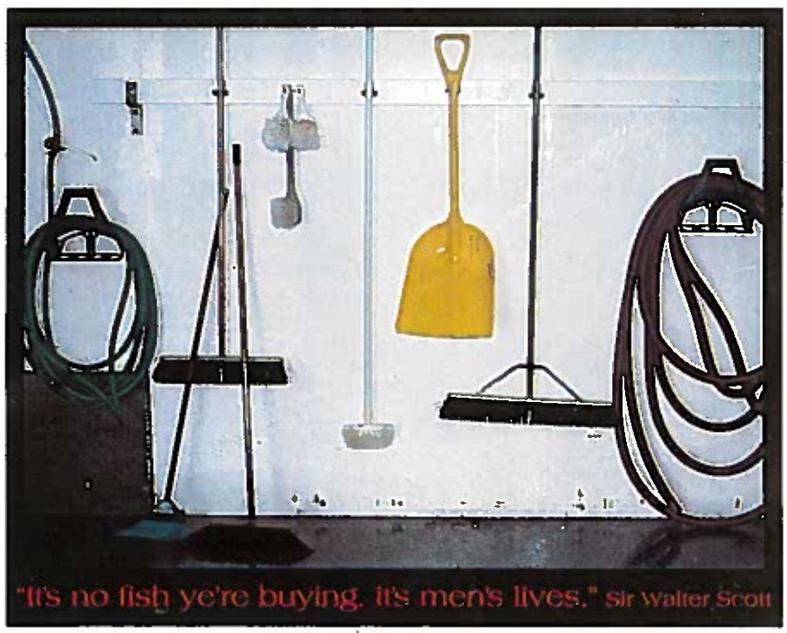
FISH OUT OF WATER

Most menus today read like geographic haiku. Topographical descriptions of "daily specials" map the consciousness of great American chefs. This current trend in kitchens not only intrigues diners but serves as an educational link between field and table. The most integral part of the link is the chef who has the ability to go into the field and bring back to his restaurant a wealth of information and an abundance of products. By doing research "in the field," he is better equipped to make personal decisions on how to conduct business in the future. Chefs are redirecting their attention from the wholesale distributor to the quality-driven products of small purveyors and individual fishermen and farmers. This keeps each party keen to the other's needs, and loyalty runs deep on both sides.

As food and wine become de-mystified, chefs can pass along what they have learned to the dinner guest, whose current appetite far exceeds the contents of a plate. The public's questions, like their palettes, are becoming more sophisticated. The once frequently asked questions, "What is lemon grass?" or "Is the fish cooked through *all* the way?" are being replaced with inquiries about the absence or presence of swordfish on the menu. There is a new awareness about such things as "Why are Taylor Bay scallops special?" or "What is the difference between certified organic and plain old organic?" Finding these answers requires more than just logging onto the Internet, following the latest media trends, or keeping up on market prices—it requires going directly to the source. Most importantly, going to the source helps to educate chefs on what to buy and serve in their restaurants.



