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Intelligence

Off the Knife with Bruce Mattel, Culinary Institute of America

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By James Wright

Institute's senior associate dean of culinary arts on teaching chefs about sustainable seafood and responsible aquaculture

Bruce Mattel, senior associate dean of culinary arts at the Culinary Institute of America, lectures at the Hyde Park, N.Y., school. Photo courtesy of CIA.

Foodservice professionals' engagement with sustainability and responsible sourcing is a bit behind that of retailers. Bruce Mattel wants that to change and does all he can as senior associate dean at the **Culinary Institute of America** (http://www.ciachef.edu) (CIA) to make sure his students are properly educated. When students graduate from CIA and run kitchens of their own, Mattel wants them to not only be able to butcher a fish but to know the environmental impacts of their seafood purchasing decisions.

Mattel is an appropriate lead-off hitter for this new foodservice interview series, "Off the Knife," seeing that he was once the fish butcher at legendary New York restaurant Le Bernardin. In this series, we'll talk to chefs and other foodservice professionals about aquaculture and sustainability and ask them to dish on how they can use their influence to educate consumers about fish.

A 1980 graduate, with honors, of the Hyde Park, N.Y., school, Mattel began teaching there in 1998. He authored the book **Catering: A Guide to Managing Successful Business Operation** (http://www.amazon.com/Catering-Managing-Successful-Business-Operation/dp/076455798X) (John Wiley & Sons, 2008) and has several stints at high-end New York restaurants on his resume.

He's also part of CIA's **Menus of Change** (http://www.menusofchange.org/about/) – a collaboration with the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health – that took place earlier this month. The three-day event aims to create a vision for integrating nutrition, social responsibility and environmental stewardship in the foodservice sector.

Are you training students to be chefs, or foodservice professionals? Please forgive me if there is no difference between the two.

You're 100 percent right in differentiating. We have been developing programming over the years, and there's a real focus on it right now to provide the education – experiential and classroom education – so that students can go into many areas of foodservice, including service and hospitality management, culinary science and applied food studies. We have also started to provide graduate- and executive-level education in our California campuses that are more geared to entrepreneurship, food ethics, food policy and food systems.

I didn't know that CIA offered such scientific courses.

There's a lot of science in food – there's no escaping the science. Food grows, whether it's animal, fungi or plants. There's a whole science in growing and cooking food. Then there's food safety science as well, as it gets distributed to the masses. There's a lot of science, and you see it every day. In just boiling an egg there's a lot of technique there.

What does a typical CIA freshman know about seafood? What are their basic skills when they arrive and what do they leave with?

Of course, different students have varied exposure. If they come from closer to the coast or the Great Lakes or internationally near shore areas, or even from families with avid fishermen, they will be more knowledgeable than students from landlocked areas. Generally speaking, it's sort of like 50/50. Some students don't have a clue; some think they don't like to even eat fish. After they have good fish prepared well, they start to change their preferences.

In the second semester of the first year, while they're freshmen, they take a class called Seafood Identification and Fabrication. In that class, which is an immersion class of 14 curricular days, they're exposed to multiple species of fish, they learn to distinguish fish based on their activity level and bone structure and they start to understand how, based on those characteristics, they should be prepared for consumption.

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They also get a lot of information on fishing methods and aquaculture systems as well as some exposure to certification bodies, NGOs and government organizations like NOAA (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration). And they also, from a practical standpoint, learn how to scale, head and gut and fillet different types of fish. They learn the straight cut and the up-and-over, and also how to handle crustaceans and molluscan shellfish and cephalopods. One thing we do is make sure to educate and don't advocate for a cause or a position, even though that's the name of your publication.

Why is that?

Students are impressionable. They have a tendency to gravitate to a cause that sounds like its logical or has social implications. We want them to be part of important initiatives and organizations that are doing wonderful things. However, we want them to do it from an informed standpoint. When you take a stand or action, there are often some casualties and you need do to know what those are to make an informed choice. For instance, fish boycotts over the years have not been effective and some fisheries under less pressure get caught in the crossfire.

You were once a fish butcher at LeBernardin. I know that restaurant and how demanding their kitchen staff is. What was it like cutting fish in the "Sistine Chapel of Seafood?"

It is a groundbreaking place. I was only the butcher for the first three or four months I was there before I became a cook upstairs, and it was a fortunate thing I got put down there. At first, I was saying why am I here, out of the action? But all the fish came in drawn or in the round. I got exposure and recognition and I started to understand the differences between the snappers, for instance, and the subtleties coming my way. It was great. I became quite the fish cutter; I did more of the finesse work. There was a great fillet guy, who worked in fish markets his whole life. He'd zip the fish from the carcass and I'd to the finer work. I learned through necessity how to do it all, and handle the fish, because sometimes he wouldn't show up! Most chefs straight-cut salmon, through the pin bones; he up-and-overed all the salmon. I learned how to really fillet salmon with more finesse than most chefs.

