
BORO FOODSHED

BY BRIAN HALWEIL

FRESHEST FISH IN THE CITY

When you can't make a living as a bayman, try Brooklyn.



most Long Island fishers, who ship their wares to Fulton Fish Market or other distributors, the Villanis commute into town and participate in a symbiosis that makes them—and their customers—very happy. With the exception of fish you catch yourself, Blue Moon has the freshest fish available in Brooklyn.

“If it’s crossed out, it’s sold out,” Stephanie explained, pointing to a dry-erase board with several items crossed out. “We usually sell out everything.”

The board lists over a dozen fish—skate to fluke, blowfish to blackfish—plus clams, mussels, oysters, scallops, and home-smoked fish. They have tuna and swordfish in summer, and the elusive Long Island lobster in spring and fall.

“People have trouble with the idea of local fish,” said Stephanie.

“They ask for salmon or shrimp or Chilean sea bass, and I explain Chilean sea bass isn’t from here, and it’s really overfished, and isn’t even bass. But we have great striped bass and great black seabass

“People ask for salmon or shrimp or Chilean sea bass, and I have to say Chilean sea bass isn’t from around here, and it’s really overfished, and it’s not even a bass.”

you should try.” (Stephanie empathizes with farmers who have to explain in spring that there isn’t any corn yet.)

The Villanis’ knowledge of the foods they sell enables them to answer customer questions—from concerns about mercury (“Choose smaller species that don’t accumulate as much”) to oyster-shucking tutorials or recipes for whole porgie. “Our customers try unusual local fish because we can tell them how to use it.”

A one-boat operation (Alex goes it alone on their 36-foot Duffy), the Villanis guide customers towards fish that other fishers waste. Perfectly delicious fish like sea robin and sand shark—discarded or killed by larger boats that target other species—make it to the Villani stand.

The customers love it, and tell Stephanie so. “They tell me it’s really hard to find high-quality, fresh fish at reasonable prices in the city,” she said. “I like to hear that our fish tastes great. Most fishers put stuff in a box and never hear about it.” Alex, who grew up in New York City, but started fishing commercially in the early 1970s, raking clams and catching eels and crabs, often tells the story of an interaction with a customer shortly after he started selling at the Green market in 1990. “The customer said ‘Thank you,’” he recalled. “No wholesaler had ever thanked me for my fish.”

Of course, the Villanis don’t just do it for the praise. “Billy Joel was right when he said ‘You can’t make a living as a bayman anymore,’” Alex said. “You really can’t.” Distributors and canneries pay fishers

PARK SLOPE—Call it a farmers market love story.

Alex was a fisher from Long Island who sold his catch at the Grand Army Plaza Greenmarket every Saturday. Stephanie was a recent NYU grad working the orchard stand that neighbored Alex’s. They talked during the lulls—as market vendors do. Before long, she was spending weekends in Mattituck, on Long Island. Eventually, she didn’t want to go back to the city when Monday came around.

That was 15 years ago. Today, Alex and Stephanie Villani run Blue Moon Fish together. But romance isn’t why, every Saturday morning at the Grand Army Plaza Greenmarket, Brooklynites line up, dozens deep, single file, to buy their impossibly fresh catch. In contrast to

only a small fraction of the final retail price. At the Greenmarket, there's no middleman. Just the fisher (or farmer) and the customer. "That's why we're here," Villani said. "We can make a living this way."

The couple is busier than ever. "I've never had such a line as I have this year," said Stephanie. She also sells at the Union Square Greenmarket, but observes, "the Brooklyn market is much more of

house preparing one of Blue Moon's most popular products: smoked bluefish. "Even people who don't like bluefish like it smoked," she said. "It's perfect for summer, on sandwiches or in salads." The filets of the particularly oily bluefish develop a slightly caramel crust even as the inside retains its succulence.

She smokes fish twice a week, using Hudson Valley applewood (purchased from a fellow Grand Army Plaza vendor), and taking



Above, left to right: Even in the rain, Brooklynites line up. Stephanie smokes some of the catch. **Opposite:** Whole or filleted, pulled from the sea the day before.

a social scene." Neighbors catch up, walk dogs, push baby strollers, and stop for a cider after their jog through Prospect Park. "People here are more relaxed, not as hurried, and talk to us and each other. They listen when I tell them that farmer Ray's sorrel makes a great sauce for flounder." In contrast, the Union Square crowd is "much more businesslike, more in a hurry."

Some of Stephanie's customers have been shopping with her weekly since she started at the market in 1990. Recently her clientele has gotten younger as demographics have shifted in Park Slope, and it's slightly more multicultural than in Union Square, including Japanese customers who love her monkfish liver (they taught her to poach it in sake) and West Indian customers looking for whole fish.

Back at the couple's home in Mattituck, about 80 miles east of Brooklyn, Stephanie was in a cargo container retrofitted as a smoke-

advantage of any fish—bluefish, dogfish, striped bass, monkfish, eel—that Alex is catching in copious amounts. (She smokes sea scallops around Christmas and jars them in olive oil, with garlic and parsley, but that's just for friends and family.)

Aaron Bashy, chef and owner of the Minnow in Park Slope and probably their single best customer, has been serving their catch for over a decade and can't say enough about the quality. "I know I'm putting the freshest product on table," said Bashy. "Everything, from the bluefish to the tuna to whatever, is so fresh that you can literally cut a piece and eat it. And that's how it should be for a seafood-based restaurant." His menu features pan-seared skate wing (he calls it "skate osso bucco") with pancetta and caper vinaigrette, couscous-crusted tuna mignon over potato gnocchi with rosemary-basil pesto, and barbecued Mattituck calamari salad with summer vegetables.

Every Saturday, before driving home, Alex and Stephanie dine at restaurants like Minnow that shopped with them a few hours earlier. "We have the best of both worlds," said Stephanie. □