"It's no fish ye're buying, it's men's lives." Sir Walter Scott

A web of single, sometimes double-lane highways connects a constellation of rich fishing ports along the Nova Scotia coast. On the evergreen-lined shores, multiple generations learn and live the fishing industry. It is here that purveyor, fisherman, and chef meet through the efforts of a tireless Eric Tevrow. Tevrow, himself a chef by trade, co-owns Early Morning Seafood with Chef Marc Andre Jehan. The two run the business out of their Millburn, New Jersey, restaurant and retail market, Sinclaire's. Over the two short years that Early Morning Seafood has been in business, Tevrow has quickly earned the trust of his clients. He is known by his suppliers as a fair representative in the cutthroat markets of Boston and New York, and by his customers as a reliable source for some of the best seafood available. Eric decided that by taking his clients directly to the source, he could help to establish a professional relationship between chef, purveyor, and fisherman. His intuition about the fishing industry and knowledge of the restaurant business allows him to be an effective player in the Fulton Fish Market. For Tevrow, the choice of supplier is based on quality and the ability to ice, package, and expedite shipping. When it comes to suppliers, he explains, "The owner-operated factor is key for me. You might have to pay more for a product to ensure quality. In reality, understanding the market trends of supply, demand, and weather are the three primary factors for procuring the best possible product at the best possible price." By maintaining close ties with his suppliers in Nova Scotia, Tevrow is able to keep chefs abreast of what will be available and what the market will bear. As he describes, "The Fulton Fish Market is a commodities market in the truest sense of the word—it is a kill or be killed environment. Ninety-nine percent of the fish I sell is from Nova Scotia, partly because of the personal and professional trust I have with the people, and more obviously for the quality." Tevrow also knows the perils that await a well-stocked fisherman when he arrives at the savvy New York market. Prices have a way of getting slashed when a fisherman is unprepared to negotiate, and he is then lucky to turn a profit. "It's part of the game of doing business at the market," admits Tevrow, who buys and sells at the Fulton Fish Market to ensure that his fishermen get a fair price and his elite clientele get the quality they demand. He explains that fishermen want to sell directly to restaurants in order to bypass fluctuating market prices. The chefs, too, enjoy the peace of mind that comes with consistency and familiarity. Tevrow makes about a half dozen trips to Nova Scotia each year to visit purveyors. He is accompanied this time by some of New York's most promising talent and dedicated clients: John Schaefer of Gramercy Tavern, Jacinto Guadarrama of Gotham Bar and Grill, Matthew Maxwell and Michael DeMilta of Hudson River Club, Rocco DiSpirito of Union Pacific, and Mark Sabbatino of Best Buy Seafoods in the Fulton Fish Market.

Day 1: 3:00 PM

The three-hour drive south from the Halifax airport skirts the "northshore" of Nova Scotia along the Bay of Fundy. It is here in Digby County, home of the prized Digby Bay Scallops, that the *Pierette A.* awaits its passengers. Blair Cooper, manager of the Hillsburn Basin Scallop Group Ltd., navigates the bow through three miles of choppy water towards the 100-hectare "plot" in Digby Bay. Cooper's ten-year lease grants him the right to raise aquaculture-approved scallops in the wild. Cooper, who holds a Master's degree in invertebrate biology, has been raising scallops in a predator-free setting since 1994. On the surface, most eyes can only see the bobbing tide. Cooper's eyes can see beyond the break in the waves. He knows every detail of his 100 hectares, which he proves when stopping to check the status of specific pens. The attending chefs inch their way towards the edge of the boat as the engine idles. Several deck hands hoist a multi-tiered flat pen loaded with scallops out of the water. Cooper pokes his rubber-gloved hand through the dripping mesh rope and sea growth to retrieve about a dozen pink shells. Each is swiped with a sharp blade to reveal the white morsels and orange roe. With only the bay's cold water to season the meat, the scallops are devoured by the amazed chefs, who seem to taste the creamy meat for the first time. Cooper explains that the age of a scallop can be determined by the stress lines along the shell hinge, which indicate seasonal growth patterns. Cooper also warns that brown- to gray-colored meat is a sign that the scallops were harvested when spawning. Chefs continue to inquire about the season, size, and diet of the scallops as the pen is lowered back into the water, where it will remain suspended just below the water's surface until harvest time. Cooper explains that because the scallops do not reside on the bay floor, they are able to feed more readily on algae, which naturally grow closer to the water's surface. This translates into a plumper, sweeter scallop. Subsequently, the waste from the scallops that falls to the bay's floor has resulted in a large lobster population within the same vicinity as the scallop out-put provides an excess of feeding material. The abundance of scallops in one pen can give cause to debate market price. Cooper carefully explains that he tracks his scallops very closely: every female scallop may produce 7,000,000