What are some of the common questions or comments your newer students have about aquaculture?

There is a sense, at first, that fish farming in general is great; it makes sense. They don't know how to distinguish good practices from less favorable practices. They don't know the ins and outs. They have a limited knowledge, and on more of a conceptual basis. Once we start to teach them the differences between intensive and extensive aquaculture, closed systems, and how it's done from country to country – regulations, criteria for sustainability, fallowing, feed conversion ratios, that kind of stuff – they realize that these things are a lot more complicated.

They also don't understand why not any species can be farmed. It's still a survey class, in that we give them basic, foundational information for them to be stimulated and inspired by, so that they go out and do more research on their own.

My goal is for the students to get exposure. It goes to the back of their brains, and when they have the responsibility to make purchasing decisions, there will be triggers to guide them to more responsible decisions. For example, we brought in some dogfish, a good fish for fish and chips. They get exposed to it, even if they don't see it again for a few years. Then they meet a fishmonger that presents dogfish and they remember it from their time at CIA: "If I saw it there, I probably should try it."

You're not going to move everybody into really caring about seafood sustainability, but if we teach a little about it, there will be times when they'll use that fish in other classes and there will be something from the curriculum that reinforces that this fish is part of a global cuisine.

Chefs Bruce Mattel and Mark Elia preparing sample plates for a seminar. Photo courtesy of CIA.

Chefs have a lot of power to change trends in food consumption. In order to make any realistic change, you have to change the customer demand. When a customer demands changes, the private sector has no other recourse but to change what they're offering, or they'll perish.

Of all the non-culinary education that your students get at CIA (sourcing, origins, ingredients, backstories, etc.) how challenging is the seafood category for them?

It's tough: The labeling and transparency of the seafood supply chain is way behind meat and poultry, which have grading, inspections, etc. But with seafood, it's often not labeled. It's getting better and you have to rely on your relationships to make sure you're getting what you're paid for.

Daurade and red snapper – these names get used for other species, it's crazy. Then tack on top of that the fishing methods, which are rarely reported. It baffles me that there aren't more regulations on origins. It can be done.

How has the curriculum changed since you were a CIA student? What were the seafood classes like in 1998?

There really weren't any. The seafood class, I wrote the curriculum and was one of the first to teach that class in 2001. We took the cooking out of the model, so we could concentrate on fabrication and identification. We have tastings every day. One day is devoted to flatfish, then another to salmon and trout. We have amped up the teaching on aquaculture and sustainable fishing. It's the current and future focus, and these students need to understand good practices.

About how much of this "non-culinary" education is part of the CIA student curriculum, and how much is straight-up knife and oven work?

For the first two years, it is 80 percent hands-on education, 20 percent didactic learning. Junior and senior year that is reversed.

GAA has co-sponsored some research into working culinary professionals' knowledge of seafood, sustainability and aquaculture. The findings show that many working chefs need help with seafood. Whose responsibility is this, ultimately? And what is a good way to reach working chefs outside of schools?

It's everybody's responsibility. Chefs have a lot of power to change trends in food consumption. In order to make any realistic change, you have to change the customer demand. When a customer demands changes, the private sector has no other recourse but to change what they're offering, or they'll perish.

Retailers have a huge head start over foodservice, engaging in certification, procurement policies and overall sustainability awareness. But two-thirds of all the seafood consumed in the United States is at restaurants. How can sustainability be messaged in restaurants effectively?

There's only a certain amount of information you can send to patrons in a restaurant. For menu copy, everything must be concise and focused.

The root of all the problems we have with food are two things: overpopulation and rapid growth in demand and the fact that everybody wants cheap food. If you think about seafood, who's going to have the most influence? It's companies like McDonald's – with its Filet O Fish using [Marine Stewardship Council] certified pollock – that can make a commitment to market that stewardship and be able to raise the price of that accordingly and get people to pay for it. It's going to be the biggest distributors of product to make the biggest splash.

What went into your school's procurement policy as it pertains to sustainable seafood and aquaculture? You guys must buy a lot of fish!

We've been using, as a rough guideline, the Seafood Watch principles. Then we take our information and use the seafood calculator on Fishchoice.com to analyze the species that are still in the red, based on Seafood Watch criteria, and address it but still make independent decisions.

Mattel and a student drain a shellfish bisque through rinsed doubled cheesecloth. Photo courtesy of CIA.

For instance, we buy farmed farmed salmon from Cooke Aquaculture, its True North brand. Seafood Watch rates some facilities as red, some as yellow. We still buy from them. For us, the only area they need to work on is the food-to-fish conversion ratio. But to us, buying Verlasso salmon from Chile doesn't make sense when Cooke is just 600 miles away. We don't just back down – we know we need to expose our students to certain species to give them a full education. It wouldn't be fair to them otherwise. You have to know what something really is in order to find a viable substitution.

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