

<http://newspaper.asia1.com.sg/guide/story/0,4136,145806,00.html>

SUPER SAUCES

By Yeoh Wee Teck

October 25, 2007



I HATE to be corny but really, eating at Wan Hao is a saucy affair.

True to any Cantonese restaurant worth its reputation, the restaurant produces some of the most amazing sauces.

The soup is queen of all Cantonese creations, but the sauce is the plucky hand-maiden. Even for a dry dish with just a dab of sauce, that sauce will begreat.

Wan Hao presents a seafood menu that will last till 15 Dec.

You can order your seafood and ask for it to be cooked in a variety of ways.

My lunch started with chilled South African abalone with honey and sesame sauce (\$32 per piece).

The abalone was tender but chewy - but it was the dip that was the winner. It was sweet and had the fragrance of sesame.

Abalone can be bland, but the dip added a piquant sweetness. It was most lovely.

DUMPLING DELIGHT

The special shark's fin dumpling in superior stock (\$9.50) is on the regular dim sum menu, but it's so good, you should not give it amiss.

And for what you get, the price is really affordable.

And by the way, if you love the XO sauce, you can ask for the sauce alone with a bowl of rice and dine well off just that.

I liked the braised live crab claw served ona bed of wintermelon (\$25).

Again, it is the sauce that stood out. It was savoury, but only lightly so and it didn't obscure the sweetness of the crabmeat.

The wintermelon seemed to have absorbed the rich flavours of the sauce. It made each mouthful a treat.

Basil is a herb I like tremendously, so I was thrilled that it it was lavishly used in the wok-fried New Zealand mussels (\$18 for a small portion).

It was a wonderful-tasting dish and the scent of the basil will stay with you long after you've finished your meal.

If you're a rice eater, save it for the braised garoupa head and belly (\$50). This is cooked in a claypot with garlic, beancurd and mushrooms.

The savoury sauce is the perfect accompaniment for rice.

What sets Wan Hao apart is that the food has a wonderful home-cooked feel and flavour to it - with superior ingredients and presentation.

While a meal here will not be cheap - aside from the shark's fin dumpling - you can at least rest assured that it will be good.



The honey and sesame sauce in this chilled South African abalone dish had just the right amount of sweetness.



The wok-fried New Zealand Mussel with basil and fish sauce was a tasty dish.



<http://www.traffic.org/RenderPage.action?CategoryId=2103>

Abalone fishery closure not the answer—TRAFFIC

Cape Town, South Africa, October 25—the South African government's decision to close the commercial wild abalone fishery from 1st November 2007 is unlikely to lead to a decrease in abalone poaching, according to TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network.

"Whilst the decision has been taken in good faith, the real issue affecting the industry is the illegal harvest and trade in wild abalone," said Markus Bürgener, Senior Programme Officer with TRAFFIC.

For years, high levels of illegal harvest and trade in abalone has caused a decline in stocks and consequent annual reductions in the quota available to legal harvesters.

"It's clear the South African abalone fishery is in a crisis, but a closure should not necessarily be seen as a panacea," said Bürgener, adding that a three-year closure of the Chilean abalone fishery in the 1990s increased abalone prices on the black market and exacerbated the illegal fishery.

TRAFFIC warns that closure is only likely to succeed where comprehensive law enforcement, research and socio-economic initiatives are put in place and where stakeholders are directly involved in future abalone management plans.

In a Statement from the South African Ministry of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Minister van Schalkwyk noted it was a difficult decision to take because of its impact on the livelihoods of many people and families in the industry.

"If the Minister's objective was to protect the abalone stock, then he has made the wrong decision," commented Maria Hauck, a senior researcher at the Environmental Evaluation Unit, University of Cape Town, who has researched the socio-economic aspects of the abalone fishery for over a decade. Her research results have clearly indicated the danger of closing the fishery and the negative repercussions that could result.

"The Minister is alienating the legal fishermen, the very people he should be collaborating with to develop a strategy to protect the industry."

Bürgener noted that "we are encouraged to see that the Minister makes reference to the 'up-scaling' of monitoring and control on the part of the Department. However, we question why this is only happening with the closure of the fishery when poaching has been the major threat to the resource for many years."

