FOOD

The S.F. Bay is teeming with this tiny fish, adored by local chefs

Anchovies rest on ice at TwoXSea's Fisherman's Wharf warehouse.

Benjamin Fanjoy/Special to the Chronicle

By **Aviva Bechky**, Staff writer

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Gift Article

Standing on the deck of a 60-foot fishing boat, Lucas Allen Maxwell swishes a net through almost-empty tanks. He comes up triumphant, holding a smattering of squirming silver fish, the last of that morning's anchovy haul.

It's just about 8 a.m. in San Francisco, and a man in a mustard yellow jacket is waiting on nearby Pier 47. Maxwell raises the anchovies for another deckhand to hose off and then pours them into a plastic bag. The man — Nicola Ingargiola, 69 — takes the bag from Maxwell with a look of delight, fish still wiggling around inside.

"Nice and fresh," Ingargiola says. "You cannot get better than that."

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FROZEN ANCHOVIES

Left: Nicola Ingargiola, 69, holds a bag of fresh anchovies. Right: Deckhand Lucas Allen Maxwell stands on the fishing boat Cape Knox while Ingargiola waits for his fish. Photos by Benjamin Fanjoy/Special to the Chronicle

He's right. A few hours ago, those anchovies were schooling in San Francisco Bay. J&P Bait, a bait fish company anchored in Fisherman's Wharf, scooped them up and had only just gotten back to shore. Few people get to enjoy them quite as fresh as Ingargiola did, but increasingly, the anchovies at the pier are making their way to restaurants throughout the Bay Area — sometimes arriving less than two hours out of the water.

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To the chefs that swear by J&P's catch, anchovies are a delectable — if misunderstood — treat.

People "think of those salty, briny, awful things that you put on pizza with those canned olives. But they're not at all," said Laurence Jossel, owner and chef at San Francisco restaurant Nopa. "They're incredible creatures."

When eaten fresh, northern anchovies have a delicate, mild and soft flesh, ideal for any number of preparations.

They're also in high abundance in local waters: According to Andrew Thompson, a research fish biologist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the anchovy population is currently in a "boom" cycle. That makes them a much more sustainable alternative to larger fishes like salmon and tuna.

“You can’t even put a dent in how many anchovies are in that water,” said Erik Sandquist, owner of J&P Bait.

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A boat sails around Fisherman’s Wharf as the fishing vessel Cape Knox, left, unloads anchovies.

Benjamin Fanjoy/Special to the Chronicle

That’s especially true now, with his company facing limited competition. California Department of Fish and Wildlife data shows that local anchovy fishing has plummeted over the past 40 years. In the Bay Area, only six businesses are landing anchovies, according to an environmental scientist with the department.

In Sandquist's eyes, this is because purse seine fishing — the technique he uses — has become a "lost art." It's one that his four- to five-man crew knows well, though.

A few times a week, from spring until November, Sandquist's boat, the Cape Knox, sets out into San Francisco Bay or through the Golden Gate into the Pacific Ocean.

Once they find the anchovies, the crew unspool a giant net into the water, encircling the anchovies before tightening the "purse line" on the bottom to trap the fish. Then they use a pump to suck thousands of pounds of water and anchovies through a tube into the boat's four tanks. The fish swarm in the boat's belly, a writhing, black mass that flashes silver when anchovies come close to the surface.

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Left: Lucas Allen Maxwell works aboard the fishing vessel Cape Knox. Right: Anchovies pass through a tube as they're pumped from the boat tanks into netted pens at Pier 47. Photos by Benjamin Fanjoy/Special to the Chronicle

When the Cape Knox arrives back at Pier 47, the crew drains the tanks, using a pump to move the fish from the boat into netted pens at the pier. A deckhand, inside the boat's tanks, bangs a metal tool to corral the anchovies toward the tube. As the pump sucks, the fish flash through the tube, little glimmers splashing out into a submerged, netted pen.

With the anchovy pens open, hungry gulls circle overhead. Sea lions bark in the Bay. Sandquist's rust-colored dog, Scoop, jumps alongside the pens, scaring off the birds.

Starting around 6 a.m. each day, customers come by too, eager to get their still-squirming anchovies. Most of the buyers will use the fish as live bait to catch halibut, but the occasional person like Ingargiola fries them up to eat. Seafood suppliers come by too, getting anchovies to sell to restaurants and to home cooks.

