



Legal Sea Foods stirs controversy with 'blacklisted' seafood dinner

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Seafood restaurant chain Legal Sea Foods is drawing fire for a seafood dinner aimed at promoting sustainable seafood that has been unfairly labeled as "outlawed or blacklisted."

The dinner, co-hosted with The Culinary Guild of New England (CGNE) on Jan. 24, "will be deliberately designed to serve what others consider outlawed or blacklisted fish." Legal Sea Foods' Roger Berkowitz and Vice President of Seafood Purchasing Bill Holler will both attend the dinner.

Boston-based Legal, which specializes in casual dining focused around a large seafood menu, has more than two dozen locations across 10 states.

The idea behind the upcoming dinner -- and its tongue-in-cheek theme -- is that guests would have the opportunity "to ask questions about what is safe to eat, which species are plentiful, and how to read between the lines of media reports," CGNE said.

Food writer Jacqueline Church jumped on the announcement of the dinner and blasted it on her blog. "Every once in awhile something comes across the transom that sets off the BS Meter. The needle is buried in the red zone," Church wrote.

Among the species on the "blacklisted fish" menu are black tiger shrimp, cod and hake. Sustainable sources of cod and hake are indeed available - stocks from the Barents Sea have been certified to the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) standards for sustainable fisheries. Several farms producing black tiger shrimp have been certified to the Global Aquaculture Alliance's (GAA) Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) standards.

Church cited NGOs that encourage consumers to avoid the fish species, or list their fishing or farming practices used to harvest the fish as harmful to the environment.

"The tone of this press release and menu strike me as a bit off target," Church wrote. "Is the goal to discredit someone else or is it truly to educate the dining public? If the intent is to educate then why not celebrate what IS sustainable rather than take a swipe at those who work so hard in the field. Why proclaim "blacklisted fish" is okay?"

Church sent out dozens of "tweets" on her blog entry, which raised alarm among the food and environmental community (and, not least, drove traffic to her Web site).

Church complained that Legal and CGNE were not responding to her calls and emails, and encouraged her readers to contact Legal to complain.

On Dec. 23, Church wrote that Berkowitz did respond, via an email from Marketing Director Ida Farber, noting that sustainability in the seafood industry is "highly complex."

"The intention of our upcoming dinner with the Culinary Guild of New England is to bring awareness to some of this inherent complexity and to establish an open dialogue on the topic that hopefully broadens our collective understanding," Berkowitz wrote. "Legal Sea Foods is passionate about sustainability, the fishing industry and food safety...It seems that you're not aware of our longstanding work and dedication in this area..."

For years, Legal has been involved in raising awareness of problems in the seafood industry and the challenges of sourcing sustainable fish. Legal was one of the first restaurant chains to become involved in the sustainable seafood movement, with Berkowitz out in front. Among its efforts, several years ago the company controversially said it would "wean" diners off farmed salmon by promoting Alaska wild salmon instead.



Berkowitz invited Church to attend the dinner as his guest, and offered to answer any questions she had.

"I am quite truthfully, on the fence about attending a dinner of seafood I don't feel is sustainable, in a setting that feels like more of an ambush than a discussion," Church wrote.

Even with the bad reviews, Legal has made no mention about changing its dinner plans.

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