Hauck voiced similar concerns pointing out that "law enforcement efforts should be implemented to protect the fishery, and should be seen as one strategy among many to combat the illegal abalone trade."

In a joint statement by Bürgener and Hauck in June 2007, they cautioned the Minister against closing the fishery and highlighted a number of negative repercussions that could result.

They stated: "the long-term sustainability of the fishery...in terms of management needs to be implemented."

Further, they argued that "an integrated strategy, with the involvement and support of all stakeholders" was required to protect the future of the abalone fishery, and warned that the closure of the fishery may in fact make the situation worse.

ENDS

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Notes

* TRAFFIC's work on the abalone trade in South Africa is generously funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) of the United Kingdom.



South Africa's abalone fishery has been closed, but it won't tackle the illegal harvesting of wild abalone
© Rob Tarr

SA bans wild abalone harvesting indefinitely



Picture by: Bloomberg

By: [Marian Olivier](#)

Published: 25 Oct 07 - 15:31

South Africa has placed an immediate ban on the commercial harvesting of wild abalone (also known as perlemoen) fishing - an industry that sustained some 800 jobs - to protect the species.

Government spokesperson **Themba Maseko** said on Thursday that Cabinet did, however, approve a social plan to address the job losses that would result from its decision this week to suspend wild abalone harvesting.

Some of the measures that had been incorporated in the social plan, included the development of a sustainable aqua-culture industry, and the issuing of additional permits for whale watching and shark cage diving.

"To suspend fishing in any fishery is a very difficult decision to take as we are aware that such a decision will have an impact on the livelihoods of many people and families in the industry. We are, unfortunately, at a point where the commercial harvesting of wild abalone can no longer be justified because the stock has declined to such an extent that the resource is threatened with commercial extinction," Environmental Affairs and Tourism Minister **Marthinus van Schalkwyk** said.

He explained that the main causes of the decline in abalone stocks were poaching and the migration of the west coast rock lobster into the abalone areas. Rock lobsters consumed sea urchins that provided the shelter to juvenile abalone.

"Studies show that unless decisive and immediate action is taken, the resource will collapse completely with little prospect of recovery."

South Africa's total allowable catch (TAC) has reached a record low of 125 t for the 2006/7 season.

In the early years, catches of abalone were unregulated and landings escalated to a high of nearly 3 000 t in 1965, before declining rapidly to a point in 1970, when the first commercial quotas within a TAC were introduced.

The stabilising effect of a TAC managed fishery was apparent, with catches remaining relatively constant at between 600 t/y and 700 t/y between 1970 and 1995.

Over the past 10 years, due to declining resources, the TAC has had to be reduced yearly from 615 t in 1995 to a record low of 125 t for the 2006/7 season.

Van Schalkwyk also said that, worldwide, abalone fisheries had either closed or were threatened by commercial extinction, for example the US, Canada, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

"The North American fisheries have now been closed for more that ten years. It has been suggested that such fisheries are slow to recover because closure was delayed," he said.



Abalone man to be charged under Tas laws too

Posted Thu Oct 25, 2007 5:32pm AEST

Tasmanian police say the seizure of \$20,000 worth of abalone in Melbourne today was the result of an interstate operation targetting illegal fishing.

Victorian Fisheries officers boarded the Spirit of Tasmania ferry in Melbourne this morning and found 500 abalone in the boot of a hire car.

A 37-year-old Sydney man is facing charges in the Melbourne Magistrates Court and will also be charged under Tasmanian laws.

Inspector Ross Paine says Tasmanian police are working with Victorian and New South Wales fisheries authorities to stop illegal fishing.

"The collaborative approach is really the only way to go when you're protecting an island state's resources," said Inspector Paine.

He says the markets for illegally-caught abalone are bigger interstate than in Tasmania.

Police have urged members of the public to report any cases of suspected abalone poaching.



Arrest prompts abalone divers to push for dog team

Posted October 25, 2007 13:42:00

Tasmania's Abalone Council is to further lobby the State Government for a sniffer dog team at the Devonport wharf.

