In the sea, almost everything that swims, burrows, or crawls can be presented on a plate and eaten. Yet many marine species are not well known among chefs and diners. The lack of variety on the menu represents not only a loss of culinary opportunity, but a potential source of ecological imbalance. No one knows this better than sustainable seafood devotee Rizwan Ahmed, chef/owner of the Hourglass Brasserie in Bristol.

"There is an abundant diversity of marine life that can be used and prepared by chefs to put on their menu," says Ahmed. "But nine out of 10 restaurants have species like cod. This puts a heavy load on the cod population. People have now become so accustomed to a limited choice of seafood that they are not willing or are not aware of other species that taste just as good if not better."

Chef Riz, as he is called at the restaurant, speaks with good authority. In addition to being a chef, he is a professionally trained marine biologist. Ahmed’s is a story of two parallel career paths that have more in common than one might think. Growing up in Karachi, Pakistan, along the Arabian Sea, he had two great loves: the increasingly besieged coastline down the street from his house, and his mother’s home cooking. Unable to choose which of these passions to follow, he obtained both a marine ecology degree from the University of Maine and a culinary arts degree from Le Cordon Bleu Institute in London. After working in both fields, he married a woman from Bristol and opened

Sarah Schumann is a razor clam harvester and the coordinator of the Eating with the Ecosystem dinner series.
Despite ultimately choosing the kitchen over the research vessel, Ahmed brings his knowledge and love of the ocean to bear in every aspect of his life as a chef. “To me it is the duty of the chef not just to provide an excellent meal but to educate the guests on what they are eating,” says Ahmed.

As part of this commitment, Ahmed is participating in a six-part dinner series taking place around Rhode Island this year called Eating with the Ecosystem. Eating with the Ecosystem is an initiative to promote a new, place-based definition of “sustainable seafood” that takes into account the whole ecosystem, rather than evaluating single species in isolation. Each dinner in the series features presentations by scientists, fishermen, and chefs, and presents a wide array of seafood from one of three New England ecosystems: Southern New England waters, Georges Bank, and the Gulf of Maine.

The Hourglass Brasserie hosted its Eating with the Ecosystem dinner on October 9, 2012. The featured ecosystem was the Gulf of Maine, Ahmed’s outdoor classroom during his university days.

Ecological concepts, of course, are nothing new for Ahmed, who says his work as a chef allows him to help guests “have an understanding of ‘eating with the ecosystem’ and to work with it. Not to put a heavy load on a few selected species but to utilize a wide range as to not negatively affect the ecosystem as a whole.”

In addition, eating sustainably doesn’t just mean using a wider variety of items from the sea, says Ahmed. It also means using them wisely. “My biggest respect goes to the French chef, who tries to utilize as much as possible from a product with the least amount of waste. This to me shows that with a little insight one can do wonders and provide a guest with a memorable and educated dining experience.”

For more information
Hourglass Brasserie
382 Thames Street Bristol, RI 02809
www.hourglassbrasserie.com
Eating with the Ecosystem
www.eatingwiththeecosystem.org
Point Judith Razor Clams, Caramelized Squid, Wishing Stone Farms Shiitake Mushrooms, Dashi Broth

Serves 4 as a starter

Locally Sourced Ingredients

- 1 4-inch square edible kelp (Sarah Schumann, Point Judith, RI)
- ¼ oz bonito flakes (found at Asian markets)
- Mushroom stems (from shiitakes)
- Parsley stems
- 1 quart water
- 12 razor clams (Sarah Schumann, Pt. Judith, RI)
- ¼ cup white wine (good quality)
- 2 sprigs thyme
- 1 large bay leaf
- 1 garlic clove
- 1 knob butter
- 2 cups shiitake mushrooms (Wishing Stone Farms, Little Compton, RI) stems removed, cut into small dice
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 2 thyme sprigs, stems removed and leaves finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon parsley, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- 2 cups squid tubes and tentacles, cut tubes into rings (Local Catch, Block Island, RI)
- Lemon juice
- Salt to taste

Dashi

Add kelp, bonito flakes, mushroom stems and parsley stems to water. Bring to boil, reduce heat to low simmer and cook for about 20 minutes. Remove and strain. Keep warm.

Point Judith Razor Clams

Clean clams thoroughly by washing them three times in clean cold water. Add clams, white wine, thyme and bay leaf to an extremely hot pot and cover with lid. Cook until clams open up, about a minute to two. Strain through fine sieve reserving cooking juices. Remove clams from shell, cut tip off neck (siphon), remove and discard stomach sac, and cut what remains into ½ inch pieces, reserving shell (cleaned thoroughly) for garnish. Discard rest of ingredients.

Wishing Stone Farms Shiitake Mushrooms

Add a knob of butter to pan and heat till butter foams. Add mushrooms, garlic, thyme and saute for about 2 minutes. Add ½ reserved cooking liquid from clams and reduce by half or till syrupy. Add clams to warm up. Remove from heat and add parsley. Keep warm.

Block Island Squid

Add oil to saute pan. When smoking add squid and cook for about 30 seconds until caramelized. Remove from heat and add salt and lemon juice to season.

Plating

Place squid in center of bowl. Add clam and mushroom mixture to three clam shells and sit on top of squid. Pour dashi broth tableside for a visual effect.

Recipe by Rizwan Ahmed