

Hey, everyone, this is Peter Hanlon, and today I'm talking to Sean Dimin, who is the co-founder of [Sea To Table](#), a family business that partners with local fisherman from small scale, sustainable wild fisheries and connects them directly with restaurants and chefs all across the country. Sean, thanks so much for being on the podcast with us.

My pleasure.

So starting off, why don't you tell us a little bit about Sea To Table?

Sea To Table is a business that my family started that works to connect small-scale fisheries, both fishermen and fishing communities, with markets, mainly restaurants and retailers.

Now I know Sea To Table traces back to a family visit to Tobago, so I'm wondering if you could take us back a little bit to that. How old were you and how did your family come to think of this idea for the new business?

Sure. The first time I went to Tobago I must have been about 12 or 13 years old. We have a big family. I've got three brothers and a sister. And my parents would take us as far as the frequent flier miles would take us. And it took us to Trinidad and we'd hop a flight from Trinidad to Tobago, and a small Suzuki Samurai for seven people and their baggage to the far end of Tobago to a little island, a little village called Charlotteville. And it was there that my dad had the idea that all these fishermen catching beautiful fish lacked markets. And being from New York we knew we had plenty of chefs and plenty of restaurants that would be hungry for these fishermen's hand-line fish. And the challenge was figuring out how to connect the two. And that's where the idea of the business was born.

Now, does fishing run in your family's history?

Yes, although we can't really consider ourselves fishermen: we are not commercial fishermen. But my grandfather, my father's father, has always had a boat, he has always fished, and it's been more than a hobby; more of a passion. But he was an accountant — he was a fisherman who earned a living being an accountant.

And so now, getting back to the business, how is your model of a fish distribution different from the typical model today?

The typical model is quite convoluted and perhaps even by design. Most fish makes its way from where it was caught to centralized markets, wholesale markets. Whether they are in Miami, or New York's Fulton Fish market or Seattle's Pike Place, or Chicago's market, where they get mixed in with all different fishes from all over the world, and really bought and sold as commodities. It loses the story of where they came from and who caught them. And once they end up at these wholesale markets, like I said, they are bought and sold and they go from wholesalers to local distributors, who then take possession of them from these markets. Perhaps that distributor is down the road or perhaps he's another flight away in a different city. But by that time the fish is a week, up to two weeks old already. And from there that end distributor will have relationships with restaurants and sell the fish and perhaps fillet the fish and deliver the fish. And oftentimes they have no idea of where that fish actually began its journey.

So what we do is we work to create a clean, clear line of traceability, really telling the story of that fish all the way from the sea to the table, from the fishermen who caught it, the boat where it landed, the dock where it was landed, the people involved in that fishing community, and communicate that and sell it along with the fish. And we find people react very well to knowing where their food comes from. So that's the clarity we try to provide in our business.

Now has the idea of sustainability with these fisheries always factored into the business from the beginning?

We didn't know about sustainable seafood when we first started our business in the Caribbean. It was just a man on small open skiffs hand-lining the fish. It wasn't later until we realized that this very selective method of fishing was inherently sustainable, and that's why this fishing community was still so vibrant and active, that they hadn't overfished their fish stocks. Once we learned that there was a good way to do things and a bad way to do things, it's just always been our way to just do it the right way. And there was a right way to source seafood. It was to work with the men and women who harvest it responsibly. And a big part of it is knowing where that fish comes from. And that if a diner or a chef or a fish monger or a customer at a supermarket can be told where the fish came from, how it was caught, who caught it and has that clear line of traceability, all that information, chances are they are going to make the right decision. And if they don't have all that information, chances are it's not the right fish.

So I imagine that when you first started breaking into the world of these fishermen, it might have been a little tough. Did you go into this with any trepidation? And actually the chefs too--was there any skepticism on their part when you were first starting?

I think maybe I was too young, and I was too confident, and I had no idea what I was stepping into. And it wasn't my first business, it was my second business, but it was, as I start to learn what other people do with their lives, I don't know if I'd make the same step. It's a very difficult business. It's very rewarding, but coordinating fresh fish from independent-minded fishermen to a strong-willed chef is like being in the middle of a rock and a hard place, with a lot of weather and uncertainties in between.

So has it gotten to the point now, do you connect chefs and fishermen like face-to-face ever?

It's funny, because tomorrow I'm actually bringing a few chefs from New York City out fishing.

Great. And that will be off in Montauk, I'm assuming?

Yes. On the south shore of Long Island.

So now, when you are deciding to work with a particular fisherman today, what is it that you are looking for, in terms of how they operate or where they are. Or what are certain factors that go into it?

Knowing them is the first part of it. Really having that personal relationship as key, is number one. And the second is that we tie our hands to science-based NGOs that dictate what seafood we can and cannot offer. So we take the science out of our own hands and put it into, oddly enough, the hands of scientists. So they are the ones who allow us to work with specific fisheries, with specific species, with specific catch methods. If it's considered a red-listed species by all the major organizations that rate these things we, by our own accord, will not deal in that fish. But if it is a species that's got a healthy population, a catch method that's appropriate, good management in place, then we look to the fishermen for quality and we look to them for consistency and professionalism. And is it someone that we want to support? Because what we do, hooking them up with restaurants and chefs is that we give them better market access than they would otherwise have, and we understand that that's a powerful tool for change.