Victorian Fisheries officers say they've seized illegal abalone worth \$20,000 from the Spirit of Tasmania.

Officers boarded the ferry about half past seven this morning and found 500 abalone in the boot of a hire car.

A 37-year-old man was arrested and is now being interviewed by police.

The chief executive of the Tasmanian Abalone Council, Dean Lisson says government has a bigger role to play in catching abalone poachers.

"I'll certainly be having further discussions with the Minister about the possibility of introducing a sniffer dog team in Devonport," Mr Lisson said.

"And I'll be hopeful we can get somewhere and get a team, sniffer dog team instituted or instigated up there as quickly as possible," he said.



South Africa: Government Places Ban On Abalone Fishing

[BuaNews](#) (Tshwane)

25 October 2007

Posted to the web 25 October 2007

Shaun Benton
Cape Town

Permission to fish for wild abalone, also known as perlemoen, has been suspended in South Africa from next month, says government spokesperson Themba Maseko, Thursday.

The decision to suspend permission for abalone fishing from 1 November 2007 was taken by Cabinet during one of its regular meetings on Wednesday, Mr Maseko said.

Abalone stock in South Africa is "in a crisis and threatened with commercial extinction", he said.

While resolving to suspend permission for abalone fishing, Cabinet at the same time approved a social plan to address the job losses that will result from this decision, Mr Maseko said.

He added that the social plan approved by Cabinet to address the impact of the decision on those who depend on abalone fishing for their livelihood would consider alternative means of earning a living from the sea.

"Some of the measures incorporated in the social plan will include the development of a sustainable aquaculture industry and issuing of additional permits for whale watching and shark-cage diving.

"Government will work with all key stakeholders to manage the transition, which I'm sure will be difficult for many involved in this industry," Mr Maseko said.

It is believed that there are about 800 jobs dependent on the legal fishing of abalone, which has also been subjected to sustained and widespread poaching over the years, given that the coveted and tasty shellfish fetches very high prices abroad, especially in the Far East.

The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism stated on Thursday that there are currently 302 rights holders (262 individual divers and 40 legal entities in the form of close corporations) operating in the sector, accounting for about 800 jobs, including those of individual divers.

A number of criminal syndicates, with international links, are believed to have been behind much of the widespread poaching, which has led to a decimation of stocks.

Mr Maseko conceded that it was "not an easy matter" for government to suspend abalone fishing, but added that government has the responsibility to "strike a good balance" between the species going extinct and the needs of communities living along South Africa's coastline.

The department said the decision by Cabinet to suspend permission for abalone fishing would ensure the survival of the species.

Welcoming Cabinet's decision, the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, said: "[Wednesday's] tough decision by Cabinet to support the suspension of wild abalone commercial fishing will ensure the survival of the species and will also ensure that our children and the generations that follow will know what perlemoen is.

"We are unfortunately at a point where the commercial harvesting of wild abalone can no longer be justified because the stock has declined to such an extent that the resource is threatened with commercial extinction."

Mr van Schalkwyk added: "The main causes of the decline in abalone stocks are poaching and the migration of West Coast Rock Lobster into the abalone areas. Rock Lobsters consume Sea Urchins that provide shelter to juvenile abalone.

"This in turn subjects the juvenile abalone to increased mortality. Studies further show that unless decisive and immediate action is taken, the resource will collapse completely with little prospect of recovery."

The minister added that for the past few years, the department's managers and researchers have been recommending closure of abalone fisheries.

The decision to suspend permission to fish for abalone was taken in terms of Section 16 of the Marine Living Resources Act.

The suspension of permission to fish for abalone as of 1 November was indefinite, Mr Maseko said earlier.

Of course, the possibility exists that the suspension could be lifted after a period of a few years should abalone stocks replenish themselves.

However, the minister cautioned that if there is not "a drastic decline" in poaching, he would consider a 10-year ban on perlemoen fishing.

Mr Van Schalkwyk said: "I want to give notice that if there is not a drastic decline in poaching I will have to apply my mind at the start of the next season as to whether it is perhaps time to consider a complete ban on all perlemoen harvesting for a period of ten years to allow the resource to recover."

