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DINING | MONTAUK

Getting the Catch Directly to the Restaurant



Sean Barrett, founder of Dock to Dish, holding golden tilefish in Montauk.

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When [Dock to Dish](#) became an instant success in Montauk last summer, it made sense. The community-supported fishery dovetailed with a [growing sustainable fishing movement](#) and a community-supported agriculture initiative already embraced by many locals. People could now pick up their black sea bass alongside their baskets of pea shoots and snapdragons — all they had to do was pay upfront and take what the ocean provided.

Now in its second season, which concludes at the end of October, the cooperative has a waiting list for those who would like to become members. What's more, high-caliber chefs like Joseph Realmuto of [Nick & Toni's](#) in East Hampton and Dan Barber of [Blue Hill](#) in Manhattan and the Hudson Valley, have joined the movement. With their help, Dock to Dish expanded this summer to include a restaurant-supported fishery. Renowned restaurants like Manhattan's [Le Bernardin](#) and [Telepan](#) have become members.

"Dock to Dish applies the farm-to-table philosophy to the oceans," Mr. Barber said. "That's catnip for any chef."

Restaurants are guaranteed their delivery within 24 hours of when the catch hits the docks. They agree to pay \$2,500 per month for a weekly delivery of 100 pounds. They get 50 pounds of premium catch, which might include scallops, striped bass or bigeye tuna, and 50 pounds of bycatch, like porgy, skate or sea robin.



Joseph Realmuto, executive chef at Nick & Toni's restaurant in East Hampton, preparing a dish using Dock to Dish catch.

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At first, Mr. Realmuto admitted, there was a learning curve. He wondered how he was going to sell porgy, a fish he'd been throwing back his whole life. But Toni Ross, co-owner of Nick & Toni's, recently gushed over a Montauk sea bream crudo. She was shocked to learn that Montauk sea bream is a fancy name for porgy.

Dock to Dish fishermen receive the best price at the dock — an average of 25 percent more than the highest market rates. They're paid by the cooperative on the spot, plus they get the satisfaction of having their name attached to their catch in a world where [91 percent of the seafood consumed by Americans](#) is imported, according to government statistics.

“People bump into each other in church,” said Sean Barrett, 38, founder of Dock to Dish, “and say, ‘Hey, I had your blackfish the other night and it was phenomenal.’ ”

Mr. Barber said he believed this was the best part of the program.



Capt. Bryan Fromm, a fisherman in the Dock to Dish program, on his boat, the Flying Dutchman.

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“It empowers fishermen,” he said. “They choose which species of fish to catch. Ultimately, they’re the ones dictating the restaurant’s menu.”

Of course, not all chefs want someone else defining their menu. When Mr. Barrett approached [Jean-Georges Vongerichten](#) about joining the cooperative, the chef rejected him — twice.

“He plans and prints his menus months in advance,” said Mr. Barrett, “so the concept of having unknown species arriving straight from the dock simply would not work in his venues.”

Chefs and consumers have gotten used to being able to choose what they want, no matter what’s running in the local seas. And while federal fishing regulations control what’s caught here, they don’t hold sway in the global market.



A tilefish dinner at Nick & Toni's.

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Bonnie Brady, executive director of the [Long Island Commercial Fishing Association](#), said that all fishermen in this country are subject to rigorous guidelines of sustainability. She argues that the major focus of ethical seafood consumers should be on eating fish caught domestically. “We have the most regulated fisheries in the world,” Ms. Brady said, “so any U.S. fish is a sustainable fish.”

That may be the case, but it hasn’t stopped Dock to Dish and other Long Island organizations from trying to produce seafood in a safer, more ecologically responsible way. The [Montauk Shellfish Company](#), for example, is a New York State surface-grown oyster farm. The farming of bivalves is a practice [championed by sustainable seafood advocates](#) like Paul Greenberg, author of “American Catch: The Fight for Our Local Seafood.” The shellfish get churned by the waves, and they feed on phytoplankton, helping to filter and clean the surrounding waters.

“It’s really nice to be involved in a way of life that gives back to the ecosystem, especially after earning a living taking from it for so long,” said Mike Martinsen, co-founder of the company and a former commercial fisherman.

Dock to Dish follows the fishing guidelines of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration ([N.O.A.A.](#)). But it also works with other organizations, like the [Concerned Citizens of Montauk](#), to get the local take on best practices, including the impact on the ecosystem and fair wages for fishermen. Concerned Citizens [recently petitioned the N.O.A.A.](#) to increase regulations to “include a ‘triple bottom line’ set of values, which outlines the social, economic and environmental effects and benefits of sustainably harvested seafood,” according to a statement from the group.

There remains some controversy about what constitutes true sustainability. For example, Dock to Dish recently hauled in striped bass, which the N.O.A.A. had just declared sustainable. But John McMurray, a Nassau County fisherman unaffiliated with the co-op and who built his business on striped bass, thought this designation was wrong.

“The number of fish is a shadow of what it used to be,” Mr. McMurray said in an interview. “The stock is almost certainly going to be overfished by next year.”

Mr. Barrett went ahead and distributed the fish, but with caution. “We know on the front lines that there are fewer of specified sizes of the species,” he said of striped bass. “Our most seasoned fishermen say to keep an eye on this.”

To avoid relying on any one species like striped bass for its premium selections, Dock to Dish alternates among 24 different fish and shellfish over the course of the 27-week season, based on what’s running.

For the most part, members have embraced this rotation philosophy.

“We need to be more adaptable,” said Stefanie Sacks, a nutritionist and founding member of Dock to Dish. “We’re a society of instant gratification. But if tuna aren’t running in your area, maybe you can’t have tuna.”

Ms. Sacks also appreciates that Dock to Dish reduces food miles drastically. Many fish that come into Montauk Harbor travel through the Fulton Fish Market in the Bronx before returning, days later, to Hamptons restaurants and markets.

The hope is that more people will eat what the ocean provides. Mr. Barrett says that in fisheries, a demand-based society doesn’t fit.

“It’s wild and unpredictable,” Mr. Barrett said. “Which way the wind blows — that’s what predicts what’s going to land on the dock that day.”