

From Sitka to Madison



The fleet at rest in Eliason Harbor, Sitka. Annina Giezendanner photo

Madison, Wis., and Lake Monona.

A new way to sell seafood – community-supported fisheries

Cindy Severt is a data librarian at the University of Wisconsin. The Madison resident is also an avid gardener and her husband is a hunter. They like to know where their food comes from and to support local farmers.

Severt recently found a way to connect more directly with another one of her passions – seafood. Although she lives in the American heartland, Severt spent many evenings last summer and this fall dining on Alaska wild salmon delivered to her home.

“There was a knock at my door and when I opened it, there was a guy standing there with 5 pounds of king salmon from Alaska, wrapped in brown paper, with a letter telling me where the salmon came from and who caught it,” said Severt.

As a librarian, Severt is a detail person – someone who relishes information. She said she appreciates knowing that the king

salmon she received came from Sara Ohlin, a North Carolina transplant who has run her own power troller out of Sitka for the past six years.

Ohlin moved to Sitka a decade ago to work at a fish plant, a job she found on the Internet. After several years as a deckhand crewing on other people’s boats, Olin decided to buy her own vessel and sink \$34,000 into a commercial fishing permit.

Now she spends summers, and sometimes parts of the winter, fishing Alaska’s Inside Passage, mostly for salmon but also at times for shrimp, halibut, and black cod.

“It’s pretty cool for people to know who caught the fish they’re eating. It’s also nice to have a connection with people who are getting my salmon,” said Ohlin.

Boat to table: Severt and Ohlin became connected through Sitka



When Cindy Severt, left, wants salmon in Wisconsin, she gets it at her doorstep from Sara Ohlin, right, a troller out of Sitka. Fishermen who are a part of Sitka Salmon Shares get paid more for impeccably handled salmon.

Consumer-supported seafood in Astoria

Mark and Alana Kujala have been selling fresh, canned, and smoked seafood at farmers markets in Beaverton and Astoria for years. Now, the Warrenton residents are taking their direct marketing a step further. They're starting a seafood version of community-supported agriculture. In November, they will begin delivering individual packages of fresh seafood to the Astoria Co-op every Friday for customers who sign up for weekly deliveries.

It's another example of an emerging trend toward community-supported fisheries.

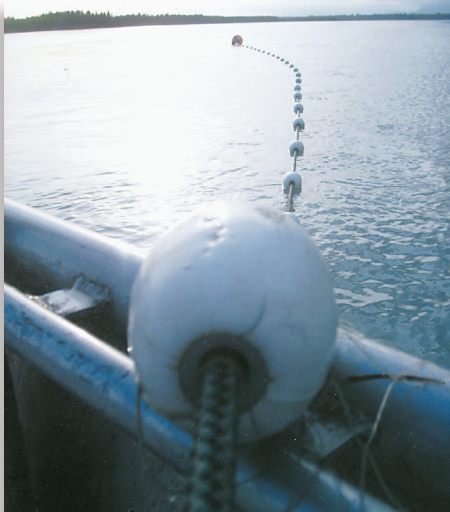
Mark Kujala said he noticed that a lot of the farms selling produce at farmers markets have their own community-supported agriculture programs that deliver fresh produce to customers on a regular basis. One by one, people started suggesting the Kujalas do something similar with their seafood. They're starting their CSF in Astoria with an eye toward expanding into the Portland area.

"What we're doing now is responding to what customers have asked for," said Mark Kujala. "We're anxious to see what the possibilities are. We're starting small and hoping for big things."

CSAs allow customers to buy shares of a farm's crops directly from the farmer. They usually offer an annual subscription and deliver fresh produce to consumers weekly or monthly. Buying fish directly from fishermen isn't unheard of, but on the West Coast, organized community-supported fishery programs are still pretty rare.

More: <http://ecotrope.opb.org/2012/10/cannery-launches-a-csa-for-seafood-in-astoria/>

— Pacific Fishing contributor *Cassandra Marie Profita* writing in her blog *Ecotrope*, a service of Oregon Public Radio.



Sitka Salmon Shares sells fish from trollers and gillnetters.

Salmon Shares, a new boat-to-table seafood company modeled after community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, a growing trend in food circles over the past two decades.