The minister added that in other countries, abalone fisheries are also threatened with commercial extinction.

In North America, for example, abalone fisheries have now been closed for more than ten years, he said, adding that it has been suggested that such fisheries are slow to recover because closure was delayed.

To ensure that the suspension of harvesting is observed, monitoring and control of abalone by the department is to be scaled up, and abalone population dynamics will be monitored through regular research surveys.



Sydney man charged with trafficking abalone

October 25, 2007 - 9:52AM

Fisheries officers boarded the Spirit of Tasmania in Melbourne today to arrest a man over the trafficking of a commercial quantity of abalone.

Officers from Fisheries Victoria boarded the Spirit of Tasmania shortly after it docked at Station Pier at 7am and arrested a 37-year-old Sydney man.

The officers also seized a vehicle in which they allegedly found more than 500 abalone, along with wetsuits and diving equipment.

"There has been more than 500 abalone found," Fisheries Victoria spokesman Murray Donaldson told ABC Radio.

"The man has been arrested and taken to South Melbourne police station for interviewing.

"It will be alleged that he doesn't hold any (fishing) licences."

Fisheries Victoria alleges the abalone was poached from waters off Tasmania and was to be driven back to NSW where it would be sold on the black market for up to \$90 a kilogram.

Mr Donaldson said the arrest was made following a joint operation involving authorities in Tasmania, Victoria and NSW.

"There is a sergeant from Tasmania Police with us and he will be interviewing the person with respect to offences in that jurisdiction," he said.

"But by bringing fish into Victoria this person has committed offences under our Fisheries Act in trafficking in a commercial quantity of fish, and that will be the allegation we will be putting to him."

"All I can say is that there was a degree of sophistication with this particular operation."

AAP



Monday, 22 Oct 2007

Australian AVG virus threatens NZ paua

By MICHAEL COURTMAN - The Southland Times | Thursday, 18 October 2007

New Zealand paua could soon be under threat from a herpes-like virus that was decimating the Victorian abalone industry, Southern Paua Management Council deputy chairman Jeremy Cooper said.

The virus, called ganglio-neuritis or AVG, had affected a 200km stretch of Victorian coastline and killed up to 90 percent of abalone on infected reefs.

Abalone are similar to paua.

The virus does not present a danger to humans eating paua.

Australian scientists were unsure exactly how the virus spread from one area to another, but as it tended to "hop" along the coastline, it was believed it could be carried on contaminated fishing and diving gear, Mr Cooper said.

The virus could potentially have a devastating effect on New Zealand paua, which was closely related to Australian abalone species, and there was a possibility it could reach New Zealand, Mr Cooper said.

"A young surfer for example, might be able to carry it back to New Zealand on a wetsuit."

Mr Cooper said he had twice passed through New Zealand customs in Auckland declaring he had been diving in infected areas and visiting Victorian paua farms, yet had not been questioned by customs officers.

In contrast, whole parts of the Tasmanian coastline had been closed to divers by Tasmanian authorities, he said.

"Biosecurity should be stopping divers and surfers from affected areas at the border, but appear more interested in developing contingency plans for when it gets here."

Tasmanian authorities were recommending that divers thoroughly dry and disinfect equipment after use to help reduce the risk of the virus spreading.

Harry Peeters, of the Western Abalone Divers Association in Western Victoria, said the virus had had an enormous impact on the livelihoods of abalone divers in infected areas. "Quota has been halved and will likely be halved again next year.

"There have already been two divers leaving the industry and the reduced quota will put more pressure on those remaining."

In Tasmania, abalone quota has dropped substantially because of the fear the virus would jump Bass Strait, he said.

Southern Paua Management Council deputy chairman Storm Stanley said he had been asked by two of New Zealand's regional paua management councils to find out if New Zealand paua was susceptible to the virus.

"They have asked if we can send some healthy live animals from New Zealand to Australia on a one-way trip and arrange for the authorities there to expose our paua to the virus under quarantine conditions." If the paua succumbed to the disease, then the paua management councils would appeal to New Zealand authorities to introduce strict border controls to stop the virus spreading across the Tasman, Mr Stanley said.

