

Tastes

IN THE KITCHEN | Bluefin and Burgundy with Sam Gugino



It's 8:45 a.m. and I'm in the crowded lunchroom of Browne Trading Co. in Portland, Maine, with owner Rod Mitchell and his staff for the daily production meeting. A few weeks earlier, a nor'easter ripped off the building's roof, damaging several offices, including the usual meeting place. But while Mitchell's customers may be sympathetic, they want their seafood—on time and of the high quality for which Mitchell is famous.

Sales manager Lucas Myers goes through the 12 pages of orders from restaurants, a list that reads like a who's who of America's top eateries. Le Bernardin gets 80 pounds of monkfish, Restaurant Daniel 30 pounds of halibut, Morimoto 10 pounds of barramundi. Per Se wants scallops that are exactly 2 ounces each. Other regular customers include Charlie Trotter, Wolfgang Puck and the Wynn Las Vegas. "We're not competing with McDonald's for the fish fillet business," Mitchell quips.

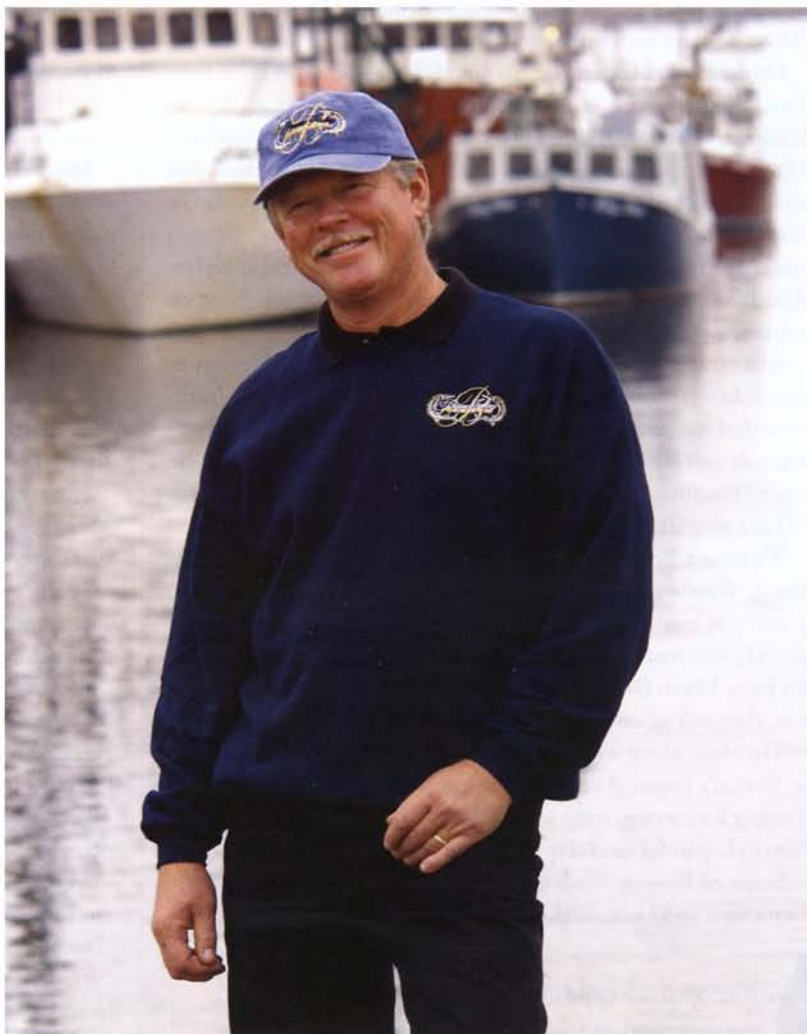
The finest seafood in the world isn't the only thing that interests Mitchell—he's also a nut about wine, red Burgundy in particular. "I'd much rather drink red wine with fish," he notes. Mitchell's wineshop sits right behind his retail fish store, next door to his office. After the meeting, he shows me a row with bottles of Romanée-Conti, Echézeaux and La Tâche, proudly proclaiming that his allotment is "more than most places in New York get."

While Mitchell's love of wine was acquired, his love for seafood is in his genes. Born into a family of fishermen, Mitchell learned how to catch everything from lobster to striped bass from his grandfather, Earl Browne. "I fished as much as I could while learning how not to get seasick," he says.

After getting an associate degree in marine biology, Mitchell was befriended by Bruce MacDiarmid, a local businessman who asked Mitchell to run his wine store in Camden, Maine, even though, Mitchell says, "the only wine I knew was Ripple." Over the next decade, Mitchell not only learned a lot about wine, he bumped into the rich and famous who summered in Maine, including the Dillons, who own Haut-Brion, and the Wyeths. Andrew Wyeth has collaborated with Mitchell to market oysters from the Wyeth oyster farm; the logo for the business was painted by Andrew and his son, Jamie.

