

# FRESH BOUNTY

From dock to dinner  
with Catalina Offshore Products

By Elaine J. Masters



Dan Natrass



*Between the docks and dinner plates, a quiet, hardworking network of fish and fishermen flourishes with one thing in common—the region's largest seafood processor, Catalina Offshore Products. It's not quite a secret, though, as a-fish-ianados and restaurants have been enjoying its bounty for more than three decades. Now, however, fish fans are invited to visit the packaging plant for some surprising new experiences.*

Imagine attending a live cooking show gone rogue. That's the spirit behind Collaboration Kitchen, a collaboration of Catalina and Specialty Produce. Connecting local chefs, Catalina's marketing maestro, Tommy Gomes, started the monthly event to raise money for local charities, educating and introducing aspiring cooks to new ingredients and recipes. Guests sit between industrial coolers in rows on the packing room floor of Catalina and are treated to a handful of small plates, recipes, cooking demonstrations, and revelations. Each evening, Co-Emcee Dan Natrass takes a moment to slide open the refrigerator door and heft the fish of the day into view. It's a crowd-pleasing moment, to be sure. Gomes, using the skills he learned on his father's fishing boat, gives a fillet demonstration, offering all-you-can-eat sashimi to

the crowd. Each event sells out quickly.

What's fresh here—besides the daily catch—is a new open-door policy that breaks down the mysterious walls between purveyor and public. Visitors are welcome to venture into Catalina Offshore Products, along with chefs, to angle for their dinner catch. The company's founder and president, Dave Rudie, along with Fishmonger Gomes, has cast a wider net by opening an Educational Seafood Nutritional Center. "Kids think of fish as fried sticks and tacos. We want to show them and their parents that buying local is a healthy alternative and it can change eating habits," Gomes explains.

Each weekend, chefs teach easy, single-pot cooking



Tommy Gomes



methods that are very simple for kids and their parents to prepare, including how to break down a whole fish to make 3-4 different meals.

But first, the beginnings. How did a 30-something-year-old business grow to include such diverse educational elements? For Catalina Offshore's founder, Dave Rudie, it began back in high school scuba class. An introduction to the pastime quickly led to a passion, and Rudie soon developed a love of diving. Later, while studying oceanography in college, he spent summers harvesting red seaweed off Catalina Island (for agar-agar used in laboratories) and going deeper for sea urchins (uni) in the winter.

"Our vision is to bring parents and kids in and, down the road, watch them bring their kids in."

—Tommy Gomes

When the blue water gold rush for California's sea urchins took off, Rudie's processing days began in the family garage. He and wife Kathy would crack, sort, and clean the urchins in the evenings. His sister, Julie, helped with deliveries the next morning. Soon, Catalina Offshore Products was born and Master Chef Kazumi Yokoyama, owner of one of San Diego's first sushi bars (now Sushi Bar Kazumi), became the first local client.

"Uni has changed my life," Ota San of Sushi Ota, a client for over 30 years, says. "It helped that Dave was a diver and brought me the best sea urchins in the world," he laughs. Ota San now has regular customers calling when they visit from Japan. They want Catalina's uni.

But there's more to the magic of Catalina than urchins. Green business practices continue to be a priority for the purveyor, having built nearly an acre of solar panels onsite to run the ice machines, tanks, and offices. Rudie has also worked with Bob Harrington at Specialty Produce over the past 10 years to deliver daily catches and greens together instead of sponsoring a separate fleet of trucks to crowd San Diego's already bulging freeways.

Given the day and the season, Catalina's fresh

catch board varies wildly. There may be oysters from the Carlsbad Aqua Farms or hand-harvested diver-select scallops from Baja on the menu, but what doesn't change is the commitment to sustainability. South of the border, Panga boats—fishing boats about 17 feet long with crews of three each—catch fish and shellfish using non-invasive fishing practices. Not only is this eco-friendly sourcing, but the practices used are in tune with the local weather, and keep technological interference to a minimum.

Because of its beliefs and eco-friendly commitments, Catalina Offshore Products has fostered deep ties with the artisanal fishing fleets organized in cooperatives along the Pacific side of Baja. Dan Natrass, instrumental in Catalina OP's Purchasing and Sales, met Don Javier Nava in 1995 in Mexico while the Japanese market was still strong.

"Nava's group of fishermen was willing to work with fish-handling practices resulting in super high quality and that were minimally invasive," he says. In the end, Natrass explains, it's about people, "and they were willing to trust us. All of us were intent on creating relationships built on a willingness and vision to improve our techniques and sourcing methods." Today, Don Javier's legacy and longterm vision continue through his son, Claudio, and grandson, Hugo—both of whom ship seafood north to Catalina in San Diego.