Conversely, if the paua demonstrate resistance then the Australian abalone industry might benefit from finding out what it is in the New Zealand paua that provided resistance.

Fisheries scientist Bob Street said it would be technically feasible to send the live paua across the Tasman, but it would probably take a lot of effort to get it approved by biosecurity agencies in Australia and New Zealand.

The Southland Times contacted Biosecurity New Zealand's Border Standards division for comment but received no reply.



Abalone confiscated in surveillance operations

Posted Mon Oct 8, 2007 11:09am AEST

- [Map: Batemans Bay 2536](#)

Two abalone busts in Batemans Bay, in south-east New South Wales, are likely to land four men in court.

Batemans Bay highway patrol stopped a 56-year-old Canberra man on the Princes Highway and allegedly found 234 shucked abalone hidden in the spare tyre cavity of the boot of his car.

Most of the abalone were fresh, but 50 were frozen. Police also found scales and a large sum of cash.

In a separate incident, two men from Batemans Bay and another from Sydney were caught in a fisheries and police surveillance operation.

It is alleged that two of the men were diving for abalone while the other acted as a lookout. The 86 abalone confiscated were returned live to the water.

<http://www.smh.com.au/>

Woman escapes white pointer attack

October 15, 2007 - 12:34PM

A woman knocked from her surf ski by a white pointer shark near Byron Bay fought off the predator with her paddle before making it ashore with just a small bite wound to her wrist.

Measuring about 2.5m, the shark tipped 52-year-old Linda Whitehurst off her surf ski at The Pass, one of the most popular surf breaks at the NSW north coast tourist town.

The attack occurred at about 11.30am (AEST) on Monday as Mrs Whitehurst and her husband Glen were paddling some 150m from shore.

A shaken Mrs Whitehurst said she feared the shark would take hold of her leg before she was able to fight it off.

"My ankle's gone, he's going to grab a leg - that's what I thought," Mrs Whitehurst told Network Ten.

Her husband Glen described seeing the shark rise up and bite the back of his wife's surf ski.

"(It) literally lifted itself in the back of Linda's boat ... and had the back of the boat in its mouth and gave it a shake," he said.

Mrs Whitehurst said once she was in the water, she repeatedly struck the shark with her paddle until it let go.

"I just kept punching, punching, punching," she said, demonstrating how she thrust the paddle at the shark.

When the shark retreated, Mrs Whitehurst, an experienced paddler from Coopers Shoot, 6km south of Byron Bay, was able to make her way to shore before going to hospital.

She required four stitches in the small wound the shark left on her wrist.

"She received a few stitches in her arm, but there was no other damage, fortunately," a Byron Bay Hospital spokesman said.

The beach was closed after the attack and half an hour later, Surf Life Saving boat crews spotted the shark and chased it out to sea.

The beach was reopened about 2pm (AEST) on Monday, northern NSW lifeguard coordinator Stephen Leahy said.

News of the attack spread quickly around the Byron Bay area, with popular learn-to-surf classes cancelled and hundreds of beachgoers staying out of the surf despite the perfect spring conditions.

Authorities said it was unusual to find sharks so close to shore at Byron Bay, but Mr Leahy said there was a similar incident last week.

"There was a similar incident last Tuesday when a man in a kayak was menaced by a great white about eight to 10 foot long at Wategos Beach, just the next beach around from where this woman was attacked today," he said.

"It appears to be unusual that a shark would menace people like this.

"It's not unusual to see sharks when you are out at sea, but for one to ... go to today's extremes, it's most unusual."

The attack was the second in Australia in three days.

A 31-year-old Brisbane man was bitten by a bronze whaler shark on Saturday while spearfishing off a charter boat at Holmes Reef, about 240km east of Cairns in far north Queensland.

He suffered a deep, 30cm tear to his calf muscle and was airlifted by helicopter in a stable condition to the Cairns Base Hospital where he was said to be in "good spirits".

