

Sea change

John Porter reveals emerging trends in the seafood sector and says Brexit looks likely to make more waves

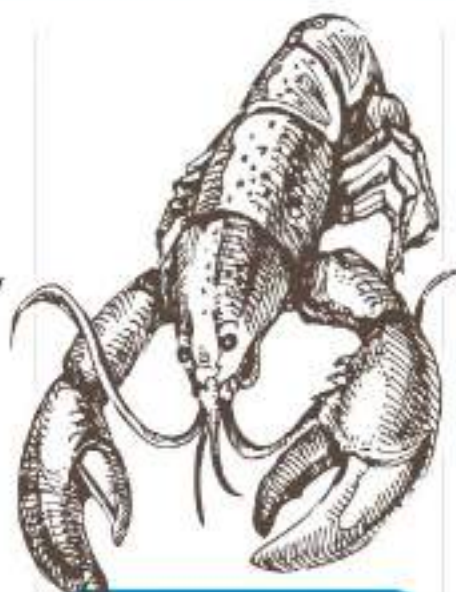
For an industry that accounts for less than 0.5% of gross domestic product, the UK's fishing industry has undoubtedly been punching above its weight in political terms since the 2016 referendum on EU membership. In coastal areas, which have seen revenue from and employment in fishing both decline, the issue was said to be a deciding factor in many people's decision to vote "Leave".

"Taking back control" of Britain's waters has become a mantra for pro-Brexit politicians including environment secretary Michael Gove, who published the Sustainable Fisheries For Future Generations white paper in July, which set out the government's planned approach to fisheries when the transition period ends in 2020.

Gove declared: "Leaving the EU creates a sea of opportunity for our fishing industry. Outside the Common Fisheries Policy we can take back control of our waters and revitalise our coastal communities. We will be able to put in place our own systems, becoming a world leader in managing our resources while protecting the marine environment."

Perish the thought we would ever take a minister of state at anything less than their word. However, some in the fishing industry who were already concerned the UK agreed to fully abide by the Common Fisheries Policy during the transition period, fear further trade-offs down the line.

Among them is Chris Neve, a fishing industry veteran who has been involved with quota and sustainability issues for decades. He says: "I think our government will use fishing as a bargaining chip to try to get something out of the EU. I think we'll end up with the same fishing deal for many years to come. For many European politicians their fishing industry is far more important to them than ours is to our politicians – and it's always been that way."



Fish in foodservice

- British consumers spent about £3.4bn on eating seafood out of home in 2017, an increase of 8.1% on the previous year

- Fried fish dominates the commercial foodservice market but items such as fish cakes, fish sandwiches and shellfish – including mussels, prawns and scampi – have increased

- The top five seafood species on menus are prawns, salmon, cod, tuna and crab

- On any given day there are more than 100 species of fish and shellfish available to buy from regional fish markets and suppliers in the UK

Source: SeaFish

He makes the point the majority of fish and seafood caught in UK waters goes abroad, mainly because other countries value a more diverse range of species and will pay more than UK buyers.

Suppliers to the UK eating out market have to compete at the daily markets and deal with a greater recognition in the restaurant and pub sector that fish is now a far higher quality, premium product than it was when boats spent weeks at a time at sea. Neve says: "The quality of fish we get today is far superior. Most of the boats are doing very short trips, just two days at sea, and the fish we get is absolutely tip-top."

Neve has a better handle on the eating out market than many in the fishing industry. His family business, D&M Seafoods, is named after his sons and co-directors Daniel and Matthew, while one of its best customers is Lancashire-based Seafood Pub Company, where managing director Jocelyn Neve also calls Chris "dad".

The connections don't end there. When Seafood Pub Company set up shop in 2010, its first chairman was Andrew McLean, founder of Devonshire Pub Company. With McLean now in a property role and identifying new sites for Seafood Pub Company, the role of chairman has passed to another pub trade veteran – Brunning & Price co-founder Graham Price. McLean and Price are both former customers of Neve.

Jocelyn Neve says: "I grew up surrounded by fabulous produce. Before I could reach the sink I'd be stood on a chair cleaning mussels or scallops. Then I worked through university in kitchens, putting the food I'd grown up with on plates."

Seafood Pub Company currently operates 11 sites, with plans for further expansion once a current round of refurbishment is complete. As the name suggests, fresh fish and seafood is at the heart of its offer.