The importance of relationships remains strong at Catalina—not just with its fishermen, but with its employees at home. In fact, many of the people working at the company have been there for decades. Cousins, fathers and sons, brothers and sisters all work together. Alejandro Castillo, for example, has held several positions since 1988 and has traveled across the continent and the world for the company. He knows the best product is at home. "My friends in Hokaido, Japan say that San Diego has the best urchins," he says.

The media agrees. Catalina OP was featured recently on Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern, in the pages of *Vogue*, and on Celebrity Chef Wolfgang Puck's cooking show. When Anthony Bourdain spoke in San Diego last year, he mentioned proudly that San Diego had the best sea urchins in the world, following up his laudation with a sample of Catalina's live uni before leaving town.


Down on the docks, local fishermen recall the



early days of Catalina, and how its success has followed Dave Rudie from his early diving days. Cliff Hawk, an urchin and sea cucumber diver, appreciates the changes that Catalina Offshore Products has implemented since he first started working with them in 1994. “Dave diversified,” he says. “If he’d stayed with uni, we might not still be here. I’m grateful he’s around. He’s an open book, simply asking us to bring in what we have—nothing but the best. He does what he says he’s going to do.”

Another diver, Gary Harley, dove near Rudie off Catalina in the ‘70s and echoes Hawk without wavering: “Dave is fair, keeps quality product, and provides us extra income from fish. He buys more from fishermen and helps keep the business afloat.”

Which is the secret—at least in part—of Catalina’s long-sung success. And what does the future hold? No doubt children’s programs and education are driving the new direction Catalina Offshore Products is taking. As Tommy Gomes says, “Nose to tail, seed to sprout, and now dock to plate, we’re teaching families how to use natural ingredients and how to enjoy the whole fish. Our vision is to bring parents and kids in and, down the road, watch them bring their kids in.”

Selling sea urchin or seaweed, sea scallops or yellowtail, there’s something to be said for a company with kids at its heart. 

Learn more about Catalina at [CatalinaOP.com](http://CatalinaOP.com).



## CHEFS DISH



*So many of San Diego’s renowned chefs have benefitted from Catalina’s fine products. Here are a few—just a few—whose long-lived relationships with the 30-year-old purveyor have created a profound and unbreakable bond between Dave Rudie and the ever-growing restaurant community of greater San Diego.*

### TREY FOSHEE **Georges at the Cove**

Fifteen years ago, Foshee was at his favorite sushi bar in LA and mentioned that he was moving to San Diego. They said that if he wanted the best uni in the world, he would have to get a hold of Catalina Offshore Products. Now, he uses many of their products, including local yellowtail, white sea bass, fluke, spiny lobster, and of course, sea urchin.

### JEFF JACKSON **The Lodge at Torrey Pines**

During the decade that he’s been buying from Catalina, Jeff Jackson has talked with the purveyor three to four times each week, varying his menu with what’s fresh. Some of his favorite products

include scallops from Guerrero Negro, swordfish, black cod, and albacore.

### OTA SAN **Sushi Ota**

Ota San has been using Catalina Offshore Products—and has known Dave Rudie—for over 30 years. In Ota’s own words, “Dave brought me the best uni in the world—it has changed my life.” Ota San specializes in sushi, of course, and several of his clients regularly come over from Japan to enjoy the Catalina-sourced product deftly prepared in Sushi Ota’s kitchen.

### PAUL JOHNSON **Sushi on the Rock**

A customer since 1988, Paul Johnson has praised Catalina, calling it the best processor in the region with quality that is second-to-none. Among his favorites are uni, live local lobster, swordfish, and tuna. He often features live items as specials and seasonal lobster throughout the fall season and into March.

### JASON KNIBB **NINETEN**

Knibb’s introduction to Catalina’s high quality fish experience was initiated ten years ago at the inaugural Celebrate the Craft event at The Lodge at Torrey Pines. Since then, Knibb regularly phones Catalina’s Dan

Natrass who screens the daily catch for individual fish worthy of a NINETEN “crudo” presentation. The relationship complements Knibb’s philosophy of using the freshest local products available to create regional cuisine. Knibb also regularly uses Catalina’s Hamachi to present a uniquely delicious sashimi plate.

### MIGUEL RUIZ **Red Door**

Ruiz has long known about the legendary quality of Catalina products, but only started using them when he became a sous chef at Red Door. He often goes over to Catalina to hang out with Tommy Gomes, checking out the daily catch menu. Among his favorite products are the jumbo shrimp, and the world-class uni, which Ruiz uses in a pumpkin bisque sauce on top of scallops.

### CARL SCHROEDER **Market Del Mar**

A history of 10 years binds Chef Schroeder to Catalina. The established and well-respected chef values seasonal and local ingredients as the core of his menus, which is why he’s into whatever’s fresh. Dan Natrass will often call him up with the day’s catches: Mano de Leon scallops, spiny lobster, white shrimp, spot prawns—you name it. He loves it all.