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## Business

# Fish tracking system ensures identity, freshness

By Beth Daley and Jenn Abelson | GLOBE STAFF    OCTOBER 24, 2011



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**606 Congress executive chef Richard Garcia buys fish for the South Boston restaurant through Trace and Trust.**

NARRAGANSETT, R.I. - As soon as Rhode Island fisherman Steve Arnold hauled up a fishing net with black sea bass, he pulled out his phone and snapped a picture.

Arnold e-mailed and tweeted about his catch from the small cabin of the blue-and-white vessel to chefs in Boston and Providence. Orders began rolling in before the 47-year-old Narragansett resident even got back to shore.

The next night at 606 Congress in South Boston's Renaissance Hotel, waiters told interested customers how the sea bass had been caught locally on the 55-foot Elizabeth Helen. Diners who ordered the fish in a white coco bean and chorizo stew with yogurt were given cards with an ID number and a QR code. They could enter the number on a website or scan the code with their smartphones to verify when and where their dinner was caught - and to confirm the species of fish.

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It's seafood with a side of technology. Called Trace and Trust, the pilot program is one of several tracking fish from the boat to the customer's plate as concerns grow over mislabeling of seafood and the sustainability of fishing practices.

"This is a bottom-up way to know where your fish is coming from," said Arnold. "We were aware of the problems with seafood fraud."

Efforts to authenticate fish have been around for about 15 years. The Marine Stewardship

## A fish trail

A new system called Trace & Trust tracks fish from fishermen's nets to diners' plates to ensure its identity and freshness.

1. Fishermen tell chefs when they are going to fish and what they hope to catch.

2. A photo of the catch can be uploaded from the boat to the Trace & Trust website. When the catch is landed, it is assigned a unique ID number and QR code.



Glove in picture for scale.

3. Chefs place order through fishermen.

4. The fish is packed on ice and brought to each restaurant.

(Fish ID: PR608)

5. Diners who order the fish receive a card with the QR code and ID number. They can scan the QR code with their smart phone or enter the number on the website to learn the story of where their fish was caught and by whom.



SOURCE: Trace & Trust

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Council, for example, created certification standards for wild fish that have healthy populations and are caught using environmentally friendly methods.

But such programs do not always guarantee the fish is what a consumer believes it to be. In August, Clemson University researchers published a study that found three of the 36 Chilean sea bass it tested were a different species, though they had all been certified through the stewardship council. The council says that it is investigating the findings but that several studies it commissioned give it confidence that the supply chain is intact.

Relatively inexpensive DNA-testing technology became available about five years ago, and some food businesses soon began using it to verify the identity of fish they bought. But William Gergits, cofounder of Therion International, a New York DNA-testing company that did follow-up testing for the Globe, said the faltering economy caused many companies to drop the safeguard. Such testing can cost restaurant chains, wholesalers, and distributors tens of thousands of dollars a year.

Instead of doing DNA testing, Legal Sea Foods, the Boston-based restaurant chain, buys fish as close as possible to the boat that caught it. The company purchases most of its wild fish directly from boats or at fish auctions, mainly from Gloucester or New Bedford, said chief executive Roger Berkowitz.

“The closer you are to the source, the less chance you have of any issues with mislabeling,” he said.

So far, seven fishermen in New England have used Trace and Trust, and more than 100 restaurants have received seafood through it.

Michael Clayton, a West Coast fishery consultant who developed Trace and Trust, says the program’s main value is connecting chefs with fishermen they trust to offer fresh,

### Tracking seafood from the boat to the plate

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traceable products. The program is also now launching spot DNA testing to give added assurance to chefs and consumers.

Much of Arnold's catch still goes to traditional processors, but as more chefs learn about Trace and Trust, they are starting to call him.

Richard Garcia, the executive chef at 606 Congress, is one of them. As soon as Arnold's black bass catch was delivered, Garcia cleanly sliced open the belly of one. He extracted two dead squid and gently laid them on the cutting table.

"Look how fresh this fish is," he said excitedly. "It was swimming 24 hours ago."

Tracing programs can raise the cost of fish, but Garcia said Trace and Trust's offerings are fairly priced because he is buying directly from fishermen.

"More and more people in the last five years are coming into the restaurant asking, 'Where is your seafood from?'" Garcia said. "I wanted to answer that question."

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