Jocelyn Neve says: "Our concept is built

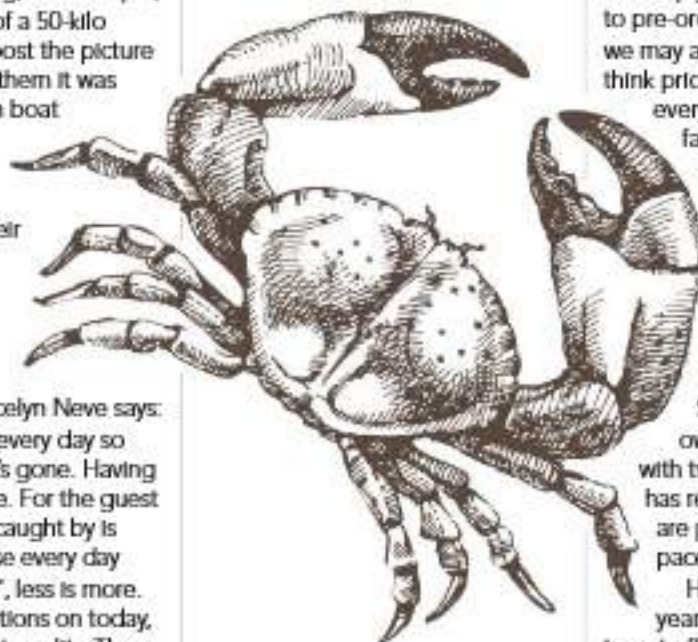


around market fish of the day on the menu and the specials board. It's this direct link that makes the business special. This morning, for example, my brother texted me a picture of a 50-kilo halibut at 3.30am. I was able to post the picture on the staff Facebook page, tell them it was coming from Shetland and which boat caught it. The fish was in the pubs later that day."

By the evening, the chef in each pub would have devised their own way to serve that halibut. Each pub will typically have ten portions of each fish or seafood special on offer on weekdays, while at the weekend each pub might want 20 or 30 portions. Jocelyn Neve says: "We want the boards to change every day so we'll use it up – when it's gone, it's gone. Having the story is our point of difference. For the guest to know which boat the fish was caught by is great. We print the menu in-house every day and, with the 'market fish section', less is more. If there's only two market fish portions on today, that's it, but it will be the very best quality. Then at the weekend we ramp it up."

The group also buys from local inshore boats, which means species such as skate are on the menu all year round. Almost all fish served by the group is caught in UK waters. Jocelyn Neve says: "The only things not UK-caught are tuna, swordfish and wild tiger prawns – the warm water stuff. It's maybe 2% of what we sell."

However, persuading UK customers to eat



a broader range of species, often cited as why more of the nation's fish fail to appear in the eating out market, is not the biggest challenge.

She adds: "It's not so much the species but as soon as you get into items such as oysters, which are on all the menus, the raw element can put people off. Proper seafood fans are the ones who want oysters – there are people who come in especially for them. But I think people like to try something they haven't had before. We operate food-led destination pubs and that's what they're coming to us for, although it might be different on the high street in a wet-led operation. We've also got a lot of offal on the menu – calves liver always sells well. The foodie crowd coming in want a point of difference."

Gross profit (GP) can be a challenge in a market where prices can fluctuate dramatically. Jocelyn Neve says: "We're really struggling with crab at the moment, it's been going up £2 a kilo every two weeks and then last week there wasn't any. It's all going to China. That's a concern. Devil crab starter is one of our signature dishes but we may have to look at that."

"You can only pass so much of the cost on to the customer and, if it gets to a silly price, we simply won't have it in. If someone wants to pre-order something, for example lobster, we may advise them to wait a few weeks if we think price and quality will get better. We want everyone to go away thinking they've had fantastic value so we work with what's in season and what's good and absorb the cost where we can."

Fewer choices

For a business that takes a more generalist menu approach, the challenges of serving seafood are different. At the award-winning Ye Old Sun Inn in Colton, North Yorkshire, co-owner and chef Ashley McCarthy works with two fish suppliers but believes choice has reduced because the price customers are prepared to pay has failed to keep pace with market prices.

He says: "The variety going back ten years was far better. Now we always seem to get offered the same stuff – hake or salmon – and salmon is stupid in price even for the farmed product. It always comes back to the mundane things and I don't know whether that's because it gets shipped over to the continent, which I know a lot does, and likewise perhaps down to the capital. In the north, unless you're paying premium prices, which we're struggling to do, we're getting squeezed out of the market because of the cost. When we can have species such as plaice, sea trout and king scallops on the menu, we're selling it."

A king scallop starter will sell for about £9 at Ye Old Sun Inn. McCarthy says: "We always work on 70% GP but we do lose it on something like that. However, it's not a big-volume dish anyway so we can afford to lose a bit of GP. I'd rather see it sell out than waste any. We'll then move on to another dish, such as squid, where we can get a 72% GP and make it back."

"For a main course special, we work on a minimum of 12 portions depending on the price. If an item such as John Dory is on over the weekend and we get a good price, we

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Seafood Pub Company managing director
Jocelyn Neve



might double that to 24 because we know it's going to sell. For a John Dory main course you're looking at about £24 on the menu, depending on the garnish."

Confidence is key in persuading customers to broaden their seafood repertoire, says McCarthy. He adds: "People know our food is fresh. They may try something with us they won't try with somebody else, which is good when it comes to putting the more unusual fish on the menu."