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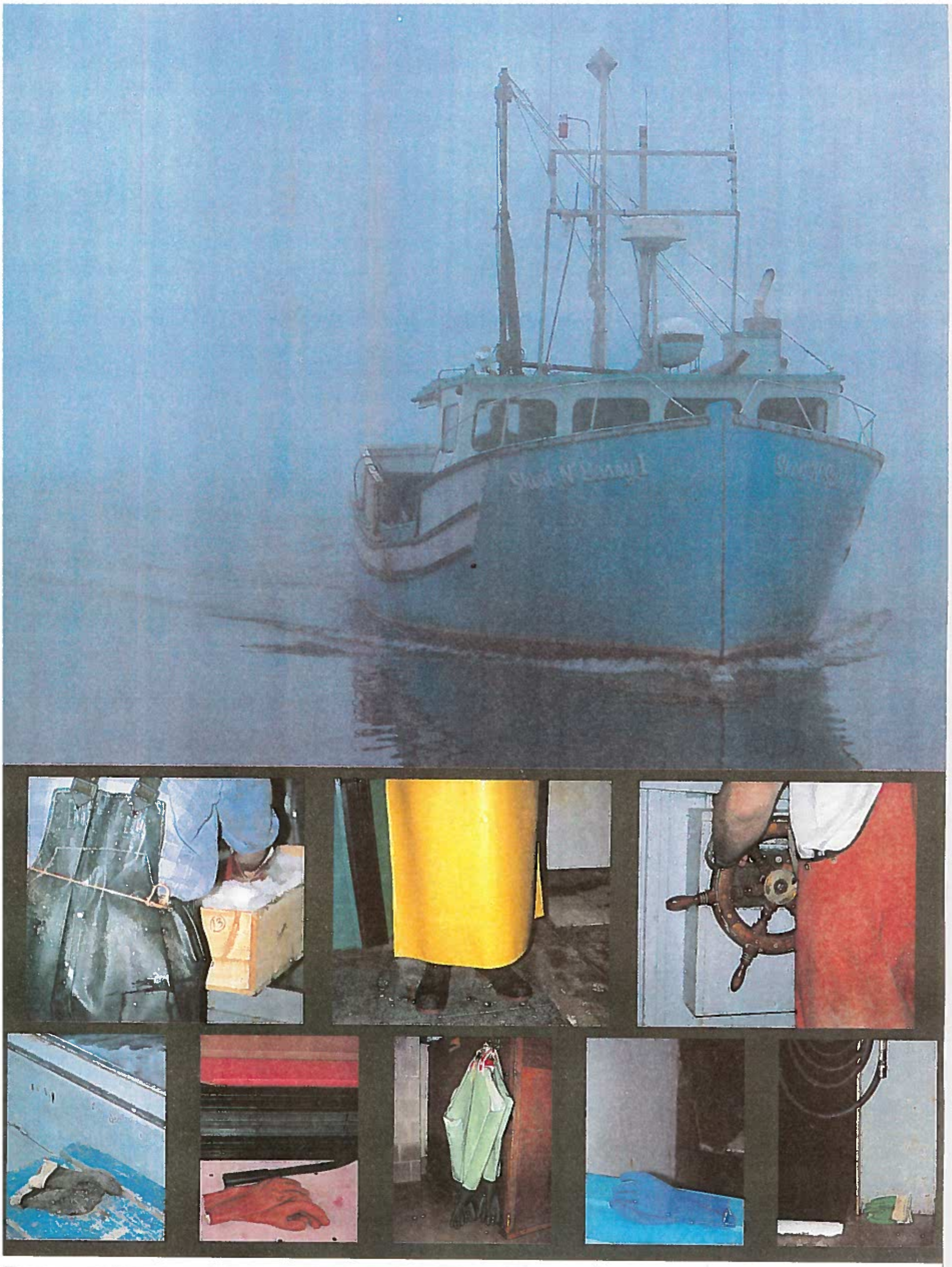




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eggs, but only five of these will make it to market size. To better monitor his pens the scallops are separated by size and generation. Once harvest has started, the scallops are custom-packed live or quickly frozen according to individual needs and sent by refrigerated truck or plane to the distributor. The scallop season, which is dictated by Canadian law, permits harvesting from October through June. As the winds pick up and the sky fades to black, the *Pierette A.* churns towards the tiny lights on the horizon.