CSAs operate much like subscription services. Members pay an upfront fee and, over the course of the growing season, they receive boxes or baskets of locally grown vegetables and fruits, or in some cases, eggs, meat, cheese, or even flowers.

Community-supported fishery (CSF) programs operate much the same, providing fish instead of agricultural products or meat. There are currently more than two dozen CSFs across the country, according to www.localcatch.org, a website that tracks the programs.

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To see a glimpse of skipper Sara Ohlin through the lens of Sitka Salmon Shares, go to www.sitkasalmonshares.com/sara.html. The company creates small videos for each of its fishermen.

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Marsh Skeele, captain of the F/V Loon, holds up a troll-caught king salmon destined for Sitka Salmon Shares consumers in the Midwest during the second troll king opening in August 2012. Danen Vest photo

If you know of, or belong to, a community-supported fishery program, we'd like to hear from you. Send an email to: editor@pacificfishing.com.

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Other community-supported fisheries throughout Alaska

Sitka Salmon Shares is among at least two other community-supported fishery (CSF) programs in Alaska.

★ **Alaskans Own:** The state's original program, Alaskans Own, is now in its third year of operation. Alaskans Own is based out of Sitka and was started by Linda Behnken, executive director of the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association, a nonprofit group of longline boat owners and crew who focus on sustainability and resource stewardship.

Connecting conservation-minded consumers with community-based fishermen, Alaskans Own provides pre-paid boxes of fish to subscribers in Sitka and Juneau. Besides king and coho salmon, the boxes also contain a variety of other species including black cod, ling cod, halibut, and rockfish.

"The mission behind Alaskans Own is to strengthen the connection between fishermen who have a deep commitment to sustainable fishing and consumers who have a strong interest in supporting sustainable seafood," said Behnken.

Alaskans Own launched with 24 subscribers in Sitka the first year. The program has grown to include 80 subscribers serving 235 households in Sitka and Juneau. It also sells seafood at farmers markets and through direct sales.

Four pricing options exist for subscribers of Alaskans Own. A four-month subscription of 20 pounds of fish cost \$230 last summer. A 40-pound subscription cost \$430.

For those who chose to stretch out their seafood deliveries over the course of six months, a 30-pound subscription cost \$330, while a 60-pound subscription totaled \$630.

Details on the species and the box weights appear on the Alaskans Own website: www.alaskansown.com/seafood-subscription.php.

Although members currently must live in Sitka or Juneau, Behnken said she hopes Alaskans Own will expand to other communities in the future.

After paying fishermen, Alaskans Own invests any profits left over in marine conservation and research, Behnken said.

Alaskans Own is part of the Fishery Conservation Network, a group of fishermen organized by the Alaska Longline Fisheries Association. Fishermen in the network participate in research to reduce rockfish bycatch, to deter marine mammal predation on longline gear, and to lower the fleet's carbon footprint, among other things.

★ **Catch of the Season:** In addition to Alaskans Own and Sitka Salmon Shares, there's another, smaller-scale CSF operating in Alaska. It's called Catch of the Season, and it is operated by the Alaska Marine Conservation Council.

Catch of the Season offers boxes of Tanner crab from Kodiak Island to subscribers who are based primarily in Anchorage or Kodiak. The subscriptions are available only during the month of January, when Tanner crab is harvested from the waters around Kodiak.

The program will enter its third season in January. Last year, it sold 10,000 pounds of Tanner crab to 70 subscribers, four restaurants, and Princess Tours. Princess bought the bulk of the crab last summer, about 8,000 pounds, said Kelly Harrell, executive director of Alaska Marine Conservation Council.

The goal of the program is to connect consumers with small-boat fishermen, promote sustainable seafood, and "give a leg up" to conservation-minded fishermen by paying them higher prices than they normally receive from processors, Harrell said.

— Paula Dobbins

Sitka Salmon Shares, based in Galesburg, Ill., buys salmon from a handful of small-boat fishermen in Southeast Alaska who sustainably harvest fish from waters surrounding the Tongass National Forest, a 17-million-acre coastal temperate rain forest covering most of the Alaska panhandle. These fishermen catch small volumes of salmon by hook and line or by gillnet. They are careful about preserving the quality of the fish by removing the blood, handling fish individually to avoid bruising, and icing the fish immediately, among other steps.

