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Raising The Profile Of An Undereaten Fish

By [AMBAR ESPINOZA \(/PEOPLE/AMBAR-ESPINOZA\)](#) • APR 9, 2015

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Fisherman Chris Connery guides the fish out.

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Fisherman Kevin William Jones (left), Chef Bill Idell (center), assistant professor at Johnson & Wales University, and fisherman Chris Connery (right). Idell observes fishermen unload their catch at Town Dock in Point Judith.

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It's not unusual for chefs at Johnson & Wales University (<https://www.jwu.edu/>) to take their students to local farms. So it's no surprise to find Chef Bill Idell with one of his students on the Heather Lynn, a large commercial fishing boat at Point Judith.

While fishermen unload their catch at Town Dock (<http://www.towndock.com/>), a wholesale seafood distributor, longtime commercial fisherman Fred Mattera shows Idell and his student what's happening on the boat. "This is Chris. He'll guide the fish out. You know, there's a fellow down here, he's called a lumper. And he loads the fish into the basket," explains Mattera.

Once the basket is full, the fishermen haul it up and send it out to a conveyor headed to the processing plant, Mattera continues to describe. "Mark catches it and then dumps it into the flume, of which goes inside, and they'll cull these fish a little bit based on size."

Some of the smaller fish in this catch are scup, a silvery local fish that on average weighs about a pound. Fishermen Kevin William Jones thinks they're an under appreciated species.

“It’s a good fish and people around here don’t eat scup, they don’t even know what you’re talking about,” said Jones. “And we sell a lot of it. There’s a lot of scup in here. There might be 30,000 pounds in here today.”



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Scup waiting to be unloaded from the fishing vessel the Heather Lynn at Point Judith.

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Town Dock ships scup to places with better markets for it, such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Canada. But Town Dock’s fleet manager Donald Fox said it’s tough to make a living selling scup.

“That’s the most volatile fish next to whiting,” Fox said. “It can go from a dime today to a dollar tomorrow a pound.”

It’s all about supply and demand. There’s plenty of supply along the Atlantic, but not enough demand for this fish. Rhode Island fishermen can catch up to 50,000 pounds of scup per day. But often they just pass it by, because New Englanders don’t have a taste for it. Fox encourages people to try it.

“Most people in New England are used to eating cod fish, flounders. As those get less accessible, they need to switch to a different species and they haven’t yet,” said Fox.

One reason it's challenging to sell scup is because it's bony and mostly sold whole, not in fillets, which home cooks usually prefer.

"Most people don't want to deal with a whole fish," said Fox. "They don't want to see eyes starin' back at 'em."



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Scup on ice in a kitchen at Johnson & Wales University.

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Fox is encouraged that the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation (<http://cfrfoundation.org/>) (CFRF) has found a company to develop a filleting machine that they plan to eventually bring to Point Judith. They're hopeful that soon, they'll be able to offer scup fillets at the supermarket. And they're trying to get more chefs interested in scup.

In a kitchen at Johnson & Wales University's culinary school, a student stands at the sink, with a tub of scup on ice to practice the art of filleting a whole fish. First he has to cut off the scup fins, which are especially sharp and spiky. Then he removes the scales with a metal brush.

Johnson & Wales Assistant Professor Chef Bill Idell said filleting is a valuable skill for a commercial chef to have.

“If you can train your staff to fillet the fish quickly, you can actually end up making good money on it, because even though you are going to spend more time working it, the price per pound is going to be much, much cheaper,” said Idell, who is also department chair of the College of Culinary Arts.



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Chefs have to remove the spiky fins of scup before removing the scales.

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The students in this kitchen are participating in a culinary seafood challenge (https://events.jwu.edu/event/2015_ri_seafood_challenge#.VSZD8NzF_To) to see who can create the best recipe for scup. The event, hosted by JWU for the second year in a row, is sponsored by the university, the CFRF (<http://cfrfoundation.org/>), which is supplying all the scup for practice and the competition itself, and the Rhode Island Sea Grant (<http://seagrants.gso.uri.edu/>).

Idell looks on as students peel carrots and chop lemongrass. He lifts a bag of thick, waxy dark green leaves that hint at this team's recipe.

“Smell this,” he said. “Isn't that nice? That's kaffir lime leaves. You can smell that, too. That's lemongrass. Two staple ingredients of southeast Asian cuisine.”

We won't give away more of this team's secret recipe, but Chef Idell said even simple pan seared scup tastes "fresh, number one. I would say it's mild, all right. It's not too fishy, compared to mackerel or even salmon to that degree. I don't think it's as fatty or fishy as that fish."

The culinary seafood challenge is part of a larger effort to increase the profile of these underappreciated fish in local markets. Organizers expect more than 140 people at the competition, where they will taste each team's dish and vote for their favorite recipe. A panel of fishermen will also be there to talk about the challenges and rewards of making their living at sea.

Cheff Idell says this program is about teaching the next generation of chefs to build menus around what food the changing seasons have to offer. And he says chefs will need to be flexible as climate change and warming seas change the types of fish that can be found in local waters.

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