As with many operators, fish and chips is by far the biggest-selling seafood dish on the menu at Ye Old Sun Inn. McCarthy says: "It is always haddock. In the early days we played about with different types of fish but always reverted to haddock for fish and chips on our core pub menu. Even now it's one of our best-selling dishes, with the larger portion the biggest seller by a long way."

Regarding portion sizes, he adds: "Fish suppliers will never give you a set price so the weight fluctuates depending on what price it comes in at. We adjust the portion sizes slightly because the menus are printed, so we're restricted."

A sprinkle of Salt

Other operators can make a virtue out of diversity. One of the main aims of Seafood Restaurant of the Year, which is awarded by industry body Seafish, is to recognise the creative use of seafood and under-used species.

That is certainly the case with The Salt Room, the Brighton restaurant that won the award in 2017. Owned by Raz Helalat, the business is part of a three-strong group of restaurants that includes sites in Brighton and London trading as The Coal Shed. The Salt Room menu is built around a Josper oven, which is used to grill fresh produce over charcoal including a daily "whole market fish" to share alongside daily changing specials. This enables the kitchen team, led by group head chef Dave Mothersill, to make the most of availability.

Mothersill says: "Our consumers are definitely more into provenance – they want to know what they're eating. That's great for us and great for our front-of-house team. London is different, you have a lot of business lunches and customers don't always engage, but in Brighton they want to know everything, where it comes from and how the chef prepared it. Regular customers are about 15% to 20% of trade at the Brighton sites and they look for the specials because they want to try something new."

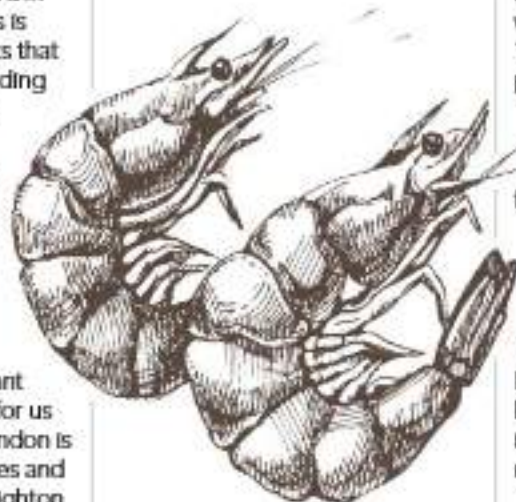
"We used to serve a lot of sea bass but following the latest guidance that has changed. We want to be as sustainable as possible so we currently sell a lot of Cornish monkfish. Everything we buy comes in whole and we prepare it ourselves. When something unusual comes in, everyone in the kitchen gathers round to see how to prepare it. We cook most things simply on the grill or over coal and serve it with seasonal vegetables."

Laky Zervudachi, director of sustainability at foodservice fish supplier Direct Seafoods, sees a mixed picture across the sector in terms of operators embracing ocean diversity. The cost sector, as well as



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The Salt Room group head chef Dave Mothersill



Emerging trends include:

Fish sandwiches such as Maine lobster rolls and Louisiana-style street food sandwiches with blackened fish

Cajun shrimp and crawfish balls

Warm and spicy Middle Eastern and Hispanic flavours

Bold flavours such as tequila and lime sauce, bourbon glaze and spicy, ethnic-flavoured mayonnaise

major pub and restaurant groups, have come on board in no small measure because they recognise the potential downside if they are deemed by "name and shame" campaigns not to be meeting their corporate social responsibility obligations.

Zervudachi says: "There's a growing band of chefs taking note of what the Marine Conservation Society is saying by taking fish off the menu that hasn't got a good sustainability rating and trying to promote not only sustainability but provenance. There are a number of factors playing into that, including media coverage of the social ethics behind the use of some species."

He also believes operators will have to become less picky when it comes to choosing wild-caught fish over farmed species. He adds: "Aquaculture is going to play such an important part in terms of protein production. There are still cowboys out there but that's why you should use certification as your backstop. It's much easier to audit a farm, whereas in the wild it's more problematic."

Even against the backdrop of a market where consumers are expected to remain cautious for some time when it comes to spending on eating out, Zervudachi sees only one way for the UK to make better use of its marine harvest. He says: "We have to be prepared to pay a little more. The reason a lot of fish is exported is because in France, Italy and Spain they'll pay more for our high-quality catch."

One way to square this circle, says Seafish trade marketing manager Andy Gray, is to broaden the menu beyond classics such as fish and chips, tuna salad and prawn cocktail and spotlight species and recipes consumers are less confident about preparing at home.

Gray says: "With an increasing variety of seafood readily available to chefs and customers becoming more interested in trying something new or different, there is a great opportunity for such products to make up as much as 35% to 50% of standard mixed menus across starter and main courses."

"While many consumers are reticent about buying seafood to prepare and cook at home, it's often a main menu choice for many when they decide to eat out of home – trusting a chef will expertly prepare and serve an excellent seafood dining experience. Operators can act on this by ensuring there's a good variety of seafood on their menu." ■