

Billingsgate Seafood School busting myths about farmed seafood

By Nicki Holmyard

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A new course run by Billingsgate Seafood School in London is aiming to eliminate the stigma of farmed seafood.

The course, “Is farmed fish our future?,” was designed to help seafood buyers and sellers, foodservice managers, chefs, fishmongers and the media to understand the reality behind fish farming; why it is needed, what it involves, what is being done to make it sustainable, and how to answer consumer queries.

The short program opens with an early-morning tour of Billingsgate market, exploring the visible differences between wild and farmed species, and progresses through a series of expert lectures and questions over breakfast. The course continues with a filleting demonstration from an award-winning fishmonger, and finishes with a blind tasting. It turns out that it is not as easy as one might think to tell which is which, even amongst those who consider themselves an expert, according to the organizers of the course.

Market tours are led by Billingsgate Seafood School CEO C.J. Jackson and inspectors from the Fishmonger’s Company. Delegates enjoy constant banter from the market traders, and master the essential skill of dodging porters speeding through the aisles with barrows.

“Starting on the market floor gives people the opportunity to look at the huge variety of fish and shellfish on offer, which come in from all over the world. Their task is to see if they can pick out which ones are farmed, and to explain why they made their choice,” Jackson said.

Delegates soon learn to tell wild Alaska salmon apart from farmed Scottish and Norwegian, and to notice differences

in pigmentation between farmed and wild halibut, turbot, and sole.

“People may only deal with a handful of species and many also don’t realise that the majority of trout, sea bass, and sea bream we buy in the U.K. is farmed and sustainable. And that’s before we get onto warm-water prawns, pangasius, tuna, hiramasa kingfish, cobia, meager, tilapia, seaweed, abalone, blue crab, mussels, oysters, scallops, and clams,” Jackson said.

Facts and figures are provided by George Hide, a guest lecturer from Sparsholt College. Hide details the global rise of the industry, the challenges it faces, and the solutions available. He covers species and production methods, fishmeal and alternative feed ingredients, environmental impacts of aquaculture and wild-catch fishing, sustainable and responsible aquaculture certification, genetics, and breeding. It’s all delivered in manageable chunks and easy to understand language, with plenty of time for questions and discussion, Jackson said.

Jackson invites a variety of representatives to give presentations at each course. To kick off the six-event program this year, New England Seafood personnel spoke about the way in which their company tackles the issues of sustainability, traceability, and social responsibility head-on by putting it at the core of the business.

Jackson also tries to include a shellfish expert to talk about farmed mussels, oysters, and scallops. And in the past, Jackson has had Ruth Westcott from Sustain, a sustainability-focused non-profit, on-hand to discuss the Sustainable Fish City campaign, which encourages businesses to adopt a fully sustainable fish policy, thereby helping transform the way the world's oceans are fished.

When the lectures are over, delegates gather in the school’s kitchens to marvel at Craftsman George Hooper’s filleting skills, then dive into the blind tasting. Depending on the species available on the day, delegates tuck into freshly cooked farmed and wild sole, halibut, turbot, bass, trout, salmon, brown crab, and blue swimming crab.

“This can’t be difficult,” said Darren Kaye, group account manager for M&J Seafoods and a participant in the February 2018 event.

But the majority of students attending the class found that they couldn’t decide which fish was farmed and which was wild, primarily due to confusion caused by differences in texture. They were even more surprised to find that most had actually preferred the taste of the farmed species. As seafood “experts,” they weren’t sure what to make of this turn of events, but many said they left determined to persuade their own customers to embrace farmed seafood with a more open mind.

Most people prefer the taste and texture of farmed fish because that is what we are used to eating, whether we realize it or not, according to Jackson. Many people don’t realize that 50 percent of the world’s seafood already comes from aquaculture, and that this figure is set to grow to 75 percent in the next few years. And Jackson said, if a fish is enjoyable to eat, does it really matter if it is farmed or wild?

“We still have a lot of barriers to break down and it’s important to get everyone engaged on the subject of sustainable aquaculture, and to learn more about where our seafood supplies of the future will come from,” she said.

Feedback from the courses shows that delegates leave with a far greater understanding of the global seafood industry and a new enthusiasm for farmed species. Jackson recommends them to anyone keen to explore the subject with expert guidance.



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