

Words Robert DiGiacomo
Photos by Gab Bonghi and Ted Nghiem

Vernick

FISH

COUNTERS
SUPPLY
CHALLENGES
WITH
CREATIVITY

CHEFS GREG VERNICK AND DREW
PARASSIO SOURCE SEAFOOD
WITH FLEXIBILITY AND A
MINIMUM WASTE PHILOSOPHY.



Sustainability isn't just a buzzword at Vernick Fish at the Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia. It's in the DNA of this modern oyster bar, which opened in the summer of 2019. The globally inspired menu showcases raw fish and seafood through crudos, tartares and ceviche; puts a local spin on the classics (oysters "Philadelphia" with Genoa salami and provolone); and serves up larger, shareable plates like grilled black sea bass with kimchi stew, enoki mushroom and soy marinated egg.

To execute this diverse menu requires a daily dance with suppliers, made more complex by the pandemic. Before each service, Chef Greg Vernick and Chef de Cuisine Drew Parassio work their phones to find out what's available and at what price. Just as importantly, they also need to determine if the products are right – for sustainability reasons.

This daily intel might mean revamping menu items around an ever-changing mix of wild and



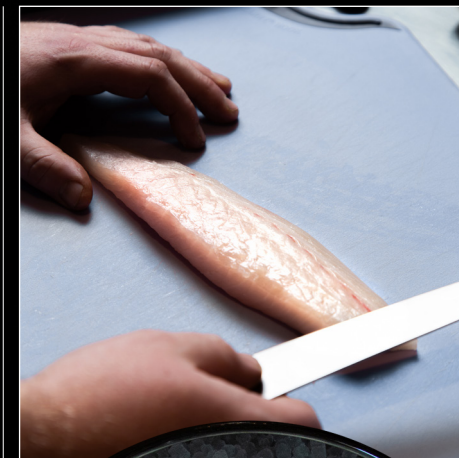


farmed fish and seafood, as well as high-quality frozen and tinned products. "From a chef's point of view, it starts with being nimble," Vernick says. "With seafood, you have to think about changes almost daily because the supply chain changes almost daily. Availability changes, and sometimes the product and quality change, and we just have to pivot."

To help inform their decisions, the James Beard Award winner and his staff also regularly

consult the tracker on the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch. The tool features a green-yellow-red light system to advise on whether a product is in good supply, in danger of being overfished or scarce. The verdict could mean that a dish centered on golden tilefish on Wednesday could flip to a different protein the next day. "If something has a red light, we know to steer away from it and call the vendor to ask them what's going on," Vernick says. "If it's running red, what's our substitute?"





Trusted vendors like Samuels in Philadelphia have become an even more important part of this conversation. It helps that Vernick has a long track record with suppliers, through his 10-year-old New American restaurant Vernick Food & Drink, located a few blocks away. "Choosing a vendor is almost as important as choosing a fish," says the Culinary Institute of America-trained chef, who also has a degree in hospitality management from Boston University. "You need to have a vendor that can

teach you and educate your staff. A huge part of selling something that's a unique farmed product is to educate the server, so they can explain it to a guest."

This might mean describing the provenance of tinned fish, such as the menu's Ramón Peña sardines, sourced by a top provider in Spain, or explaining why a domestic farmed salmon is being served in place of Ora King salmon that would have to be flown in from



New Zealand. Where possible, Vernick Fish sources local products like scallops from Viking Village in Barnegat Light, New Jersey, and oysters from Sweet Amalia, a woman-owned farm in South Jersey. It's all about finding the sweet spot where the highest quality meets the most sustainable. "Twenty years ago, there was a belief that ocean fish is what you should be eating in a fine-dining restaurants," Vernick says. "I don't believe in that philosophy, so we try to build a menu

that has a balance of different options available to the guests."

This head-to-back fin philosophy means that Vernick will regularly purchase large whole fish from their suppliers and have them break them down. A 25-pound tuna loin, for example, will yield prime cuts for sushi or sashimi, while the trim might get ground with fennel, black pepper and pork fat into sausage for a cassoulet. Black sea bass might be served



whole, while its bones will form the basis of fume or stock that might provide the mother sauce for multiple dishes. "Whatever we buy, we try to get 100% yield or two preparations for the protein," Vernick says.

Pandemic-related supply chain issues have further complicated these considerations. Even when product is available, the price might be too high or the quality too low. For a time, the restaurant hit pause on farmed

branzino from Greece due to quality and price issues. Similarly, sea urchin from Seattle was off the menu but is now back. However, you likely won't see king crab for the foreseeable future. Prices have skyrocketed due to extremely limited supply. "We have a lot of good ideas to use king crab but unfortunately 20 pounds of king crab right now is \$1,200," Parassio says. "It's tough to explain to a guest that this crab dish is going to be \$75."





Another factor impacting sustainability is limited hours wrought by the pandemic. Like so many restaurants, Vernick Fish has been forced to scramble, reducing service, offering take-out and even closing for a time. Currently, the restaurant is serving dinner Wednesday through Saturday but hoping by late spring to add additional dinner service and restore lunch.

With lunch on hold, it's no longer possible to turn last night's Dover sole into a fish sandwich

special the next day or unsold monkfish into fish chowder. Instead, they are focusing on repurposing product into sauces and secondary uses, like cured bones for a smoked fish rillette. "We've always had the philosophy of: How can we use the whole product? Is there a secondary use for it? Can we put it in the staff meal?" Parassio says. "We've gotten more creative in the last few years to put most of the stuff to use. The trash is the last place we want it to go." □