

Making Sustainable Seafood Easy

By Matt Kettmann ([Contact](#))

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Paul Wellman

FISH IS FUN: Salty Girls Laura Johnson (left) and Norah Eddy ensure their products are truly eco-friendly.

Salty Girl Seafood Connects Chefs and Everyday Consumers with Fresh, Properly Harvested Fish

Whether eyeing the seafood at the back of a grocery store or considering a restaurant's catch of the day, consumers are frequently confused about which fish is the truly sustainable option. And with such a hypersensitive eco-conscious environment surrounding an often murky path from boat to plate, we're also increasingly skeptical about whether what's advertised on the menu is really what winds up on our forks.

Seeking to give clarity to these dark dining depths are the women behind Salty Girl Seafood, a UCSB Bren School–originated company that's connecting both chefs and everyday eaters to seafood that's certifiably sustainable and tracked from hook to kitchen. “We have backgrounds in fisheries management, but it's hard even for us to figure out what's the right choice, let alone the average person, chef, or business owner,” said Laura Johnson, a Chicago native who started Salty Girl with Rhode Islander Norah Eddy as one of the Bren School's Eco-Entrepreneurship projects in 2012. “And anyone can label their stuff as sustainable, but who do you trust?”

Upon getting their degrees last summer — “We made our first sale the day we graduated,” reported Eddy — Salty Girl started tackling the problem at the distribution level, cultivating ties with both fishermen, from Santa Barbara to Morro Bay and Ventura, and restaurants, including Julienne, S.Y. Kitchen, and Full of Life Flatbread. “It's a lot of relationship-building,” said Eddy. “That's our favorite part.”

The harder part is tracking the ever-changing understanding of global fish stocks and fishing tactics. The Salty Girl

team must constantly consult the latest research to confirm the health of a particular fishery while also vetting each vessel's gear, a diligence that makes the company a de facto sustainability validation agency. To scale up the program, they recently launched a website where chefs and seafood retailers from around the region can track today's catch and place orders, with Salty Girl handling all of the payment and distribution logistics. Conversations are already happening with fishermen from Fort Bragg to Alaska, and they hope to conquer the West Coast before expanding their service nationally. "The idea is to create greater access to sustainable, traceable seafood across the country," said Eddy.



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Though there is plenty of competition from existing and entrenched seafood distributors, Seattle-raised Gina Auriemma, a Bren School grad who joined as chief information officer in January 2014, believes it would be hard to retroactively retool a business toward sustainable sourcing. "We're so lucky to be building a seafood company from the ground up," she said. "It's a unique opportunity."

With so many regular folks wondering how they, too, could get their hands on fresh, feel-good fish, the Salty Girl team decided to tackle the retail market, as well. Last month, they unveiled their direct-to-consumer, flash-frozen seafood products, including garlic-chili-rub rockfish and teriyaki black cod, complete with explanations of each fishery and tips on how best to cook it. "We condense down all of the info so it's easy for people to understand," said Johnson. Those packages are now on sale at Gladden & Sons in Goleta, Isabella Gourmet Foods in Santa Barbara, New Frontiers Market in Solvang, and online elsewhere via Good Eggs Los Angeles.

With this multipronged approach, the Salty Girls hope that they can encourage people to pay a premium for truly sustainable fish, thereby giving financial incentives for more fishermen to opt for eco-friendly choices. And if they learned one thing at the Bren School — where Eddy and Johnson were the first students to simultaneously pursue both an Eco-E business and group graduate project (on Galapagos fishery management) — it's that business interests must drive sustainability.

"There's a lot of negativity surrounding ocean issues, but we are ocean lovers," said Eddy. "You can talk about the problems until you're blue in the face, but my dad always said you're either part of the problem or part of the solution. That's what we're trying to do here."

See saltygirlseafood.com.

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