

*SELLSFISH, THEY'VE GOT THEIR HEADS ON AND THEY'RE WORKING
THEIR TAILS OFF
PAUL GODBOUT KNOWS HIS FISH, AND HE TELLS NO 'FISH STORIES'...*

By: Kathleen Curry

On a bustling Thursday morning in July, Paul Godbout, wife Marla, son Mike and adopted son Andy are getting ready for the Sellsfish weekend rush. Hour after hour, the boxes pour into the cutting room. They are immediately opened and inspected for quality. If they are up to muster, they are put in their designated freezers; if not, they are sent back. The phone is ringing off the hook about large orders for clams and shrimp. The store will clear through 1500 pounds of freight from now through the upcoming Sunday; Godbout says there's a line of customers sometimes 25 deep. And not all of them live close by; they have customers from Kiawah and Mount Pleasant too. Godbout tells me they "are working their tails off" and "it's always like this around here, it never stops."

Sellsfish is a premium fish store located on North Main, next to the Tractor Supply in Summerville. DHEC and yours truly can confirm it is the cleanest fish store in this area. It is refreshingly cool to step inside on a steamy summer morning like this one, greeted by the aroma of fresh catch and ocean waters. On the left wall, there is a bait freezer under Paul and Mike's fishing awards. Godbout says the bait section will only grow in the coming months. Further back, there is an iced case of whole fish varieties. At the center of the store are labeled filets behind glass, all wrapped in cellophane and Styrofoam on beds of ice. Closer to the front windows are shelves of specialty food items from all over the Eastern seaboard, including local brands like Pawleys Island's Carolina Creole and Columbia's Mother Shucker's cocktail sauce. To the right are dry scallops* behind glass and on ice, and a 43 degree live lobster tank containing lobsters up to 5 pounds in size. On the right wall, there are two freezers: one containing frozen specialties like lobster ravioli and alligator sausage; the second contains frozen King crab legs and whole frozen Dungeness crabs. Godbout tells me

customers are often lured in by this case once they come in the store. Along the back wall are doors to walk-in freezers, a large glass window into the cutting room, and the business office. If the customer happens to forget their cooler, Sellsfish accommodates them with styrofoam and some ice for the trip home. Sellsfish can also cater special events for crabs, oysters, and clams, just one per day right now. Transplants from New England will be happy to know he can get smelts, Stump Sound oysters, giant white clams, steamer clams, quahogs, cod, and any fish you need for the festival of seven fishes come the Holiday season.

Godbout is a native of Rhode Island, and was captivated by fish from an early age. He says learned to fish from his maternal grandfather, and was caught hook, line and sinker. A tour in the Marines brought him to the South, where he met Marla. They got married and had 3 sons. 'Two are in the family business-- Mike and Ryan are both active fishermen and have been from an early age, and Mike helps run the store. Andy, an adopted son, has been watching and learning the fish trade from the Godbouts since he was a preteen. 'Now in his 20s, he does the bulk of the cutting at the store. Godbout says Andy is a master cutter, and his skills easily rival anyone's. Following the Marine Corps, Godbout returned to the waterways for commercial and recreational fishing. In his lifetime thus far, he's done all things fish except harvesting shrimp, and he's fished off every pier on the East Coast. He has thousands of hours at sea and he knows his fish, and you know this is no fish story when you've been talking after only ten minutes. He worked in the wholesale business for 25 years, and he knows chefs from Amelia Island, Florida, up to Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina. He had such a trusted following of clients that the company he worked for almost shut down after his departure. All his contacts were lured away with Godbout; they didn't want to work with anyone else.

Making Sellsfish a reality was a family affair and a labor of love. Godbout had sketched blueprints for 3 years, and scoped out the current location for some time before taking the plunge. He showed the sketches and his business plan to his silent partner, Scott Akey of Clemson Sports Medicine. Akey eagerly loaned him the money to get started. Five weeks after opening, Sellsfish was cash

positive, aka well into the black and making money. They're eleven months in now, it hasn't slowed at all. Mike confided he can't wait for the upcoming oyster season. Godbout says they go through about 150 bushels a week.

Operational objectives from day one included:

Truth in menu/labeling: All whole fish are grouped according to species, then gender in their ice case. The filets are behind glass and all labeled with species and where the fish was caught. All fish are priced at fair market value. Every order is handled with a new pair of gloves. All the fish are on ice, and the filets are on Styrofoam and wrapped in cellophane. 'Got questions? See the next bullet.

Knowledgeable help and excellent service from anyone on staff: Any staff member can do any job required to operate the shop, and anyone can 'make it right' if a customer should be unhappy with their purchase. (It's always good to be prepared for the worst, but yours truly is confident that every customer is a ubiquitous happy clam). Staff can also advise ways to prepare your fish as well.

Separate freezers for fish and shellfish (self-explanatory)

A cutting room any customer can see from behind the glass cases (also self-explanatory)

Godbout's two biggest crusades: the need for truth in menu laws in South Carolina, and

the survival of the American fishing industry. These two issues are inextricably linked, and Godbout does all he can to educate chefs, culinary students and the public about fish and the fish industry, for the benefit of public health, the local economy, and American fishermen's livelihoods well into the future.

