

Hook,



Line

Sinker

M  
emories of tuna-noodle casserole with a crispy

topping of crumbled potato chips don't die eas-

ily. But palates evolve. Dietary tides turn.

Seafood tops most daily-special lists at clubs

and restaurants across the country, thanks to

Savory **seafood** entrees reel in members

the triumvirate achievement of fisherman, fish-

mongers, and chefs extraordinaire. Superb

quality, fresh -not frozen- seafood is only a

phone call, e-mail, or fax transmission away.

But who you gonna call?

Never underestimate the power of advertising. Mike McCarthy, general manager of Pottawattomie Country Club in Michigan City, IN, called seafood wholesaler Triar Seafood in Hollywood, FL, after reading the company's print ad. While golf and outdoor swimming are the greater-Chicago club's mainstays from April through Labor Day, fine dining is center-stage year round. "Our 30-day product trial turned into a six-year relationship," McCarthy said.

For the club manager or chef, building a relationship at the wholesale or purveyor level involves the same things any good relationship does - trust and reliability. Pottawattomie Executive Chef Rick Brueggeman's weekly conversations with Triar's President Peter Jarvis are deceptively casual exchanges where the two talk over "what looks good," before Brueggeman places his order. By 2 p.m. the next day, Federal Express delivers a compartmentalized shipping container gel-packed with seafood so fresh it barely had time to dress for the airport.

McCarthy and Brueggeman collaborate on menu decisions, making weekly changes to the right side of the club's seven- to nine-item menu, which features three seafood entrees in season, two in the off-season. Tuna and swordfish sell best, but the big crowd-pleaser in-season is the club's Friday Night Family Buffet. The appetizer table brims with specialties like Brueggeman's hickory- and apple-wood-smoked scallops finished with a roasted tomato chutney, prawn-size shrimp, crab legs, and whole fish like snapper, grouper, and wahoo cut to order. Whole

lobster stuffed with seafood dressing highlights the menu at least

once a year as part of the club's New England Seafood Dinners.

"Chefs today are artists, and like any artist, they love the artistic challenge of creating new menu items, of introducing members to new and exotic tastes," Jarvis said. He typically sends first-time clients a courtesy package with samples of every item in a day's catch to introduce Triar's "shore-to-door in 24" service. The former food and beverage manager and self-described fish monger has personally overseen every step, from the suppliers' boats to the plates set before discriminating diners. "We're only as good as the weakest link in the chain," he noted. "The key in this business is knowing how and knowing when."

Any chef worth his or her Old Bay Seasoning must combine seafood know-how with know-when, because a solid knowledge base in buying, preparing, or serving fresh seafood defines the crucial difference between rave reviews and tepid responses. Putting the best piece of fish on the plate is a team effort of the supplier and the

culinarian overseeing seafood handling and storage. "What makes fish taste good and last longer starts with handling on the boat," Jarvis said.

Boats must be clean, bacteria-free and maintain proper oxygen and temperature levels. Heat causes bacteria, so fish is buried in ice as soon as it's gutted. Knowing how to read visual clues is vital. "I want to be sure the fish is firm, the flesh is translucent, with bright skin," Jarvis explained. "The meat should be shiny, not dull, and the color should be illuminated."

From the moment a fish leave the water, regulations governing tem-

perature, handling, and shipping are in force. Once-voluntary industry guidelines became law in 1998 when the Food and Drug Administration enacted Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points, H.A.C.C.P., which set strict handling and record-keeping standards monitoring each step in seafood processing. "H.A.C.C.P. made good players even better," Jarvis said.

Properly maintained seafood - well chilled, in airtight, leak-proof containers - has a shelf life of five to seven days once it reaches the club kitchen. The shipping secret to maintain optimal freshness: no dead air. "Packing (with an absence of oxygen) is as important as the fisherman and the chef," Jarvis explained.

Chef Robert Malone of Treesdale Golf and Country Club in Gibsonia, PA, takes the temperature of everything that comes in the door. "If it isn't right, it goes right back on the truck. Seafood should register 32 to 34 degrees," he explained. "Above 36 degrees, you lose quality" After inspecting and rinsing, seafood goes into a perforated pan with no water on the fish, then is covered and refrigerated. Malone prefers buying in small increments for maximum freshness.

As soon as his seafood order arrives, Chef Chris Desens, CEC, of the Racquet Club in Ladue, MO, makes sure it is repacked in ice, and kept cold, guaranteeing the best flavor. Educating his staff is an ongoing process. "I show my staff what the fish should look and smell like, how dishes are prepared and finished," Desens said. Besides his relationships with purveyors like Triar in Florida or Foley Fish in Boston, Desens believes a sec-

ondary source locally is as important as his culinary expertise - especially when certain varieties become scarce. "I can call Bob's Seafood (in St. Louis at 8 a.m., and have delivery by 9:30 a.m. The same person cuts the fish every day, and (that person) knows what you like and how you like it," he added.

