

SALMON COME



FULL CIRCLE

Wheelhouse Seafoods' family & fish





FISH AND SEAFOOD HAVE ALWAYS BEEN THE BACKBONE of Trevor Yamamoto's family. His mother worked at the **Gulf of Georgia Cannery** in Steveston. His grandfather and uncle were fishermen off the coast of Steveston. But Yamamoto didn't know this as a young man, making it all the more serendipitous when he stumbled into the fishing industry at the age of 17.

"It was really weird to me. It was like ..." Trevor stops mid-sentence and trades glances with his wife, Catherine. "... fate," he says. "It was like we're attracted to fish," Catherine adds.

As a young adult, Trevor's first full-time job was at Token Seafoods in the fish processing industry, where he worked his way up to become a supervisor. Catherine's father was a sailor and longshoreman, and she ended up in the seafood restaurant business. She came up with the idea to open a fish shop that would also sell a few cooked items. Trevor wasn't convinced. Fish is a highly perishable and delicate product, and the seafood business is tough and unforgiving. As Trevor puts it, even though we live in a beautiful port city, there's a reason why there isn't a fishmonger's shop on every corner. However, he eventually gave in and was once again drawn closer to fish. In 2001, with the help of Trevor's mother and Catherine's father, the Yamamotos opened **Wheelhouse Seafoods** at 2605 East Hastings Street.

Sitting at the kitchen counter at Wheelhouse Seafoods, all I can smell is the mouth-watering aroma of seafood chowder. It fills the shop and wafts outside into the chilly morning each time the door opens. Wheelhouse Seafoods started off carrying local and sustainable seafood, but they eventually added free-range meats and made-in-house delicacies like their chowder and signature salmon cakes.

"Trevor is a great cook and he invented the recipe for our signature wild sockeye salmon burgers," Catherine says. Wheelhouse customers have been creative in using the salmon cakes: they've been stuffed with cream cheese and pan-fried, and even reshaped into salmon balls to sit atop spaghetti.

Trevor's a large man with a tan complexion and a neat ponytail. He shows me how to prepare his salmon cakes. "The trick is to go by feel," he says in his husky voice. "We don't put too much in our recipes, and we try to keep things simple." He combines fresh salmon with eggs, breadcrumbs, olive oil, and one other secret ingredient; Catherine adds minced green onions and dill. Trevor's face lights up when he shapes the salmon cakes with a mould and weighs them. In his hands, sockeye salmon is transformed into juicy salmon cakes with the richest sunset hues.

To Trevor, this beautiful silver-skinned fish with succulent flesh evokes certain times, memories, and people. His mother was an



Catherine & Trevor Yamamoto

enormous part of Wheelhouse and of their success. She worked at the shop right up until she passed away, endlessly scraping post-fillet salmon bones for more meat to add to salmon cakes.

"His mother was like, 'I can't get away from fish. Even though I am in my '70s, I still can't get away from fish!'" says Catherine.

Trevor recalls a recent conversation with his uncle, who asked, "Do you ever get that spring salmon with the hooked nose?" Trevor explains that mature spring salmon develop a distinctive hooked nose, which signals the beginning of their spawning journey back to their birthplace. His uncle rejoiced in the memory of the cherry-tinted fish swimming upstream, guided by their natural and family instinct: "That's the best-eaten salmon," he said to me. "Make sure you get spring salmon with the hooked nose." Trevor recollects his uncle's words as he lifts a fist to his chest, extending his bent index finger and middle fingers to mimic the spring salmon's hooked nose.

Like salmon returning to their spawning grounds, Trevor and Catherine were drawn to Steveston's winter **Cannery Farmers' Market**, on the same site where his mother used to work. Catherine explains that they were initially invited to join the market with their baking



side business, but they decided to bring Wheelhouse forward instead. “We feel such a connection. When we are at the cannery, it’s very cold and we sell our seafood cakes there. We often think, we could be standing on the very spot that his mother did.” They are now a regular vendor at the market.

The Yamamoto family business has deepened their connection with the sea and knitted the family closer. With Catherine’s seafood restaurant background and Trevor’s salmon cake recipe, the business is right up their alley. “It seems like everything leads us back to the sea and we can’t get away from it,” Catherine says as she looks at Trevor, who chuckles. “So true.”

Note: The Steveston winter Cannery Farmers’ Market is open every other Sunday from October to April, 10 am–3 pm.

Rachel Kwok is a freelance writer who has a soft spot for deliciously raw sockeye salmon served as sushi and sashimi. Visit her portfolio at rachel-kwok.com

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