<http://www.projo.com/food/content/fd-wild_rhody_trace_and_trust_fi_07-20-11_R6P_v42.39cfa.html>

Wild Rhody fishermen sell their catch directly to local restaurants

01:00 AM EDT on Wednesday, July 20, 2011

By Jenna Pelletier

Journal Staff Writer

Decades ago, when Kevin Durfee’s grandfather ran George’s of Galilee, fishermen used to walk over from the docks across the street to sell him whatever they happened to catch that day.

That’s no longer possible because of strict regulations that require restaurants to purchase seafood from licensed wholesalers, explained Durfee, who now manages George’s, his family’s Narragansett seafood restaurant. The system helps ensure that food is safe, but also makes it more difficult for restaurants to get fresh fish and for fishermen to earn a living.

But recently, an entrepreneurial group of three Point Judith fishermen have started to use modern technology and business acumen to market and sell their catch directly to restaurants in Rhode Island and the Boston area. It’s a modern version of what those fishermen were doing a generation or two ago at George’s.

“We can deliver fish that was in the water at noontime to a restaurant in Providence by three in the afternoon,” Christopher Brown said.

“That’s unheard of.”

In January, after obtaining the proper licensing, Brown, Steve Arnold and Bob Westcott began selling and delivering fish under their own label, Wild Rhody. Selling direct requires more legwork than going through a wholesaler. But it also allows them to set their own prices and make more profit.

“We’re becoming businessmen, finally, as opposed to just hunters and gatherers,” Brown said.

They say they are fishing “smarter, instead of harder” in response to new quota-based fisheries management, which allocates individual fishermen a share of the total allowable catch.

“Used to be, years ago, they would say, ‘the season is open, go,’ ”

Brown said. “There was a race to fish. We wouldn’t have been able to do something like this. Now we can fish to the prompts of the market.”

Simultaneously, Arnold, Brown and Westcott became the first group of fishermen to use the interactive, Web-based tool Trace and Trust to share detailed information about the origin and freshness of their catch. They helped develop the concept with a California-based consulting firm, Cap Log Group.

On the Trace and Trust website (traceandtrust.com) consumers can learn when, where and who caught their fish by inputting an ID (such as

PR0341) –– shared by chefs through social media or printed on a menu –– or searching by zip code.

A typical description: “Steve Arnold landed summer flounder on 7/7/2011 while fishing near Block Island Sound. Steve Arnold docks his vessel, the F/V Elizabeth Helen, at Point Judith, Rhode Island. Wild Rhody shipped 80 Pounds of this catch to Chez Pascal and Julian’s.”

“It’s a verification tool,” Arnold said.

This new way of doing business wouldn’t be possible without two things:

smartphones and the close relationships the fishermen have developed with local chefs. Through e-mail, text messages and Twitter, Arnold and Brown regularly communicate with them, taking orders and providing real-time updates on the species they are and aren’t finding on a given day.

“Our fishing activity is actually flavored by the needs of the chef,”

Brown said. “If they put in an order for a certain kind of fish and we’re not seeing it, we may just tow over here or look over there.”

Beau Vestal, executive chef at Providence’s New Rivers, used to purchase fish through a Wellesley, Mass., distributor, but now orders almost entirely through Wild Rhody.

“It has kind of made me wonder, what have I been buying all these years?” Vestal said. “The advantages as far as quality goes are night and day. Before, I had no sense of when and where it was caught and stored.”

The freshness of the fish is even known to make him a little misty eyed, he said.

“I realized I was cutting fish that was in the water eight hours ago,”

he said. “You just kind of pinch yourself. I always tell my young cooks, remember this. There’s no way you’re going to get better quality.”

Brown’s son, Sam, and Arnold deliver orders to the restaurants in a refrigerated truck. The turnaround time from dock to dining room typically ranges from a few hours to a day.

“We really don’t want these guys ordering a lot of fish all at once,”

Brown said. “We’d rather have them take smaller amounts over the course of the week to maintain the freshness.”

All restaurants receive the fish whole, rather than in pre-cut filets.

Though butchering costs chefs in labor, they are able to use the left over parts to make dishes such as fish fritters and stock for fish bisque.

Since the Trace and Trust program is still in its pilot stage, both here and on a smaller scale in North Carolina, the fishermen count on the chefs to give them feedback about what’s working and what could be improved. The chefs benefit, too, by learning more about the fish they are serving and how to support sustainable fishing practices.

“I love when Steve comes into the restaurant and I can shake his hand and look him in the eye,” Vestal said. “It’s more than a nameless, faceless e-mail or answering machine. This guy has a family at home.

He’s fishing to put food on his table.”

Buying whole fish directly from Wild Rhody costs George’s of Galilee a little more than getting it through a distributor, but Durfee said it’s worth it. Not only does it support the local economy, it’s good

marketing: Customer demand is driving restaurants to share more information about where food is coming from, he said.

“People are wondering, ‘Is my fish frozen, coming in from Chile, or is it right out of the port?’ ” Durfee said

Durfee typically offers Wild Rhody fish as a special. Because of the operation’s small scale — just three men— it is currently not feasible for the 476-seat restaurant to get all its fish this way.

Similarly, Trace and Trust verified Wild Rhody fish only represents a portion of Arnold, Brown and Westcott’s total catch. They still sell mainly through wholesalers, a sales method that leaves them wondering where their fish ultimately ends up.

However, one wholesaler they work with, River & Glen, has signed on to use the Trace and Trust technology. Through it, the fishermen are able to follow the distribution of their fluke, striped bass and squid to more than a dozen high-end restaurants in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

“It makes you proud to see your fish in the hands of chefs like that,”

Arnold said. “It’s amazing what they do with it.”

And with all their new chef friends, these fishermen say they have never eaten so well.