In February this year, a 26-year-old surfer was bitten by a shark at Shelley Beach, also on the NSW north coast.

He suffered cuts to his lower left leg and foot.

In January, an abalone diver working off the NSW south coast was also mauled by a shark in terrifying circumstances.

The three-metre shark closed its mouth over the head and shoulders of the 41-year-old diver, off Cape Howe, south of the fishing port of Eden.

He managed to club the shark's head and eyes with an abalone chisel until it spat him free.

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Source: *Hermanus Times*

[World News](#) 13/10/2007 20:29:11

House burnt down, vehicles stoned in abalone strike

Striking Abagold workers who are also members of the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) are now waging a war of intimidation and violence against non-striking employees and management at the Abalone farm.

One Abagold employee's shack in Zwelihle was burnt to the ground on Friday night while a petrol bomb was also thrown at the house of a divisional manager in Mt

Pleasant. However, the bomb did not explode.

Managing director of Abagold, Christo du Plessis said there were also earlier arson attempts on Tuesday last week when a petrol bomb was thrown at the home of a management member in Mt Pleasant and another home was set alight.

"On Friday afternoon a group of strikers threw stones at the Abagold bus that was on its way to offload temporary workers while the private car of one of the managers was also bombarded with stones," says Du Plessis.

"The incidents happened after management sent a notice to FAWU on Wednesday in which the union was informed that 11 workers who have been pinpointed with regard to acts of violence will be suspended and will have to attend disciplinary hearings."

Du Plessis said he believed only a small group of instigators were behind the violence and intimidation.

"We have notified the union that workers who want to return to work have two choices, they can continue with the current dispensation whereby wage negotiations will be held as usual during March next year or they can enter a multi-year agreement that will make provision for a substantial increase in October next year. We are still waiting for their response."

The strike was called about two weeks ago after management and the union reached a deadlock on wage negotiations.

Du Plessis said that management reached an agreement with employees in October 2006 in which they were granted an additional 16% increase on top of their March wage increases on condition that there would be no wage negotiations during 2007.

According to shop steward Patrein Zwelethemba there has never been an agreement with management in October and the 16% increase has been a "gift".

Du Plessis said three strikers who were involved in a stone-throwing incident at the onset of the strike were arrested and appeared in court.

<http://www.mercurynews.com/>

Poached abalone with lemongrass and ginger

Manka's Inverness Lodge in Inverness, as published in "West Coast Seafood" by Jay Harlow (Sasquatch Books, 366 pp.)
Article Launched: 10/10/2007 01:33:26 AM PDT

Manka's Inverness Lodge in Inverness has been closed since suffering a devastating fire in January. Its *prix fixe* dinners were celebrated for their focus on local, seasonal products, including abalone.

Serves 2 as an appetizer

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

1 small stalk lemongrass, chopped

1-inch chunk fresh ginger, coarsely chopped

1 cup dry white wine

1 live abalone (4 to 5 ounces)

1/2 cup cream

1 teaspoon juice from a jar of pickled ginger (optional)

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Combine oil, lemongrass and ginger in a small saucepan over low heat. Simmer 20 minutes, keeping heat very low so ginger barely starts to brown. Add wine, bring mixture to a boil, and reduce by two-thirds. Meanwhile, shuck, clean and slice abalone.

Strain oil and wine mixture into a skillet, and add cream. Bring mixture just to a boil and reduce it slightly, enough to coat a spoon. Season to taste, adding ginger juice if desired, then slip in abalone slices and poach until just tender, 30 to 45 seconds.

Serve abalone slices in the creamy broth.

<http://www.mercurynews.com/>

Abalone sashimi

Brett Yasukawa, trained sushi chef and now executive restaurant chef of the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco
Article Launched: 10/10/2007 01:33:30 AM PDT

Fresh abalone in the shell (one per person)

Kosher salt or sea salt

Soy sauce

Wasabi

Detach the "foot" of the abalone from the shell with a large kitchen spoon (a Japanese rice scoop works the best).

Once the shell is removed, gently pull away the liver (innards) and detach where needed. Cut off the mouth at the end of the narrow side.

