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Ideas and Insights for Full-Service Restaurants

EXCLUSIVE: Top States for Growth

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JAZZING UP NEW ORLEANS

How Ralph Brennan Put His Mark on The Big Easy's Food Scene



First Course

PAY AT THE TABLE // PACIFIC NORTHWEST BRANDS // ORGANIC LIBATIONS ARRIVE

Local catches bring character and color to daily menus, reinforce a sense of community, and bolster the hometown economy.



PHOTO: MICHAEL HAZZIS

SOURCING }

From Coast to Table

Inspired by the farm-to-table movement, chefs are sourcing more local seafood. They're weaving fishermen's names into mouthwatering descriptions of seafood entrees, knowing that it's much more tantalizing to eat fish caught from a guy with a first name than from a faceless operation.

"You see people becoming more and more interested in where they get their food," says Dena Grunt, general manager of Nick's Cove in Marshall, California, where oysters and Dungeness crab are culled from nearby. Notes written on a blackboard inside the restaurant reflect information about each fish

purveyor, and whether the fish was line-caught, farmed or netted.

Working with local fishermen means you never know precisely what you will get. And that's part of the fun, says Joshua Lewin, executive chef of Boston's Beacon Hill Hotel & Bistro, who sources 90 percent of the menu's seafood from

a two-man operation in nearby Scituate.

"We have a daily changing menu and that's so crucial to working with fishermen," says Nikki Hobson, chef de cuisine at Boston's Island Creek Oyster Bar. Recently she grilled a surprise catch of Atlantic mackerel and served it with shaved fennel,

lemon zest and Niçoise olive salad.

"Sometimes the sizes [of the fish] vary but we feel really good because it's a family we're supporting," says Susan Moses, owner of 212 Market Restaurant in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Despite being a landlocked city, she can get local fish from Pickett's Trout Ranch 100 miles away.

Recently Moses paired trout with watermelon salsa, blackened corn grits and local green beans. The restaurant is part of the "Serve & Protect" campaign spearheaded by the Tennessee Aquarium a year ago, featuring celebrity chef Alton Brown as a spokesman to educate about eating sustainably caught (often local) fish.

While local fish often costs more, that price hike is offset by the allure of eating local. "Purchasing local doesn't necessarily mean it's the best food cost," Grunt says. "But we believe it's the right thing to do. These are from our neighbors and we're keeping money in the community."

Servers need to be educated, on a daily basis, about where the fish are caught and by whom, so they can answer customers' questions with confidence. "Our servers are well-educated [about local seafood]. They come to appreciate it and know what to expect," Lewin says. Similarly, at Island Creek Oyster Bar, a daily meeting focuses on the menu, including what was caught that morning.

Creative marketing is also crucial. About 80 percent of the seafood served at The Parish Restaurant, which opened this summer in Portland, Oregon, is local and often paired with Oregon wines.

Even restaurants not in a wine region can pair local fish with other locally sourced products such as artisan cheeses, mushrooms, vegetables and fruits, providing the customer with a memorable experience in local cuisine.

{ BY KRISTINE HANSEN