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Cover Story



Port Clyde Fresh Catch processing plant (above). Elizabeth Cuccinello and Glenn Libby, below, with fresh shrimp

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New Processing Facility for Midcoast Fishery

— by *Georganne Davis*

On a frigid Saturday morning, Glen Libby and other members of the Midcoast Fishermen's Cooperative (MFC) have just finished loading their delivery truck with five-pound bags of fresh, bright-pink shrimp. The shrimp are slated for delivery to Community Supported Fishery (CSF) members in Belfast, Rockland, Damariscotta and the central Maine area who purchased whole or half shares in the CSF, which guarantees them fresh, raw, whole shrimp for the next six weeks. But within weeks MFC members hope to also be shipping cooked shrimp out of their new processing facility, housed in space leased from Marshall Point Sea Farms, a Port Clyde shellfish hatchery.

"This is our lifeline," Libby says, as he looks around the white walls of the as-yet- unfinished facility. As soon as Cooperative members install a water-purification system and receive licensing from the state, they can begin to offer cooked shrimp — whole, headless and peeled — and, once the groundfishing season begins in summer, freshly filleted fish. The group, which calls its line of products Port Clyde Fresh Catch (PCFC), is also considering shipping lobsters from the local lobstermen's co-op. "The sky's the limit, I'd say," says Libby.

The plan to directly market seafood is part of the effort to keep alive one of Maine's last traditional fishing communities. With its 12 remaining fishing boats, Port Clyde has the second-largest fishing fleet in Maine. New cuts in days at sea proposed by the National Marine Fisheries Service could leave the fleet with as few as 20 days of fishing, down from the current allocation of 48 per year, which is already

barely enough time for groundfishermen to make a living.

A system of management sectors is being proposed by the New England Fisheries Management Council. Under a sector system, fishermen-run cooperatives would share a certain portion of fishing quotas while maintaining accountability through catch limits and scientific monitoring, but the sector system won't be put into effect until the 2010 fishing season. Until then, the direct-marketing by MFC is going to be a struggle, says Libby, "but at least we have the opportunity to try." The shrimp fishing season this year is 28 days longer than last year — 180 days, running through May 29, and Port Clyde Fresh Catch hopes to be bringing in shrimp through March for their CSF customers. The boats will have to go out farther for the shrimp as the season progresses and will still need to bring in at least 1,000 pounds a day to make it profitable, but they're currently expanding their CSF markets in the hopes that the sales will sustain them.

Another possible future product for the fishermen to market is rock crabs, a largely untapped fishery. Rock crabs are bigger than peekytoe crabs and have large claws, like stone crabs. "Nobody's fishing them," Libby says. Currently, Senator Chris Rector is working on a bill for the Maine legislature that will allow fishermen to keep the rock crabs as a percentage of their bycatch, although he says he has not yet drafted the bill.

Port Clyde Fresh Catch started last winter, when the fishermen supplied about 150 shareholders with fresh shrimp for about \$1.35 per pound. Along with the shrimp, sold whole, shareholders received instructions on how to peel, cook and store the shrimp, along with recipes. The price then, and now, is about the same as that offered by roadside purveyors, with the advantage of knowing the shrimp supply can be counted on.

By spring, the CSF members were asking about fresh fish. About 180 shareholders bought full or half shares of the fish catch. A full share cost \$360 and included between 8 and 12 pounds of whole fish per week for 12 weeks. Libby and other fishermen demonstrated how to fillet the fish, as well as sharing fishing stories and their favorite recipes. In September, when MFC+ members attended the Common Ground Fair, where they circulated a survey asking what form of fish customers would prefer, they found that "a majority wanted the whole product," says Libby. But he knows that having the ability to also direct market filleted fish "is going to be big." Restauranters, who would like to support the local fishermen but haven't the time to deal with the whole fish, have told him, "If you filleted, I'd buy."

Libby and other MCF members have to wear many hats these days: fisherman, marketer, and advocate for the industry, attending meetings and legislative sessions all over the Northeastern seaboard. "Everybody's got a role," Libby says. His has become that of spokesperson, but others are at work fixing up the dock and completing the walls and installation of equipment at the processing facility. One of the hardest things is getting to all the meetings he has to attend; it's expensive and time-consuming, but, Libby says, he has a lot of help and support so he can travel to them. The group has also had a great deal of support from the Island Institute. "We're light years ahead of where we'd have been without them," says Libby.