Drawing on his seafood knowledge, Mitchell started a company called Caspian Caviar in 1984, which he sold in 1990. But Mitchell saw little money from the sale because the buyer soon went belly up. With no job, no money and his wife, Cynde, three months pregnant, Mitchell began again. Using \$3,000 of Cynde's savings and a \$10,000 loan from his mother, he started Browne Trading Co., named after his grandfather.

Mitchell would drive a truck up the coast, picking up seafood, then drive it to Boston and put it on a plane. Cynde kept her job as a nurse and did the paperwork at night. Today, Cynde is CEO and CFO of Browne Trading, which produces more than \$10 million in



Rod Mitchell's Portland, Maine, business supplies top chefs with the freshest fine seafood. Browne Trading Co. offers everything from local diver scallops to peekytoe crab to Iranian caviar.

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sales annually. “Rod is the entrepreneur and has all the energy,” she says. “I try to keep him under control.”

Over the years, Mitchell has produced a number of innovations in the seafood business. He created a market for peekytoe crabs (a term he popularized), which were Maine sand crabs that hadn't been selling well because the meat had a reputation for being mushy and stringy. Mitchell recognized that the problem was not the crab, but how it was handled. “It needs to be cooked in the right amount of salt, cooled immediately and picked when cold,” he notes.

Diver scallops were another Mitchell invention. The late chef Jean-Louis Palladin of the Watergate in Washington, D.C., was looking for the kind of scallops he grew up eating in Bordeaux. Mitchell came up with the idea to send divers to retrieve scallops individually. “Normal scallops are under stress from being dragged in nets by boats and covered with mud,” Mitchell explains. “Diver scallops are sweeter and firmer.”

Daniel Boulud became such a fan of diver scallops that he fashioned them into one of his signature dishes, Maine sea scallops in black tie, served with sliced black truffles. Soon after, Boulud and Mitchell introduced an exclusive line of Daniel Boulud products that included smoked salmon and caviar. The caviar is either Iranian or Russian and always of the highest quality. The Iranian osetra I tasted with Mitchell was sensational: buttery and complex. And Boulud's smoked salmon, made from top-of-the-line Scottish salmon, is pure luxury.

After the production meeting, several of us walk downstairs to watch fish processor Greg Wintle carve up a 500-pound bluefin tuna that has just arrived from the Mediterranean. Browne Trading only gets about a dozen bluefins a year, mostly off the Atlantic coast. “Bluefin is a big deal,” says marketing director Nick Branchina. “That's why all the guys come in to see it.”

Wearing a Browne Trading baseball cap and a hairnet over his beard, Wintle removes the four loins, each weighing around 90 pounds, as easily as if he were filleting a 2-pound sea bass. A 45-pound piece that contains part of the loin and the belly is destined for Esca, Mario Batali's seafood restaurant in New York. “Tomorrow, that will be on someone's plate for dinner,” Branchina says.

The tuna, along with other fish from all over the world, arrives at Boston's Logan Airport and is transferred by truck to Browne Trading for cutting, icing and packing. Those same trucks will return to Logan for next-day air shipping.

Some of Browne Trading's products end up nearby. Mitchell, Branchina and I sample the bluefin at Sapporo, a restaurant a few



Fish processor Greg Wintle carves up a bluefin upon its arrival, to get it to restaurants in peak condition.

doors down on busy Commercial Street, where the tuna is sliced up as sushi for our lunch. It's magnificent—silky and rich. We're also served kampachi, a farmed fish from Kona, Hawaii, purchased from Browne Trading as well. Though not as luxurious as the bluefin, it's sweet and delicious, a fish few would think is farmed.

Mitchell scours the seven seas for his wild fish, but about 50 percent of the seafood he sells is farmed. Most of the farmed seafood comes from overseas, especially Europe, like channel bass from Greece and caviar from Italy. “The United States is way behind in aquaculture,” he says.

Mitchell discovers much of his farmed seafood during annual visits to the European Seafood Exposition in Brussels. That's where he first tasted farmed cod from Norway and Scotland, now sold at Browne Trading. “We want to give chefs an option,” he says. “There are a lot of days when we don't have wild cod.”

Not today. After lunch, we head over to the local fish auction, where 40,000 pounds of wild cod are up for sale. Mitchell rejects row after row of cod sitting on ice in boxes.

“See the eyes?” he points out. “The area around the pupil should be the same color as the rest of the fish, not white like these.” Finally, Mitchell comes upon a promising-looking cod. He sticks his fingers into the gills and lifts it up. It's stiff and slightly curved in shape, unlike the other cod, which are limp. “This fish is still in rigor [mortis],” Mitchell pronounces. “That means it was caught no more than 12 hours ago.”

Mitchell has made freshness, quality and innovation the hallmarks of his business, which is how he can get away with his prices. “Daniel [Boulud] doesn't ask me if it's expensive,” Mitchell says. “What I don't want him to say is that it isn't good enough. I want to make that decision here.”

Contributing editor Sam Gugino has been writing for Wine Spectator since 1994, becoming a regular columnist in 1996.

Wine Spectator online Read about America's seafood revolution in our past cover story, “Sea Change: Five great chefs take a contemporary approach to fish and wine.” Find it at www.winespectator.com/101507.