

Spot prawns - a sustainable local choice

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Laura Neufeld is a third generation fisher who's been fishing spot prawns on the B.C. coast for nearly 20 years.

After moving to Ucluelet about two years ago, she's focusing on trying to keep her sustainable product more localized.

You hear so much about the fish we're not supposed to eat because of bad fishing practices and depleting stocks, so it's with irony that Neufeld notes Asian prawns are readily available in Canadian markets, while she has had to sell most of her product to Japan for the past several years.

To combat this she's been concentrating more on marketing and selling her product to local chefs: "The chefs are the ones who are educating the public - they're putting [spot prawns] out there and offering an alternative."

Spot prawns are the largest of the commercial species of shrimp in West Coast waters and are found from Alaska to San Diego, California. In Canada, 65 percent of the harvest takes place in the inside water of Vancouver Island on long line traps. SeaChoice rates trap caught spot prawns as a "best choice" for sustainable seafood, with the only concern arising when traps are set in sensitive areas containing species such as glass sponges and corals.

Neufeld uses six strings of line with 50 traps to a string and handles each string as it is harvested, processing and flash freezing the prawns in her boat - the Polara's - onboard freezer.

Nick Nutting, restaurant chef at the Pointe Restaurant at the Wickaninnish Inn, says their focus is using local products over others every time.

Neufeld's spot prawns are featured in a prawn broth at the Pointe, along with another local fisher - Jeff Mikus' side stripe shrimp.

John Gilmour, of Trilogy Fish Company in Tofino, says Neufeld's product ranks high among their exclusively local products. "People love them, they're one of the best quality products we have."

Brandi Fraser of the fish store Fishful Thinking in Ucluelet agrees that Neufeld's product is "amazing, very high quality."



CREDIT:
Neufeld's vessel the Polara.



CREDIT:
Laura Neufeld

She thinks Neufeld's attention to detail throughout the fishing and packaging process is the reason why the end result turns out so well, and why people enjoy them so much.

But despite the praise for the end result, the fishery itself isn't the easiest business to be in, says Neufeld.

Increasingly high overhead costs of fuel and equipment, coupled with more and more competition in the industry and far from optimal prices in foreign markets left her agitated after this year's two month season.

"I'm tired of being exploited," Neufeld said, referring to the prices offered by Japanese buyers, which run contrary to what she knows the product sells for overseas.

More and more prawn fishers came onboard after the salmon license buyback in the late 1990s and Neufelds said, "the effort has been much more intense," despite license limitations.

The industry is guarded by constant stock assessment and regulations to avoid overfishing, but it means people like Neufeld only have a small window to get their catch. And that means fishing with a crew of three, for two months straight, 12 hours a day from May until the end of June this year.

And she's had to become her own product marketer, something her father and grandfather never had to contend with.

"You can't just go out there and fish anymore - you have to be responsible for the big picture," she said.

But she is committed to offering a sustainable alternative locally, and even though she runs a bed and breakfast with her partner, it seems unlikely Neufeld will ever leave her first love of fishing too far behind.

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