9:00 PM

Several miles outside of Digby, just off the main artery in town, sits the Chowder House and Fish Shack, a small restaurant-storefront specializing in local seafood. Owners Greg Morrell, his wife Judy, and Judy's sister Hazel welcome the visiting group for dinner. After several courses of hearty fish chowder, creamy lobster sandwich rolls, and rib-sticking seafood rapure or "rappie" pie, a half dozen three-pound lobsters arrived from the kitchen, fiercely red and steaming. Both the hospitality and informative fish conversation are native to Nova Scotia. Greg Morrell concerns himself most with his own purveyor business, Gem Seafoods. Morrell, a veteran of the fishing industry, met Tevrow several years ago. Eric explains: "I was catering a wedding in the area, and I stopped into the Chowder Shack one day and started looking at Greg's fish selection. We started talking and Greg ended up supplying me with *everything* for the wedding." The two have worked together ever since. It is through his relationship with Morrell that so many contacts have been made.

Day 2: 5:00 AM

A foggy sunrise eventually burns off in the more godly hours of the morning, but the bay remains stoic. Strong coffee is passed around to help lift any excess haze. A short car ride becomes an in-depth discussion among the chefs about food products, peers, and the "celebrity" phenomenon. The conversation subsides as the caravan turns off yet another main artery onto a dirt road, which winds toward the inlet of Sandy Cove. Established in 1995, R&R Finfish Development Ltd. is the first privately owned North American halibut hatchery. Before passing through any door within the facility, shoes must tread on a spongy green mat soaked with sanitizing liquid. Walking through R&R provides an insight into the life cycle of a halibut from fertilization and incubation of the egg to the first feeding and onto the first year of life. In a warm, temperature-controlled room, halibut larvae are nurtured through their most delicate stage of development. They are closely monitored to ensure successful results. A second room contains several large tanks filled with luminescent orange and yellow *artemia nauplii*, a nutritionally enriched shrimp larva developed specifically for the primary feeding stage. Along with the artemia, algae is added to the tank during the first feeding to help the halibut distinguish its food source in the water. Once weaned, between three and six months after incubation, the halibut are moved to one of many different tanks, which mark the stages of maturity. As adults the halibut are fed a diet of fish meal and herring oil. It is at this stage that the fish are lively creatures flipping about on the surface of the water in hopes that the approaching faces mean that food is soon to follow. One to three years after incubation, the halibut are considered market ready, weighing seven to eleven pounds. Ideally, Sidney Raymond explains, R&R would like to build a "grow-out facility" where the halibut would have the room to mature beyond three years of age. The group looks in on the two largest tanks, where several adult halibut are kept for breeding. One of the chefs questions the practice of farmed halibut. Raymond, owner of R&R, explains that halibut have a very delicate larva stage and often don't survive beyond the early stages of life in the wild. If a halibut does reach full maturity, it lives a long life, reaching up to 40-50 years old. As a result, there is a shortage of juvenile halibut in eastern waters. The depletion has occurred over the last sixteen years: in 1984 there were 6,000 tons of halibut caught, and in 1999 it is estimated that 1,000 tons were caught. As Raymond believes: "The farm-raised Atlantic halibut has economic and ecological benefits. The fish are of the best quality and have the best shelf-life because they feed on a high protein, low-fat diet." Although aquaculture is a debatable topic in an industry-driven province like Nova Scotia, Raymond observes: "The biggest resistance to aquaculture is caused by misunderstandings. Many believe hormone use is a common practice, but at R&R hormones are not used at all." Raymond was the main force behind the development of seed stock for R&R. With the help of St. Andrew Biological Station in St. Andrews, New Brunswick, R&R has developed a comprehensive brood stock system. "All of our brood stock are from local waters. There are a total of thirty-three fish from which we retrieve eggs." R&R controls spawning and fertilization through temperature and light. The knowledge R&R employees have regarding the life cycle of a fish instills a curiosity to know more. The other

