

The Other Brother Darryl

A trip to the Boston Fish Market

“If you want to see the good, the bad and the ugly, “ Darryl Sawin told me, come to the market on a Monday.” A chef and food fanatic should always be game for a culinary adventure, so on a rainy Monday at 5:15 A.M., I pulled up to The Other Brother Darryl’s fish store in Otis. The lights were on; Darryl’s petite wife and business partner, Laurie-Lee, bustled around the store. The long workday at The Other Brother Darryl had just begun.

On the dark turnpike headed towards Boston it became evident that Darryl’s truck is the center his fish business: his store, his office, his boat. An ex-fisherman and chef, Darryl dreamed of selling quality fish to restaurants. His idea was to drive a refrigerated truck to Berkshire restaurants, let the chefs walk right into the back of the truck, and choose their own fish, to be cut on the spot. He started with a \$60,000 F.D.A. approved truck in 1985. Within four months he bought another truck that his wife, Laurie-Lee drove with their first child beside her. While their second child was delivered, the Sawin’s conducted business-as-usual, from the truck to the hospital, between contractions. They now have five trucks supporting a booming wholesale business, and one retail store, with a second opening at Guido’s in Great Barrington in March.

Still the backbone of the business is the truck. By 8:00 A.M. we hit Boston traffic, and the car phone transformed Darryl’s truck into an office. I watched Darryl confer with Laurie about restaurant orders from the Elm Court and The Old Mill, two of their 150 wholesale clients. In turn Darryl called his purveyors to find out what was in. One place only had Chilean salmon. “Dry,” Darryl sneered.

A few minutes later, Lois, the salesperson for a large wholesaler, promised to hold him some quality farm raised salmon, but steered him clear of the swordfish. The calls zinged back and forth, while Darryl kept a running tally in his head. Phone in one hand, steering wheel in the other, we pulled into The Pier.

While Boston has been a seaport for centuries, The Commonwealth Pier, in South Boston, was built in 1908. In the 1980's it was renovated to match the antiquated pier, a long strip with docks on either side, labeled with attractive signs. But the design is better suited to the horse and buggy, so quick access for trucks is impossible. To compensate, the market now spills down into Hay Market square and Roxbury, where the neighborhood is so dangerous that Darryl has had to step over bullet casings on his way to pick up fish.

As the market neighborhood, as well as the demand for fish expands, the supply of fish is shrinking. As recently as twenty years ago, boats brought about million pounds of fish a day into the pier. Today, because of the depleted supply, the F.D.A. has made an effort to control the catch, plummeting the local haul to under a million pounds of fish a month. Farm raised fish, as well as fish trucked in from elsewhere, supplement the dwindling supply, but prices are still on the rise. When I asked Darryl about deals, and he shrugged, "The rule is simple: the longer it's out of the water, the cheaper it gets."

It continued to rain as we drove past eight docked fishing boats, stern draggers, their nets rolled up on large wheels. "They'll be plenty of flat fish, but this bad weather should drive prices up." We pulled up to a wet dock, and Darryl hustled me into the back of a large truck filled with swordfish. He poked at the fish, rejecting one, because it was too soft, and picked out two, that he loaded into his truck. The fish were both labeled by weight with a

blue marker right on their skin—110 and 117 pounds. “Usually they run closer to 300 lbs in the summer,” Darryl told me. Before the end of the day, I saw trucks the size of large houses filled with fat swordfish, heads and tails removed, their gray bodies packed in snow white ice.

We spent the next five hours driving to loading docks, sloshing through warehouses in search of quality fish and seafood. Some of our stops were simply transfer points, warehouses where one truck drops off fish for another to pick up. Other stops were large wholesale houses. I walked through a warehouses filled with every kind of fish you can imagine, from ugly whole cod, to Caribbean tilapia, halibut, yellow tail snapper, gray sole filleted by the carload. Darryl looked at everything, occasionally stopping to touch and turn over a fish. “It’s good to see what the competition will be selling,” he told me.

