

## How eating sea bass and crab can help Maine lobstermen

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By Christine Burns Rudalevige

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A group of Rhode Island fishermen who witnessed southern New England's near-shore lobster fishery evaporate and its offshore fishery diminish dramatically in their time on the water came to last month's Maine Fishermen's Forum in Rockland to give lobstermen here a bit of seasoned advice: Embrace ecosystem change while you're in a good position to do so.

These southerly neighbors acknowledge the Maine lobster fishery is currently rockin'. Preliminary numbers released by the Maine Department of Marine Resources set the value of last year's 119 million-pound lobster haul at \$484.5 million, up from \$438 million generated by 112 million pounds of lobster harvested in 2017. Both years are down, though, from the all-time high lobster landings of 132 million pounds (worth \$541 million) set in 2016.

The two-species Rhode Island fishermen told their Maine counterparts they should be targeting are Jonah crab and black sea bass. The former have long lived in offshore waters in the Gulf of Maine and the latter, a tasty fish historically found in the mid-Atlantic region, are showing up farther north because of warming waters.

"As the poster child for a fisherman who has had to adapt to sea change, I can tell you that black sea bass represents a huge opportunity," said Norbert Stamps, a Barrington, Rhode Island-based offshore lobster fisherman. Even if fishing for black sea bass is only done on a small scale, Stamps said, it can make an impact. He told of how his daughter got a license to fish just seven traps. "She goes out for two hours a day, pulls in her 50 pounds of sea bass and gets \$6 a pound for them. That's life-changing."

Port Judith, Rhode Island-based Captain John Peabody keeps his boat, the F/V Lady Clare, afloat with a mixed catch of offshore lobster, black sea bass and Jonah crab, the market for which he's seen double in the last 10 years. "I can't survive on lobster alone. But when I can haul in enough of all three species, I'm good to go," he said.

Maine fishermen are not as "good to go" on either of these species, each for a different reason. For Jonah crab, it's a matter of local market demand. According to Maine Sea Grant's seafood guide, Maine crabmeat comes from two species, "peekytoe" or rock crab and Jonah crab. Jonah crabs are medium-sized, sport black-tipped claws and are found off shore. Smaller rock crabs live closer to shore, in bays and rivers. The black-tipped claws are the tell-tale Jonah crab market item and can be found in specialty seafood shops and through community-supported fisheries cooperatives, but the more widely available fresh or frozen picked crabmeat is typically a mix of Jonah and rock crab.

A Maine lobster and crab license is required to harvest Jonah crab commercially here. According to Ben Martens, executive director of the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, there are currently very few, if any, fishermen specifically targeting Jonah crab. Rather, they get brought to market as bycatch when they turn up in lobster pots. But since the price for Jonah crab is lower than that of lobster, "if you're catching lobsters and the price is good, you aren't wasting time on crab," Martens said.

So what's an eater who wants to support a lobsterman's efforts to diversify her catch for the future to do? Well, ask for Jonah crab by name at your local fish market and at restaurants to help create a market demand that makes it worth her while to land it.

The issue standing in the way of Maine fishermen landing black sea bass is a regulatory one. The quotas for these fish are managed cooperatively by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, and higher quotas are allocated to the states south of Massachusetts where these fish have historically been more abundant. With the help of the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation, Rhode Island has created a black sea bass research fleet – fishermen who sign on to track the frequency in which they are finding these fish in their traps or nets – to collect the necessary data required to convince the council to increase their state's allocation.

"You've got to document what's going on in the waters you fish sooner rather than later so that you can fight to get access to the opportunity they represent," said Ken Murgo, a 29-year-old Point Judith-based fisherman who lands black sea bass, squid, whelks and Jonah crab.

Black sea bass is what is called a "data-poor species" in Maine, said Marissa McMahan, a senior fisheries scientist for the environmental science nonprofit Manomet. While there is plenty of anecdotal evidence of black sea bass ending up in Maine lobster traps recently, no hard data has been collected to date because traditional trawl surveys, like the ones used to count groundfish species, are not necessarily the correct mechanism to count black sea bass. The Rhode Island project employs nine commercial and recreational fishermen who use a variety of gear types to collect biological and fishery data on black sea bass within their normal fishing grounds throughout the year. McMahan said funds for such a fleet to be organized in Maine would require more market demand for black sea bass.

So, the question arises once again, what's an eater who wants to support a lobsterman's efforts to diversify his catch to do? Seek out black sea bass at your favorite fish markets. They are typically sold whole, but if you ask, market staff will scale, gut and fillet them for you and give you the stripped racks to take home, as they make excellent stock.

If all of that seems too much for you, simply order black sea bass off when you see it on a restaurant menu. Chefs from Cape Hatteras to Calais know just how well worth the effort these fish are on the plate.

### CRISPY SKINNED BLACK SEA BASS WITH JONAH CRAB, LEMON AND CAPER SAUCE

Black sea bass has a delicate flake, so it's best cooked with its skin intact. But since it crisps up very nicely, that is not a bad thing. The Jonah crab in this dish drives home the point of the value of a diversified income for Maine fishermen.

**Serves 4**

**4 skin-on black sea bass fillets**

**Salt**

**1 lemon**



The author sautes garlic, capers and lemon peel in butter while a fillet of black bass sears in a cast-iron pan.  
Staff photo by Ben McCanna

**6 tablespoons butter**

**2 tablespoons drained capers**

**2 garlic cloves, smashed and peeled**

**1/2 cup picked Jonah crabmeat**

Use a very sharp knife to score the skin of the fillets to prevent them from curling when they encounter the heat. Season fish with salt and let rest 20 minutes.

Use a vegetable peeler to remove the zest from the lemon in 1/2-inch wide strips. Juice the lemon.

Place a large skillet over medium high heat and melt 2 tablespoons of butter. Place fillets skin-side down into the hot pan. Do not fiddle with the fish. Let it cook until the flesh is opaque 80 percent of the way through the fillets. When just an-inch wide strip of the flesh is not yet cooked, use an angled fish spatula to flip the fillets. Add the remaining butter to the pan. Then add lemon zest strips, capers and garlic. As the butter melts, tip the pan away from you and let the butter and aromatics pool at the bottom edge. Use a spoon to transfer the flavored butter up over the skin side of the fillets as they finish cooking. This butter basting process both makes the skin extra crispy and flavors the fish.

Remove the pan from the heat. Transfer the fillets on a warm plate. Remove and compost the zest and garlic cloves. Add crabmeat and 2 tablespoons of lemon juice to the pan with the browned butter. Stir gently to combine. And distribute the mixture equally across the fillets. Serve immediately.

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