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Joe Hafner: Catching Up at Santa Barbara's Saturday Fishermen's Market

By Joe Hafner, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 07.03.2013 6:46 p.m.

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Its 7:05 in the morning, and I step up to Navy Pier in Santa Barbara with a coffee in one hand and a notebook in the other. I'm here to check out the Saturday Fishermen's Market that a select group of Santa Barbara fishermen established to sell directly to their customers. What I found was not only a lesson in sustainability (which I will write about in an upcoming column), but dockside entertainment as well.



Being from the Northeast, I'm expecting a surly group, but instead am greeted by the assembled fishermen enthusiastically. The market is open from 7 to 11 a.m., but they have been preparing for hours.

It has all the excitement of a lemonade stand, and I get the feeling they really enjoy Saturdays.

The Santa Barbara Saturday Fishermen's Market was brought to my attention when searching for a story to do on sustainable seafood. A friend recommended me to [urchin diver Stephanie Mutz](#). I had heard of her before through my research on Santa Barbara — as I searched for connections to purchase fish for my private chef gig.

Mutz is one of about 300 urchin divers in California and the only female diver to hold a permit. Sea urchin in California are considered some of the best in the world. She dives for urchin 20 to 100 feet down in the kelp beds off of [San Miguel](#), [Santa Cruz](#) and [Santa Rosa](#) islands, depending on where they are.

Mutz was kind enough to defer another story on her (there have been many) and instead asked that I concentrate on the market held each Saturday at Navy Pier on the waterfront, rain or shine.

After several visits, I realized there was more than enough to write. When I arrived at the market in late April, I was treated to huge tanks of live rock crabs, and the urchin had already sold out. The early bird gets the urchin, I suppose.

The Fishermen's Market works side by side with the [Santa Barbara Fish Market](#) to bring the best fresh seafood to our pier. The fishermen themselves cannot fillet the whole fish for you, but they kindly direct customers to the Santa Barbara Fish Market, where it can be processed free of charge.

They are also able to open urchin if you would like so you can enjoy a seaside breakfast of champions like Mutz's longtime customer Christian, from Brittney, France, by way of Los Angeles. Christian drives up to eat urchin on occasion and is

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kind enough to share with any passerby who seems interested.

Mutz dives for the urchin in 30 to 90 feet of water in the kelp forests off the islands. She dives attached to a breather going to her boat that allows her up to 400-plus feet of distance in which to work. Much of her catch goes south to be distributed to Los Angeles and beyond, but she always holds back enough for Saturday's Fishermen's Market.

She sells directly to several restaurants locally, including [Anchor Woodfire](#)

[Kitchen](#), where I had an awesome dish made with sea urchin and sweetbreads.

Adding to the bargain is the fact that Mutz sells the urchin direct to customers on Saturday at an inconceivably low \$5 each — for live sea urchin. My East Coast chef friends would be in heaven.

Just a stall over was fisherman [Paul Teall](#), selling rock crab and, interestingly, kelp. Teall isn't shy and loudly touts kelp as "the new kale!" to anyone passing by. He has printed up a fact sheet for customers and has plenty of recipes for those new to kelp.

He fired off a few delicious-sounding recipe ideas, including kelp casserole and kelp golumpke. (Someone yelled this out when they heard I was part Polish — I'm not sure whether they were pulling my leg.) He compares the taste of kelp to fiddlehead ferns, which I've worked with on the East Coast in the spring.

His latest project is kelp chips, made in the oven or microwave that are puffy and crunchy and give kale chips a run for their money. Judging by his empty cooler, it seems to be catching on.

Stop by and chat with Teall if you get a chance, and he will be sure to fill you in about everything seafood in Santa Barbara and beyond.

Teall fishes for rockfish, and he had a great selection more recently when I stopped by for pictures. There are several varieties to choose from, but what caught my eye was a beautiful vermilion rockfish. I asked Teall how he finds time for the market on Saturdays, and he says he would rather have someone else handle deliveries and connect directly with his customers at the dock.

One more note: Teall's wife Katie, is the chef/owner of [Montecito Confections](#), a fantastic spot on Coast Village Road where they do everything from wedding cakes to sweet and savory treats.

Teall has two sons, and his older son is fishing in Alaska — it's clear that food stewardship runs in the family.

On the other side of Mutz is fisherman [Sam Shrout](#), who had live rock crab every time I was there. He had copper rockfish in all sizes, but what really impressed me was the selection of live lingcod.



Urchin diver Stephanie Mutz with longtime customer Christian and a Florida man trying urchin for the first time during Santa Barbara's Saturday Fishermen's Market. (Joe Hafner / Noozhawk photo)



Fisherman Paul Teall with a line-caught vermilion snapper. (Joe Hafner / Noozhawk photo)

Shrout kindly took the time to explain to me the ins and outs of rock crab, such as how to squeeze the second to the back leg to make sure the shell is firm, meaning the crab has not recently molted and expended its energy (and meat) on a new shell. Some customers prefer the smaller female crabs with eggs, and he sells just the larger claws separately if you are inclined.

I should note that in addition to rockfish, crab and the other species listed here, the fishermen also sell halibut, local salmon, spot prawns, white seabass and spiny lobster among other things when available. If you follow Mutz on [Twitter @seastepfish](#), she posts updates before the market for the whole group and will even help you reserve a fish to pick up!



Fisherman Sam Shrout talks about rock crab. (Joe Hafner / Noozhawk photo)

I have more on the Saturday Fishermen's Market and will post more links next week along with information on issues such as sustainability, global pricing and more in part two. For now, get down to the market this Saturday and let me know what you think at jhafner@noozhawk.com.

See you next week!

— *Chef Joe Hafner writes the weekly [Noozhawk](#) column [Word of Mouth](#) and can be reached at jhafner@noozhawk.com. [Click here for previous columns](#). The opinions expressed are his own.*



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