At one point we stepped into a warehouse filled with trout boxes, marked “fragile,” being thrown across the room and re-stacked. When our boxes were uncovered, we moved on to more cold warehouses filled with men and women in jackets and down vests, dragging, tossing and filleting fish in small assembly lines.

An important part of this trip was Darryl’s search for exquisitely fresh tuna. All fish must be killed and stored properly for good flavor, but tuna presents a unique problem because it is warm blooded. When it struggles it literally burns its precious fat and creates a bitter tasting lactic acid in its flesh.

In one warehouse, Darryl described as “sleazy, but sometimes in possession of quality tuna”, we hustled past several hefty workers, dragging hooked whole fish across the wet cement floor, into the foul smelling ammonia cooled refrigerator. Five tuna lay near the entrance. A worm shaped piece of tuna

sat on top of each fish. “That’s their cored sample of the center meat, but we’re going to take our own.” Darryl lowered his corer —a long thin pipe of metal — into the center of the giant fish. He pulled it out and pushed a smaller piece of pipe through the first piece, extruding the desired sample from of the center of the fish. Darryl rubbed a piece in his hand, shook his head and we left. “I’m looking for the feel of Crisco for a good fat content, and a iridescent flesh,” he told me.

Later that day we got a call; some prized Blue Fin tuna had arrived at another house. Darryl ordered the top loin and called Laurie with the price. When we arrived, the giant tuna loomed in the foreground. A thin man stood on a small plastic crate, using a mallet to pound a knife along the bones of a fish almost as large as a steer. The dark glistening red flesh instantly contrasted with the mat fish we had just rejected. The man carefully handled the most precious Toro, the fattiest part of the tuna reserved for top quality Japanese restaurants and sometimes shipped to Japan. He then removed the loin, sat it on the counter, and returned to his boning job. Darryl cut us both a piece. It was melt in your mouth sushi quality tuna, 24 hours out of the water.

Our last stop was for scallops, Darryl’s pet peeve. Apparently they are mostly treated with the chemical sodium tripolyphosphate. STP, as it is called, is added to the water in which the scallops are soaked. That way a 100-pound bucket of scallops soaks up an additional 40 lbs of water before it is sold. A milky liquid often surrounds treated scallops; inexpensive scallops are usually treated.

Darryl talks several times a day with a business that provides him with untreated scallops. In the rain, we backed up to one of the last docks of the day for scallops. Through the truck windshield, past a few circling seagulls, I

could see the skyline of downtown Boston across the water. Inside the warehouse, the white and golden sea scallops filled cloth bags that sat in a wooden crate Darryl opened a bag and fished us out two plump scallops. We ate them raw. They tasted sweet and slightly briny, like the perfect day on the beach.

It was evening before we arrived back in Otis in the Berkshires. “In the winter, “ these last hills are tough when you are loaded down with fish,” he explained. Laurie was still working in the store when we pulled up. Darryl proudly told her about the tuna. She went to check the scallops in the truck, while he unloaded the fish into the walk-in made of the remnants from their first truck.

I couldn't resist buying a couple of pounds of sole, crab, and scallops right off the truck. Inside, a few people were in the store, buying fish for dinner. No doubt the Sawin's had evening plans, like repairing one of the trucks in their garage insulated with Styrofoam salmon boxes, or collecting bones for the Berkshire Bird Paradise, a local non-profit. They seemed perky enough; not yet ready to retire to their home above the store. But I was wet, exhausted, and anxious to get home to a shower and a fresh fish dinner.

For those of you that are wondering about the name: Years ago Darryl had a look-alike roommate who was always getting into trouble. When folks nabbed Darryl, mistaking him for his roommate, his friends would cry out, “No, that's the other Brother... Darryl!” More recently, Darryl and his old roommate switched off, one driving, while the other slept in the back. A competitor spotted them, and assumed Darryl was on the road 24 hours a day. He wasn't, the Sawin's 5 A.M. to 8 P.M. workday is long enough. It's a good thing they have a passion for fish.