Laura Kramar, marketing cooperative coordinator for the Midcoast Fisherman's Association, just celebrated the first year of working through the Island Institute to help PCFC build its brand and business. She describes her job as looking for barriers that exist between fish that's available for sale and the markets that want the fish, and then removing those barriers. She has the perfect qualifications for the job: a master's from UMaine in resource economics and policy, with a focus on sustainable agriculture. Pair this with her previous experience in marketing, sales and publishing, and you have a resume that's perfect for her current job and, says Kramar, "I love what I do." Right now she's helping to get a freezer put in at the processing facility, so the shrimp can be delivered frozen yet still with "that fresh-off-the-boat taste," and getting PCFC set up to take credit-card payment for orders in the near future.

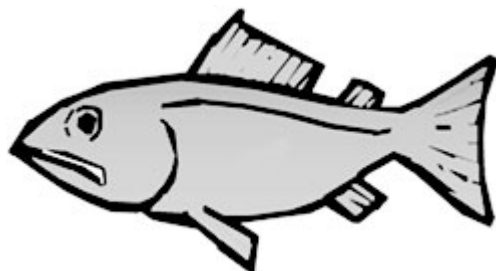
Libby tells a story about just how committed the Island Institute is to Maine fisheries. When Jen Litteral, policy advisor and research coordinator for MFC at Island Institute, was to attend a meeting of the Cape Cod Hook Fisherman's Association, she took orders for a delivery of 200 pounds of Maine shrimp. Libby asked how she planned to get the shrimp to the meeting and Litteral said she'd bring them in her car. Libby and others got some Styrofoam coolers and ice and loaded Litteral's back seat with filled coolers, which leaked, just as they feared they would. Kramar says her associate's car still bears faint whiffs of shrimp months after the delivery.

Direct sales to community members may be the only way to keep Maine fishermen fishing. But no one is certain that even direct sales will be enough to sustain the fishermen through the next years, as they wait for the days-at-sea system to be revamped into something they can live with. Libby refers to the MCF's efforts as "a crusade" — one that they'll pursue until it's no longer possible for them to gear up and head out to fish. "It's an access issue for Maine," Libby says. "They're going to lose their access to

the sea if we go away.”

Libby asks people to contact them to purchase memberships in the CSF — they even have gift certificates — and says anyone who signs up now for shrimp can get the full amount or arrange for a lesser number of weeks. If they prefer, those who’ve signed up already will be able to purchase cooked shrimp instead of raw once the processing begins. “Any way we can sell a product, we’ll do it,” Libby says.

Midcoast Community-Supported Fishery —



Six-week CSF subscriptions are available at seven locations right now. Delivery will begin February 6 through 8, and run through March 13 to 15. Shares are of whole shrimp that can be shelled at home. Half-shares of five pounds per week are \$45; full shares of 10 pounds are \$90. If it's not possible for an order to be picked up one week, arrangements can be made to double the order the following week. Orders can be placed by calling the MFC office at 372-8065, or by e-mailing glen@midcoastfishermen.org. There are seven locations and times for subscribers to choose from for pick-up:

Unity: Fridays any time after noon at Crosstrax Catering, 215 Depot Street.

Central Maine (Bangor/Newport/Skowhegan/Waterville/Orono): Fridays from 1 to 5 p.m. at the Crown of Maine Distribution Facility located at 14 Grogin Ave. in Newport. Any shares that are not picked up by 5 p.m. on Friday will be frozen for pick-up on the following Friday between 1 and 5 p.m.

St. George: Saturdays at 8: 30 a.m. at the Port Clyde Fresh Catch processing facility on Marshall Point Road in Port Clyde, behind Herring Gut Learning Center.

Damariscotta: Saturdays from 10:30 to 11 a.m. at Rising Tide Natural Foods Cooperative, located at 15 Coastal Market Drive.

Rockland: Saturdays from noon to 12:30 p.m. at the Good Tern Natural Foods Cooperative located at 750 Main Street.

Rockland: Sundays from 10:45 to 11:15 a.m. at the First Universalist Church in Rockland, 345 Broadway.

Belfast: Sundays from 12:15 to 12:45 p.m. at the Belfast Food Cooperative located at 123 High Street.

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