and environmentally conscious consumers.

"The sustainability aspect is very appealing. ... From a true fishermen's perspective, they want to try and sustain their livelihood. ... There's not an endless supply out there, so you have to find a way to sustain it. This is just one way. If you don't extract as much and you can still make a decent living, there'll be more for tomorrow."

Well, I'm in — hook, line and sinker. And look out for a Community Supported Fishery coming to a harbor near you.

Sean Gonsalves' column runs on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Read past columns at www.capecodonline.com/gonsalves. E-mail him at sgonsalves@capecodonline.com.

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