

Road food:

by Amanda Chater

Kelly McDonald cooks wild on the rails

Each issue we check in with a noted restaurateur to discover what's on her or his wild catch shopping list. Today, we meet Chef Kelly McDonald.

HE'S THE EXECUTIVE CHEF on the Napa Valley Wine Train. The train rolls 36 miles twice daily between the towns of Napa and St. Helena, through vineyards and lush countryside, and Chef Kelly serves up three- and four-course meals with a strong emphasis on seafood.

What wild fish do you use, and which do you use more frequently?

We follow the seasons, but I like to focus on island fish, mostly from Hawaii and local fish like halibut or petrale sole. Local halibut is mostly from the coast out past Jenner [California]. There's a lot of red algae in the water, the fish eat it, and they turn the color of their environment.

Is the price of wild fish prohibitive? What do you expect to see happen over the next few years?

I think the prices will go up, and I think there will be more government regulations on how many pounds can be fished of each fish. As Americans, we should start eating more variety of seafood; it comes down to education.

Which farmed varieties do you use, and why don't you use wild versions of those fish?

I use basa-basa, a white fish that's farmed in the U.S., because it's consistent; it's as good as the wild, and I'm giving the earth a break.

What is the most important thing you look for when purchasing wild fish?

CHEF KELLY MCDONALD

Awards and honors

2000: Presented at The Beard House, New York.

2003 and 2004: Twice selected as the Napa Valley Mustard Festival's People's Choice Chef of the Year.

2004: Won the Award of Excellence from the Chaine des Rotisseurs, an international gastronomic society.

I always find my salmon with eyes and gills attached. The gills tell how old it is. If they're red it's fresh; if they're bloody and red, it's very fresh; if they're grayish or bluish-gray, that fish is three or four days old. I look for a slime coat on the skin; it should be shiny and a little slippery.



Kelly McDonald: Fresh fish on wine train

What size portions do you use?

I use 8-oz. portions because I serve three- and four-course meals.

What is your favorite wild fish to cook with?

I love opa. It's such a beautiful, white fish, steaky, with a buttery, sole-like flavor. It's good lots of different ways — with a curry sauce or a buttery sauce.

How important is it for you to know where your fish came from?

I want to know exactly where the fish came from — from California, for example, but where in California? The more information I get, the more I pass on. I get more questions from diners these days — even from 6- and 7-year-olds! ★

FISHERMEN: If you have a product that you want Chef McDonald to sample, he wants to hear from you — but not directly, please. He's busy and, befitting a rolling restaurateur, on the road a lot. Instead, go to www.wildcatchmagazine.com, click on resources, and send the form to us. We'll compile the submissions and send them to the chef when he has time to contemplate them.