What would a "truth in menu" law do? It would require restaurants and seafood stores to tell you exactly what they sell you and charge accordingly, or face stiff

fines and penalties. Right now, “\$7.99 grouper for sale” or a “\$7.99 grouper sandwich” sounds like incredible deals, don’t they? Well, they’re actually inedible deals for two big reasons: A) That’s not grouper you’re buying, and B) it is more than likely it’s basa, panga, or swai, all three are catfish farmed in the toxic Mekong River. The Mekong is a dumping ground for tons of industrial waste, and tons of its fish have flooded the US market over the last decade. Basa/panga/swai are sold as more famous species we Americans know and love, like grouper, at ridiculously low prices. Quality local seafood is never under \$10, but you get what you pay for. A local fisherman, trying to make a living in an already unpredictable business, catches locally, keeps meticulous records of what he caught and in what waters, pays for fuel and boat upkeep, rods, reels, line, and other supplies. He sells his fish to a restaurant willing to pay for only the best, freshest fish. The chef prepare it with the artistry that only he/she can. In selling it to the customer, they tell you exactly what fish they have, tell you how they prepared it, and charge fairly and realistically. These higher-end honest restaurants lose business compared to corporations with no long-term interest in the local economy, environment or community health. Quality seafood is not cheap, but it also doesn’t contaminate your body, irritate your system with mystery ingredients, or potentially cause long-term health problems, which today’s cosmetically preserved, or foreign farmed seafood probably will. Godbout does not sell basa, panga, or swai at all, and he is working on educating the public to get people to stop buying it. The only imported fish to be found at Sellfish are Scottish salmon, whiting, and tilapia. As previously stated, if you have any questions about the fish in the store, anyone on staff can answer it. That doesn’t happen with bargain fish sold for a high profit at a corporate store; the people handling the fish in those places don’t have 25 years of expertise to draw from, they tell you what they were trained to say.

Godbout also has a bone to pick with overregulation of fishing industry, which makes it very hard for a local fisherman to stay afloat these days. What types of fish can be caught, at what time of year, what types of hooks can be used in what waterways, what species are listed as “at risk” when they really aren’t endangered—these are just some of the issues today’s local fisherman deal with.

At [youtube.com/user/sellfish](https://www.youtube.com/user/sellfish), you can see any number of educational videos made by Godbout when he's out fishing with family and friends. Godbout has taken local chefs out fishing in order to introduce them to Atlantic species; now those same chefs are his lifelong friends, who call regularly to see what fish are available, and Godbout unabashedly recommends their restaurants. He and Marla can show up anytime to these restaurants and tell the chef "surprise us". They have yet to disappoint. Godbout says he would really like to get more downtown Charleston chefs in the store during the week to talk to customers about fish they buy and the importance of supporting local seafood. It just might get more Dorchester residents eating downtown, raising the expectations and awareness for seafood served all over the Lowcountry.

Godbout also educates the future cooking stars of Charleston through the TTC's Culinary Arts program. Students come to the shop to practice cutting fish and learn to identify fish just by looking at them. One of his grateful students, Helen Hayes, competed earlier this year in San Pellegrino's "Almost Famous" chef contest in at the Culinary Institute in Chicago. When she became a Southeast Regional finalist, she gave Godbout her trophy—a stainless steel sauté pan. It hangs in the store, right over the cutting room window.

Naturally it is a real reward to come to the shop and have a personal consultation from the man himself about your fish, but be forewarned: Godbout has become a regular favorite on Good Morning America, and is a friend of co-host Robin Roberts. He and Marla are welcome anytime on the show. During one appearance, the producer and other crew were wearing a Sellfish t-shirts for the entire broadcast. He also made ceviche on an episode of American Bikers. And, needless to say, he does love being out on the water as much as possible. I will leave you with some fish buying pointers:

When buying a whole fish (head still on), look for clear eyes and very red color inside the gills.

When buying sashimi tuna, its flesh shouldn't be dark mauve, magenta or purple, it was treated with carbon monoxide if it is those colors.

When buying swordfish fillets, there should be a “blood trail”--an arc shape about one inch (1”) from the bottom of the filet. If the fillet doesn’t have it, it was frozen. We have swordfish off the Carolina coast, and it doesn’t get any fresher or better than that!

Dry scallops are better to buy than wet. Wet scallops are not fresh caught, they were treated with a chemical to maintain moisture and look fresh caught.

Do not eat scallop medallions, especially if you do not eat beef. Scallop medallions are white slime: lots of scallop pieces held together by beef blood protein.

Always trust your nose with all seafood you buy.

Once you’ve bought fresh, and tasted fresh, there really is no going back. If you’re served anything less, you’ll be throwing it back.

Sellfish is at 1672 North Main Street in Summerville. If you are coming up I-26 from Downtown, West Ashley or Mt Pleasant this is 199 “the McElveen exit”. Once you are on North Main, drive past Sangaree Plaza, and it is up on the left. They are on Facebook at HYPERLINK "<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Sellfish-Premium-Seafood/210352178996674>"<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Sellfish-Premium-Seafood/210352178996674>

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