So one feature I really like from Sea To Table's website, and the weekly newsletter, is the On the Dock Today feature, where you can see what fish are available, where they are from. I know for a lot of people, though, the gear the fishermen use can be a little mysterious. So maybe just going through a couple, can you just give a brief description of how these fish are caught? For example, if there's a yellow fin tuna that's line caught, what does that mean, really?

It can mean one of two things. It can mean it was caught by rod and reel, which is more of a sport fishing way to do it, where you troll lures behind a boat, or even fish with live bait. It can also mean that it was caught hook and line with pelagic longlines, where there's multiple hooks on a main line strung out between two points, all baited and left overnight for fish to come and eat, get hooked and then be retrieved within hours of being hooked.

And similarly, if there's salmon that's net caught, what would that mean?

It could mean a number of fishing methods. Most or all the salmon up in Alaska is net caught. It could either be set nets, which are set off remote beaches, it could be gill nets which are put onto the back of boats and caught in rivers and estuaries; it could be seine nets that go out and circle schools of salmon and then tender them overboard by the thousands of pounds.

Now do you ever get a chance to participate in these different methods when you go to visit these fishermen?

That's what keeps me going, that's the pleasure of my job.

That's great. Any good stories from those visits, maybe?

No, not that are appropriate for the public!

So actually moving in a little different vein, towards aquaculture, there's been a lot of movement, or a lot of news about it recently, like NOAA going ahead potentially with offshore fish farming; salmon and tuna farming has created a lot of controversy. And meanwhile there's a lot of onshore recirculating aquaculture that's a lot more sustainable. But what are your views on aquaculture, and do you

see it as a threat to fishermen and their way of life, or is it possibly some sort of partnership for the future?

I certainly don't see it as a threat. I see it as a reality. It's a necessary reality. There is only so much wild fish in the world, and luckily, because of greater management coming into place, that those fish stocks are going to be protected. And that's going to increase the value of wild fish and that's going to price it at a point where not everyone in the world is going to be able to afford it. But seafood and fish, in general, is a great source of protein and very healthy. And there is going to be more and more aquaculture involved in people's diets. There is already a lot that people don't know about. Again, there are right ways to do things and wrong ways to do things. And unfortunately, a lot of aquaculture started out in the wrong foot. And there have been a lot of problems with all of the aquaculture that are only being addressed now and oversight is only coming in now.

As far as fishermen seeing it as a threat, they do see it as a threat, but unnecessarily so. It's a separate thing and partnership in it, I'm not sure, I think it's kind of the difference between a fisherman and a farmer. They are going to have to share similar resources, especially in open water fish farming, like they propose in the Gulf. But as long as aquaculture is done correctly and wild fishing is managed correctly, there's no reason they can't co-exist.

That's interesting, the comparison with agriculture, because a lot of interest in sustainable agriculture is about sourcing locally. Do you think there is a space for that with sustainable seafood as well?

I do. I do. I certainly, even wild fish, not everybody knows the fish that live, that migrate, that are caught right outside the shores. I'm based here right in Brooklyn and we have great fisheries around New York that people didn't really know about.

As far as aquaculture, there is an interesting movement going around where people are utilizing empty spaces to produce farmed fish within urban areas. It's kind of a breakthrough, but we get notices about it all the time. And I think I most recently got calls from a restaurant group and they were approached by a company that's offering them shrimp from Las Vegas.

That's interesting, and how did they react?

The same as you and me. But it's something that's science fiction at this point. Well, it's reality, but it's too strange to comprehend, that you eat fish out of Las Vegas, that's grown and raised in Las Vegas. But the main issues are feed, energy and water. And if you can do the things correctly, there's no reason why you don't limit the transportation between where food is grown and where food is consumed, it's a really interesting concept.

Another aspect I found interesting was lionfish, which is invasive in the Caribbean, the Gulf and a few other areas, are pretty ravenous predators now and I've noticed that you've been working on providing a connection with lionfish and chefs, serving it as some sort of new delicacy. How is that going?

It's tough, it's really tough. Lionfish are actually a very real problem and they are getting more and more populated up and down the Eastern Seaboard and the Gulf, throughout the Caribbean. They are just breeding and multiplying unchecked with no natural predators. And while it's an interesting concept to eat lionfish, to literally overfish them, targeted overfishing to get them out of the ecosystem, the challenges of harvesting them have been outweighed by the markets created.

So you talked about traceability earlier, how you provide that traceability for people and what they are eating is well managed and caught properly, any thoughts

of expanding the business to being say, in a market or a grocer to be sold direct to consumers. Is that possible?

I work with some companies now that sell direct to consumers. One thing that's interesting to us is scaling our model to reach out to more people. Like you say, we feel like we're doing a good thing, and we're creating good connections, we're putting value back into fishing communities, which is something they desperately need. And we're teaching good fish that's harvested properly and managed correctly and is delicious and healthy and putting it into more and more people's homes. And it comes to a price point and it comes to a means of delivery and a way of marketing. And what we'd like to do is figure out how to reach out past these high-end restaurants where we were first established.

So I'm just curious, is your whole family active in the business? Or is it just you and your father?

Everyone is active, in a way. My younger brother, Alex, works with us full time, my youngest brother just graduated from college, and everybody helps out when there is something to do.

That's great. So you get the whole family in the office sometimes.

Yeah, that's fun.

And then just one more question actually, do you ever think of ditching the city and signing onto a fishing crew during those visits?

Every time. Yes.

All right, Sean, thanks so much for joining us today.

My pleasure, thank you.

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