Using a knife, trim off the dark fringe that wraps around the entire outer portion of the foot.

Sprinkle kosher or sea salt over the meat. With a firm bristle brush, scrub the entire foot, removing all loose particles. Rinse and repeat. Do not leave the salt on and go watch television for an hour. It will start to cure

the meat. Do not use iodized salt, as it will leave behind the iodized flavor.

With a knife, cut the top of the foot off, leaving a flat disk (use a towel to protect your non-knife holding hand). Cut that flat disk in half lengthwise. Slice into paper-thin pieces for sashimi. Then use the point of your knife to poke holes into the flesh to tenderize. When eating sashimi-style, do not pound abalone with a meat mallet. This will destroy its fresh, crunchy texture.

Serve abalone sashimi with soy sauce and wasabi.

From Brett Yasukawa, a trained sushi chef and now executive restaurant chef of the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco

<http://www.mercurynews.com/>

Abalone farming - life in the slow lane

SPEED RACER LEARNS PATIENCE IN RAISING PRIZED MOLLUSK

By Carolyn Jung

Mercury News

Article Launched: 10/10/2007 01:33:22 AM PDT

Customers looking at the farmed abalone as Bowwah Lau attends to ... (Josie Lepe / Mercury News)



Saturday nights at the Petaluma Fairgrounds, Silicon Valley mechanical engineer Doug Hayes indulges his passion for speed, strapping himself into a stock car to burn rubber around a noisy, dirt oval at 100 miles per hour.

Then Sunday mornings, he climbs bleary-eyed aboard his cabin cruiser at Pillar Point Harbor in Half Moon Bay to tackle a different pursuit, one that moves at an excruciatingly glacial pace.

But when you're the only farmer in Half Moon Bay raising abalone - which grow an inch a year, if that - you learn patience.

A lot of patience.

Hayes started applying for permits to establish the underwater farm when he was 35. This is the first year he began selling the pricey, live delicacy to the public and to a few restaurants. He's now 50.

"I like speed," Hayes says, realizing the contradiction. "Go figure."

California Abalone Co. in Half Moon Bay is owned by an unlikely duo with no farming background - Hayes and business partner Bowwah Lau of Fremont, who is a part-time receptionist in her husband's San Jose dental office. California is the only state in the country with abalone farms. There are 13 in the state; three of them are local.

The mollusk with the prized tender meat and the beautiful, iridescent shell once was plentiful in the wild. But overfishing and an increase in the population of predators such as sea otters have made wild abalone scarce.

As a result, cultivation of abalone has grown into a booming

industry worldwide. From 1989 to 1999 alone, worldwide production of farmed abalone increased more than 600 percent, according to Roy Gordon, president of FishTech, a global abalone-farming consulting firm based in San Rafael. There now are more than 1,000 abalone farms around the world. China leads the pack, producing more than 6,000 tons of farmed abalone annually.

Red abalone is the variety raised by most California farms. And it gets a "best choice rating" from the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program because the U.S. farms are so highly regulated.

"Farming of abalone is pretty environmentally benign," says George Leonard, science manager for the Seafood Watch program. "Most farmed abalone in California eat kelp - the grass of the sea - which is one of the fastest-growing plants out there."

Long road

Initially, after Half Moon Bay approved abalone farming, five companies expressed interest. But as the years wore on, only Hayes stayed the course.

It took him 10 years just to get the needed permits from a host of regulatory agencies, including the Regional Water Quality Control Board, the state Coastal Commission, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the San Mateo County Harbor District.

Although Hayes used to dive for wild abalone years ago, he did so more for the recreation than for any enjoyment of the mollusk itself. A grizzled, towering man with a wry sense of humor, Hayes decided to start the farm because he wanted a side business where he could be his own boss. He also was drawn to the challenge.

Hayes demurs when asked how much this particular challenge has cost him and Lau, who met through a mutual friend. He will only say it's "well into the six figures."

The "farm" is just inside the outer breakwater - 2,400 square feet of raft space with 20 plastic cages hanging underneath, guarded by a security system. Each cage is the size of a big refrigerator. Inside are panels, much like the frames in a beehive, to which the abalones cling.

