

edible RHODY®

Celebrating the Bounty of Rhode Island, Season by Season
Summer 2011 • Number 18



edible Communities
2011 James Beard Foundation
Publication of the Year

Trawler Tweets

CITY FARMER
FOOD TRUCKIN'
HERITAGE BREED

Member Edible Communities



ON THE BAY

BY JOHN LEE

PHOTOS BY MARKHAM STARR

TRACE & TRUST

From Trawlers to Tweets—Dinner in Real Time

This past winter, while visiting the Bahamas, I saw something that got me thinking about how fish is sold. Every afternoon a man docked his skiff along the pier. He climbed out and carried his catch—grouper, snapper and spiny lobster—to a wooden table at the head of the pier. There was no ice, no coolers, no cash register.

As a group of locals greeted him, I'd stand there and eavesdrop. They talked about commonplace things, with much laughter, but they also talked about the fish—where he'd caught them and when. What struck me mostly was the relationship this fisherman had with his customers.

The American seafood industry has lost the connection. It has gotten big, full of centralized processors and food safety laws—regulations that ultimately distance consumer from product. Yes, the product may be safer to eat but there is no connection to “place” anymore. In Rhode Island however, that seems to be changing.

Clockwise from top left: Basket of yellowtail flounder. Deckhand Kevin Barber unloading. Cod in toter. Steve Arnold sorts fish onboard the *Elizabeth Helen*.

FROM THE BOAT...

Steve Arnold, a 47-year-old Point Judith fisherman sits in the helm chair of his trawler, the *Elizabeth Helen*, holding a smart phone. He props his feet up on the dash next to the radar and chart plotter, types a message to a Newport chef, then updates his Twitter and Facebook pages. Steve's finger, it appears, has hit the wrong key. He swears, then laughs: “We at Trace & Trust are not social networking experts—but we're learning.”

Steve and his deckhand, Kevin Barber, have just finished unloading their catch, a mix of codfish, yellowtail flounder, fluke and skate. Much of their catch will head for New York, Philly and Boston, through the traditional processing and distribution channels. But not all of it. Some will be packed in the back of a refrigerated truck, bound for restaurants in Newport, Providence and Boston.

The Trace & Trust marketing initiative in Rhode Island was formed by three Point Judith fishermen and Glenn Chamberlain, a business consultant in Canton, Massachusetts. Working along with Steve are Bob Westcott, who skips the *Ocean State*, and Chris Brown who skips the *Proud Mary*. The three fishermen have all fished out of Point Judith for decades.

FROM BOAT TO THE BACK OF THE HOUSE

For more information on Trace & Trust and where you can find their high-quality locally landed seafood, as well as information on when, where and how it was caught, visit traceandtrust.com or follow them on Twitter @traceandtrustNE. Participating Rhode Island restaurants:

The Beehive Café 10 Franklin St., Bristol 401.396.9994 • thebeehivecafe.com

Celestial Café 567 South County Trail, Exeter 401.295.5559 • celestialcaferi.com

Chez Pascal 960 Hope St., Providence 401.421.4422 • chez-pascal.com

The Deck Newport 1 Waites Wharf, Newport 401.846.3600 • waiteswharf.com/atthedeck.com

George's of Galilee 250 Sand Hill Cove Rd., Narragansett 401.783.2306 • georgesofgalilee.com

La Laiterie/The Farmstead 188 Wayland Ave., Providence 401.274.7177 • farmsteadinc.com

New Rivers 7 Steeple St., Providence 401.751.0350 • newriversrestaurant.com

Nick's on Broadway 500 Broadway, Providence 401.421.0286 • nicksonbroadway.com

Tallulah on Thames 464 Thames St., Newport 401.849.2433 • talullahonthames.com

Tucker's Bistro 150 Broadway, Newport 401.846.3449 • tuckersbistro.com

The idea for Trace & Trust came about in 2010 after an October meeting at the Celestial Café in Exeter between the fishermen, Glenn and the program director of Chefs Collaborative, a national nonprofit that works with chefs to foster a more sustainable food supply. Shortly thereafter, Trace & Trust was made available to fishermen interested in tracking their own catch information and differentiating their product—essentially a new platform for boat-to-table, locally landed fish, fully traceable from Rhode Island vessels. “We got tired of seeing all of our fish leave Rhode Island,” says Arnold.

... TO THE PHONE ...