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benefit of visiting R&R is that each chef can observe and question firsthand the manner in which the halibut is raised and processed for shipping. All eyes watch as several halibut are "stunned," cleaned, packed on ice, and marked for the intended restaurant destination, all in a matter of minutes.

2:00 PM

It is a quick drive to Emery Smith Fisheries cod and halibut facility in Shag Harbour, where the group is supplied with hairnets and escorted into the main processing building where the fish is prepared. A whole cod is heaved onto a long stainless steel table. Fish cheeks are cleanly removed with a sharp blade before the young fisherman proceeds with cleaning. The meat is a beautiful, shiny opaque color. The first bite, though unusual considering its previous residence, is sweet and tender, similar to the Digby Bay scallops. One chef expresses an interest in receiving cod whole and using the cheeks as an amuse bouche for his guests. The cod is then split, cleaned, and prepared for brining and salting in a matter of seconds. Whole halibut is trimmed, and the cavity is stuffed with ice and packed for each restaurant. After answering many questions, Emery loads a truck for shipping and the group continues on to Emery's lobster facility. Emery also owns one of the few land-based, cold-water facilities for holding tubed lobsters, also known as "new caught lobsters." The lobster business is a coveted one, competition is fierce, and the laws are strict. Agent Sperry and several officers from Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans accompany Emery's lobster boat, which sails in the off-season, to ensure the trip is safe and successful in demonstrating how Emery's company operates. The boat approaches several traps containing lobsters; most are not big enough for harvest. Once the lobsters are caught, they are "culled" or graded according to size and weight. As per consumer demand, one-and-a-quarter to one-and-a-half pound lobsters are slated for the United States, and one-pound lobsters or "chicks" are slated for Europe. When the lobsters arrive at the land-based facility, they are tucked into PVC-type black tubes and submerged in the 38-41 degree shallow water of a 6,000-square-foot "tank shop" for two to six months. The low temperature slows down the metabolism of the lobster and lulls it into a somewhat dormant stage. The tube also prevents the lobsters from damaging each other, but the main goal in tubing is to allow the meat to mature slowly during the off-season. The stress-free climate and dormant stage produce a more succulent meat quality. As with the visit to R&R Finfish Development, the chefs are privy to watching their lobster orders iced, packed, and shipped before leaving Nova Scotia. Before the tour has ended, a dozen or so styrofoam boxes line the loading area of Emery Smith Fisheries, each marked with its destination: Nobu, Union Pacific, Gramercy Tavern, Hudson River Club, Gotham Bar and Grill, Tabla, Lespinasse, Le Bernardin, Veritas, Union Square Café, Chanterelle…

After a long morning, a pit stop is made for chowder, fried clams, and lobster rolls, a sandwich made popular by mounds of fresh lobster meat and rich mayonnaise sauce. Emery joins the group and discussions continue with more candor. During lunch a young fisherman stops by to ask some advice of Emery and Eric. It is clear that the fishing industry relies on the community, and the staff of Emery Smith Fisheries are familiar in town and the company name can be found in many places, including the back of little league uniforms.