"Educating the house" is even more critical in rural areas, where fewer kitchen staff members are professionally trained. At KC's restaurant, two hours south of Memphis in Cleveland, MS, Executive Chef and co-owner Walls' Joe trains staff from the ground up. Drawing patrons to fresh-seafood appetizers and daily specials in a "meat-and-potatoes" town, Joe buys only several days' supply for optimum freshness. Preparations are simple, keeping flavors light and sauces clean: vinaigrettes, broths and reductions finish grilled or sautéed shrimp, scallops, crab, calamari, or lobster.

When he isn't in KC's kitchen, Joe's post as Executive Chef of the Viking Range Co., in Memphis, gives him ample opportunities to observe new directions in food in seminars at the Viking's Culinary Arts Center. "I see a trend to a lot of raw preparation in non-Asian places," he said. We have no problem selling raw preparations like sushi and sashimi because the dining public is well educated, they eat well, and they've been to sushi bars."

Once the fish that was swimming in the Atlantic yesterday afternoon has landed in the pan - possibly 2000 miles from the shoreline - chefs eagerly seek new ways to garner gastronomic high-fives. To Walliv Joe, putting an inventive special like barely seared, sushi-grade tuna with yuzu (Japanese citrus

fruit) juice, honey and soy sauce, or offerings of fresh abalone and eel from New Jersey-purveyor Prawnco, illustrate the lack of price resistance club managers and chefs ace, despite seafood's increased cost.

Price is a factor more in terms of portion size than members' reluctance to paying for "top of the catch" seafood - plus freight - from purveyors like Triar or Joe's Stone Crab in Miami Beach, Fl "People are generally eating less, but ordering two, three, or four courses," Joe noted. "I can price accordingly 1w watching the portion size, without a small look to the plate." Another value-added technique pairs an entree with an accompaniment, like Chilean sea bass with rock-shrimp risotto.

Fame is another aspect overriding price opposition. James McClendon is president of Joe's Stone Crab, the sole supplier of stone crabs to the legendary Miami Beach restaurant of the same name. "Lots of people eat at Joe's when they re in Miami Beach," he said. "We take the typical Joe's meal, and ship 'the Joe's experience' to the club." McClendon says the popularity of club-sponsored "Joe's Nights" is so great, clubs often have seatings on two consecutive nights to accommodate demand, however pricey. The Penn Club in New York City and Philmont Country Club in Huntington Valley, PA, are veteran hosts of "Joes Nights."

Melanie Gaffin, director of catering at the Philmont Country Club, said that they hold "Joe's stone Crab" Nights on two consecutive nights (300 members each evening) in October, and two nights in April to accommodate the demand. Philmont has been hosting these dinners for years, and despite the

cost to members, the turnout is exceptional every time. "We lose money, hut because we're a private club, we do it for our members," said Gaffin.

The authentic Joe's Stone Crab meal - complete with bib, Joe's special tangy cole slaw, cold stone crabs in mustard sauce, Manhattan-style clam chowder, creamed spinach and famous Key Lime pie, and assorted trimmings - is ice-packed and on its way by h p.m., for overnight delivery to the club kitchen between 10 am. and noon. "We can have the executive chef at toes Stone Crab (restaurant) talk with the club chef, if desired," McClendon added.

Getting the best possible seafood may involve a plane ride, but "Treesdale Chef Robert Malone insists the heavy sauces stay home. "The main ingredient of what you cook should be what you taste first," he said. "The first bite should be what is featured, then the palate should dance by what is accentuating that first taste." Malone makes seasonal menu changes four times a year to meet the high expectations of the young club's 720 members, where the average age is between 35 and 45. Many members travel internationally, and bring back menus to share with their chef. Escolar and Chilean sea bass are fin-to-fin among "foodies" current favorites

Malone's "heart-healing" dinners use herbs and greens for flavor, rather than fat: Grilled tuna steak with a chipolte rub is finished with an orange/cilantro/pesto. His recipe for pan-seared, sesame-encrusted salmon in a soy/wasabi reduction sauce meets members' high expectations and their desire to stay above trends.

At the Racquet Club in Ladue,

Chef Chris Desens prefers his own interpretation on classics - a little culinary twist like shrimp scampi with garlic/almond lemon pepper aioli served with spinach fettuccine and fresh vegetables - delights club regulars. Treating firm-textured seafood like meat is another "hot fish" idea Desens favors for the Racquet Club's daily-special list: California sautéed skatewing anyone? Served on mashed potatoes with braised savory cabbage, topped with bordelaise sauce - that's about as far from frozen fish sticks as one can get.

Any chef worth his  
or her Old Bay  
Seasoning must  
combine seafood  
know-how with  
know-when.  
because a solid  
knowledge base in  
buying. preparing.  
or serving fresh  
seafood defines the  
crucial difference  
between rave  
reviews and tepid  
responses.