Starting with seedlings, as the young abalone are called, from a Santa Barbara lab, Hayes now is growing about 25,000 abalones, the majority of them about 3 to 3 1/2 inches long.

Once a week, Hayes motors out on a boat into Monterey Bay to cut a ton of kelp, which is allowed by the permits he has. He loads it on his truck, drives it back to Half Moon Bay, then schleps it by boat again out to the abalones. It's back-breaking work.

Every Sunday year-round from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. unless the weather is harsh, he and Lau sell live abalone for \$28 a pound (about two abalone) off Hayes' boat docked at Pillar Point Harbor.

Curious passersby wander over to ask questions or to reminisce about how decades ago they effortlessly waded into local waters to gather abalone more than twice as big - for free.

Violetta Sorokina and her boyfriend Maxim Ershov, both of San Jose, had never eaten abalone before but moseyed over on a recent Sunday afternoon to get a better look at the creatures inside the 100-gallon tank at the back of Hayes' boat.

Lau plucked out an abalone, then weighed it on a nearby scale. She deposited it into a plastic bag along with a moist sponge, then pumped oxygen in to help keep the abalone alive. After sealing the bag, she handed it to the young couple, along with a pamphlet containing recipes and directions for how to shuck the abalone.

"We bought one to share," Ershov says.

"We have to check it out first," Sorokina says. "Maybe we'll be back for more."

They planned to eat it sashimi-style with soy sauce and wasabi. It's a method that particularly highlights the pleasant crunchiness of the raw meat.

When cooked, abalone takes on a whole different texture - buttery tender, almost like a firm, sweet scallop. "It has a different taste than anything else," Lau says. "It's not like any other fish or shellfish."

That's why so many chefs love it, including David Kinch of Manresa in Los Gatos, where abalone from Monterey Bay Abalone Co. is featured in different preparations year-round on the menu. One of Kinch's favorite ways to showcase abalone is alongside rich ingredients such as pig's trotter, avocado mousse and milk skin (made from boiled milk), which tastes like mozzarella.

"People talk about seasonal and local; it doesn't get any more local than abalone," Kinch says. "I love its richness. It's very elegant. There's a very royal flavor to it. It's a first-class ingredient."

And it's one that almost disappeared.

Abalone fossils have been found embedded in rocks dating from as far back as 70 million years ago, James Fraioli writes in "Ocean Friendly Cuisine" (Willow Creek Press, 231 pp., \$35). They are related to clams, scallops, sea slugs, octopuses and squid. But unlike clams, abalone is a gastropod - having only one shell. Its muscular foot allows it to clamp tightly to rocky surfaces.

In California, American Indians first fished for abalone. In the 1850s, Chinese immigrants became the first commercial fishermen. In the early part of the 20th century, Japanese immigrants began using deep-sea diving techniques. And after World War II, when scuba equipment became popularized, fishermen began harvesting abalone in extraordinary numbers. In 1957, a record 5.4 million pounds was caught, according to the California Department of Fish and Game.

Population plunge

Because abalone are so slow growing and because they are broadcast spawners (releasing eggs and sperm into the water no matter if another abalone is nearby or not), overfishing devastated the population, leaving it unable to recover.

By 1994, only 322,000 pounds were caught, according to the state Department of Fish and Game. And by 1997, commercial abalone fishing in California was shut down.

It remains illegal to buy or sell wild abalone in this state. Sport fishing of abalone remains highly restricted. It is allowed only north of San Francisco County, and only with a fishing

license. Only skin diving and shore picking are allowed; scuba gear is prohibited. Sport fishermen can take only red abalone seven inches across and larger - three per day during the season or 24 total per year.

On an overcast Sunday at Pillar Point Harbor, a petite Lau in a big straw hat and dark glasses, and an imposing Hayes, clad from head to toe in waterproof red nylon, wait patiently for customers. They think about all the hard work this has taken. If given the chance, would they do it all over again? Without hesitation, they both shake their heads.

It's been a long haul. A fascinating ride. And like the abalone, they just hope to survive.