4:00 PM

As the afternoon turns to evening, one last stop is made at a second lobster facility. A drive to the southernmost tip of Nova Scotia leads to Cape Sable Island, home to Twin Seafoods Ltd. Arly Atkinson, owner of Twin Seafoods Ltd., represents a different kind of businessman in Nova Scotia, one who after fifteen years of trading knows well the rules of the Fulton Fish Market and the value of his work. Atkinson is predominately a lobster and halibut trader, bringing some 30,000 lobsters a week into U.S. and European markets. "I have a large inventory, but not for a long term." His 8,000-square-foot tank shop is meant for holding, not "boarding" lobsters. Because Twin Seafoods Ltd. sells to such a large clientele, the lobster selection is varied from soft- to hard-shell. Tevrow points out: "Most people in the business will agree that the Southwest region of Nova Scotia has superior lobsters because it is home to true hard-shell or 'black and blue' lobster. Ninety percent of hard-shell lobsters come from Nova Scotia. The species might be the same but the lobster meat is better." Atkinson further explains, "Nova Scotia is the only area where the lobsters don't move off shore once the water temperature drops." Although it is unclear exactly why this happens, the result is an abundance of hard-shell lobsters within fishing boundaries. It is through many candid questions about product and market that the chefs begin to understand the limitations and potential of dealing with small purveyors. Atkinson explains that the market is a good place to sell when the market has little to offer because you can command your price. If the market is loaded with fish, it is difficult to negotiate prices and oftentimes selling at the Fulton Market is the last resort. It serves its purpose in the end for traders who need to unload excess fish. As the sun begins to sink behind the Atlantic, the group heads north towards Halifax.

10:00 PM

The ambitious schedule causes a late arrival for the meeting with Chris Percel, a consignment purchaser. The missed opportunity leaves the group waiting in the quiet parking lot of a strip mall. Without hesitation, Eric lights another cigarette and jumps back on his cell phone to track down Chris at home. Sure enough, his kids and television muted in the background, Chris answers and doesn't hesitate to pick a new meeting spot, this time a restaurant.

The group positions itself around Chris at a large round table to get a better angle on the conversation. Chris Percel owns and operates Oceanview Fisheries with his father Stan. In addition to buying and selling fish, Chris and his father trap and pen tuna for export to the Japanese market. The Percels bring about three million pounds of fish into the American market each year. Their product list includes tuna, swordfish, halibut, and baitfish. Chris explains to the chefs that the George's Bank area of Nova Scotia, just off the western coast, has some of the best fishing because of the water temperatures: "Water temperature is everything," he confides. Chris explains that fishermen must learn to read the environment like a broker reads the market—both make their livelihood by gambling on their knowledge. The chefs take the opportunity to ask about fishing quotas, government regulations, and other professional concerns. It is the first time that many of the chefs can question some of the issues that concern responsible purchasing. Chris remains informative and provides a fisherman's and businessman's perspective. As he points out, most fishermen in Nova Scotia are conservationists; they have to be protective of their trade. The evening runs into the early morning hours as there is an abundance of interest and information to cover.

Day 3: 6:00 AM

The fog has returned with the new day and threatens the final portion of the trip. After several turns in the road and a stop for hot coffee, the familiar pier of Oceanview Fisheries is revealed through the mist. The group waits among the lobster crates and orange buoys for the boat to dock. Stan Percel of Oceanview loads everyone onto the deck and heads five miles out on six-foot seas. No land in sight and only a slight sign of sunlight above the fog, each person has securely attached him or herself to a pole or rope as the boat teeters on the crest of each wave. A deck hand miraculously leans overboard to see if any tuna have been caught. We are out of luck today. Stan Percel explains that the tuna are smart and have very good eyesight. "They see the net and can avoid being caught. Sometimes we have to use a lead wire to divert them into the pen." Once the fish are caught, they are kept in the pen and fed until they reach market size. The trip ends without an opportunity to observe a tuna harvest, but questions are posed nonetheless. As the boat gallops towards the shore, the fog begins to thin. The modest tree and house-lined horizon is a reminder of how integral the fishing industry is to everyday life in Nova Scotia. For the city chef who works long hours, often in windowless rooms, the trip provides an insight not available in the market.

For more information on the fishing industry of Nova Scotia, contact the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans at (800) 565-1633 or Early Morning Seafoods at (973) 379-2232.