Outside the wheelhouse of the 55-foot *Elizabeth Helen*, a flock of seagulls preen their feathers in the bow. On the back deck, Kevin mends a small tear in the net. Steve’s phone buzzes.

On the other end, chef Richard Allaire at Tucker’s Bistro in Newport has received Steve’s text and responded. This is how Trace & Trust works. Using social networking sites Twitter and Facebook and their website, the details on each fisherman’s catch are given in real time. Glenn also helps with dry-land support monitoring shipments of catch, responding to questions and providing business support, as requested, to other fishermen, all with a steady amount of tweeting to keep the chefs and customers updated.

Steve acknowledges that Trace & Trust wouldn’t be possible without smart phones. “We wouldn’t be able to communicate at the level we do. All the orders and fishing reports and weather reports and things like that are all given through these phones, from the fishing grounds to the kitchens,” he says. The program is new and there are still some kinks to work out but the interest shown by chefs has already gone viral. The demand is so strong that Steve and the other fishermen have created a new company, WildRhody, that will distribute the seafood but continue to market using Trace & Trust.

As the name suggests, Trace & Trust has to do with traceability, a popular concept in Europe that’s gaining traction stateside. Here large processors already have traceability rules in place: If something goes wrong with Rhode Island-caught squid at a St. Louis grocery store, that squid can be traced right back to the dock where it was landed, if not the boat that caught it. Trace & Trust puts a human face on the concept. “You can find out who caught the fish, where it was caught and when,” says Arnold.

If you want a Rhode Island fish dinner caught by Rhode Island fishermen, you can now visit the Trace & Trust Twitter or Facebook pages, and look for the most recent posts, which will tell you what the boats have landed, and which restaurants will serve that catch.

... TO THE BACK OF THE HOUSE ...

“These guys are selling a lot more than dead fish,” says Allaire. “They’re teachers. They tell me things that no conventional seafood supplier would know about—like when the fish are spawning, when they migrate inshore or offshore. Steve will say things like: ‘I don’t think we’ll be catching any cod in the next week because of bad weather—that, I think, is the trust part. There’s no b.s.’”

Trace & Trust is just one line of business for Arnold, Wescott and Brown. They also are active participants in fishery management and gear

technology, working closely with the University of Rhode Island and Cornell University. Each of them is also busy trying to fish more selectively.

“I had a bad image of trawling before I talked with them,” says Allaire. “To me trawling meant destruction and waste. But it sounds like these guys are really trying to minimize their impact on the marine environment. How can you not support that?”

Trace & Trust is not without its detractors. Point Judith is a small port of around 100 fishing vessels. Many of the crews, captains and owners have known each other since middle school. There are disagreements. Groups and alliances—cliques, even—are formed. What one group supports, another despises. Fishing has become a tough way to make a living—not for lack of fish but for abundance of regulations. And these regulations have divided fishermen.

Terry Mulvey, owner and operator of the *Tiger Joe*, says, “I think this idea is a good one—we need to keep fish local. I’m with them on that. I just question whose nest it is they are padding. [People] tend to form groups that are exclusive. Maybe we all do this. Maybe everyone is ultimately looking out for himself.”

Back in the *Elizabeth Helen*’s wheelhouse, Steve Arnold stands up. He’s getting ready to deliver the whole cod and skate to Tucker’s Bistro. Trace & Trust delivers nothing but whole fish. Delivering fillets would mean more processing, more laws. Steve wants to shorten the supply chain to the restaurants—and the cooks love this. “Trace & Trust is about being small,” he says. “The big processors are still essential for us. We don’t want them to go away. But there’s something beautiful about being small and local.”

Derek Wagner at Nick’s on Broadway was the first chef to use Trace & Trust. He’s helped to spread the word through the Chefs Collaborative about the availability of traceable locally landed fish.

“It really is a chain reaction,” says Wagner. “These fishermen are so proud of the fish they bring us. You can sense this pride in them. I love knowing where the fish was caught, who caught it—I put that right on the menu. All of this matters. It gives my staff the enthusiasm they need to cook. One has to cook from the heart. It’s a craft. So is fishing. And the customer senses all of this.” eR

John Lee works on a fishing boat out of Point Judith. He also writes articles for local magazines and blogs about fishing at thedentedbucket.com. He lives in Wakefield.

For other boat-to-table seafood programs in Rhode Island, visit oceanstatefresh.com and thelocalcatch.com.