In return for their careful handling of the fish, Sitka Salmon Shares pays the harvesters more for the fish than they normally receive from a large processor.

"This summer, we were getting \$6 per pound for kings from Sitka Salmon Shares, whereas the local plant was paying around \$4. For coho, we were getting \$3 a pound from the CSF, while the plant was paying something like \$1.80," said Ohlin. "It worked out really well for me. I'm looking forward to working with them next summer."

Besides extra money, several fishermen selling product to Sitka Salmon Shares said they take pride in delivering premier seafood to people who appreciate it.

"I really enjoy giving people the highest quality fish possible and knowing that it's going to be my fish that winds up on their plates. I love taking care of it, and I really enjoy it when people are excited about my product," said Marsh Skeele, a second-generation commercial fisherman from Sitka.

Skeele is also a self-described foodie, as are many of the people who support CSFs.

"My friends and I like to do up really fine food. We're big into having great dinner parties and using as much locally produced

food as possible. In Sitka, we're lucky. We have the ocean at our fingertips," said Skeele.

Salmon to lox: Rodey Batiza, general manager at Gotham Bagels in Madison, Wis., buys salmon through Sitka Salmon Shares and turns it into lox for his customers. They like knowing the stories of the individual fishermen who caught it and supporting small-scale, conservation-minded food producers, Batiza said.

"As they learn more about commercial food processing, they see the benefits of buying locally. This salmon isn't local, but it's close to the 'buy local' model. You're dealing with people instead of giant faceless corporations, and you know where the food came from," said Batiza.

Sitka Salmon Shares is the brainchild of Nic Mink, the Sustainable Foods Fellow at Indianapolis-based Butler University's Center for Urban Ecology. Mink worked at the Sitka Conservation Society during the summer of 2011 as salmon outreach coordinator, a job in which he met many local fishermen and seafood processors.

Fast growth: Last summer, Mink began Sitka Salmon Shares with 50 members in Minneapolis, Minn., Madison, Wis., Chicago, and western and central Illinois. This summer, his membership list tops 300, and he expects to close out the year with more than 400 members.

"It's growing like gangbusters," said Renee Warr, co-owner of Taku River Reds, a Juneau-based direct marketing seafood business that sold some 3,000 pounds of sockeye and coho salmon fillets to Mink's company this past summer. "It's exciting for us to build relationships with clients in the Midwest for the first time."

After the fishing boats arrive at the docks in Sitka and Juneau, a local processing company picks up the catch, fillets the fish, cuts the fillets into one-pound servings, and vacuum-seals and blast-freezes them in preparation for shipment. Alaska Airlines jets fly the seafood to Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, where Sitka Salmon Shares picks it up and drives it back to its distribution center in Galesburg. From there, workers send individual orders to customers' homes.

Sitka Salmon Shares will fulfill orders from anywhere in the country via FedEx. But it specializes in providing boat-to-doorstep service for its growing Midwestern clientele reachable by vehicle. For this past fishing season, customers could order 15 pounds of king, sockeye, and coho salmon for \$277. The order included three 5-pound shipments of each species in July, August, and September. If customers wanted a bit more, they could buy three 8-pound installments for \$397. Or, three 12-pound shipments for \$597.

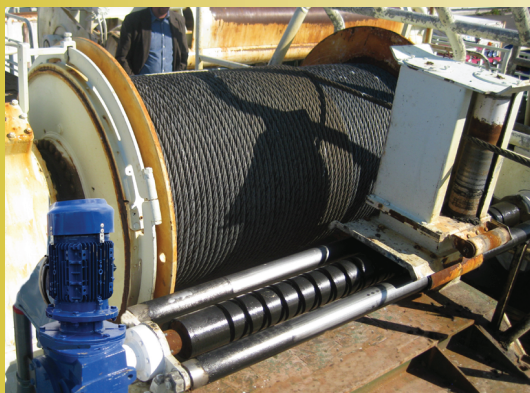
Sitka Salmon Shares has seven seasonal employees, but Mink is considering having one, full-time employee who would work year-round.

"As long as the natural habitat these salmon need remains intact, these runs should continue forever. It's a testament to the fact that when we do things right, we can have economic growth side by side with sustainable food systems," said Mink. ↓

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