Kenny Belov is one such supplier. The co-owner of Sausalito restaurant Fish, Belov started a seafood supply company called TwoXSea about 15 years ago out of frustration with the suppliers he worked with. They couldn't reliably tell him where his seafood came from and how it was fished, so Belov set out to change the industry.

Left: Kenny Belov pours fresh anchovies into a bag at TwoXSea's warehouse.Right: Erik Sandquist grabs anchovies with a net as his dog next to him helps scare off birds.
Benjamin Fanjoy/Special to the Chronicle

Working with people like Sandquist has been essential, Belov said, because he can trust that they sell local, sustainable and fresh products. And anchovies in particular have been a "truly local treasure," the most consistently available product Belov sells. (Home cooks can get them delivered from him for $16 a pound.)

Since Belov launched his business, he's seen interest in anchovies grow. Over the past 14 years, Sandquist said the share of his anchovies going to restaurants instead of fishermen has almost doubled.

After all, for chefs, the possibilities for the fish go on and on. Anchovies can be pickled. Sauteed. Fried. Layered on buttery toast, battered and crisped up, tossed into salads for a punch of umami.

Many of those preparations appear on the menu at Stuart Brioza's Anchovy Bar. The chef — of Michelin-starred restaurants State Bird Provisions and the Progress — fell in love with anchovies years ago. In 2020, he launched the Anchovy Bar, a restaurant dedicated to the fish's freshness and versatility.

Founded 2009
TwoXSea
San Francisco, CA

Left: Anchovies rest on ice at TwoXSea's Fisherman's Wharf warehouse. Right: Kenny Belov leaves the warehouse. Photos by Benjamin Fanjoy/Special to the Chronicle

Each morning, TwoXSea or another seafood supplier like Water2Table or Four Star Seafood and Provisions rush 20 or 30 pounds of anchovies over to Brioza. When they get there, the ice-packed fish have been out of the water for less than two hours.

As soon as they hit the Anchovy Bar kitchen, a team of six to eight chefs descends on the tray of fish and ice. They clean the fish one by one. A first press of the knife: the head comes off. Another: the belly opens up. A flick or two, and the black inner lining comes out.

Next comes descaling in an ice bath, and then two saltwater slurries to completely clean them. Decapitated and gutted, the anchovies drop into a fragrant bath of salted lime juice, basil, jalapeño and garlic. They soak for two days, spend about a week packed in oil, and come out ready to serve: a feisty California take on the boquerone, a Spanish vinegar-marinated anchovy.

“It’s a special fish for San Francisco,” Brioza said.

Lucas Allen Maxwell gestures from the fishing vessel Cape Knox as the boat unloads anchovies.

Benjamin Fanjoy/Special to the Chronicle

The chef makes plenty of other anchovy dishes, too. In his "purgatory" preparation, fresh anchovies serve as a soft, melty vehicle for a spicy sauce with citrusy shiso and chile-soaked turnips. Even on a vanilla ice cream sundae, he adds dried anchovies as a salty sprinkle.

But the boquerones are his signature item. Brioza is so passionate about the fish — and his recipe — that he made a mini-documentary about the process in 2018.

In 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, making boquerones was just about all he could do. Uncertain when restaurants might reopen, Brioza brought the pickling process to Belov's TwoXSea warehouse on Pier 45, just two piers away from where Sandquist docks. Wearing masks, trays of anchovies in front of them, they'd spend hours cutting off the heads, gutting the fish, scaling them and marinating them, getting the boquerones ready for sale in small to-go boxes.

Tomato toast with chef Stuart Brioza's signature California boquerones from Anchovy Bar in S.F.

Cesar Hernandez/The Chronicle

It was a difficult time, Belov said. But he felt a little less isolated thanks to the anchovy.

In the years since, he said, that memory has stuck with him. It’s a reminder of how many people it takes to bring the little fish from the Bay to the plate: “All of us just all being linked together by the anchovy.”

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Aviva Bechky is an intern on the food and wine team. They are a rising senior at Northwestern University, where they study journalism, data science, and gender and sexuality studies. They most recently worked as a general assignment intern at Block Club Chicago and as a features intern at the Seattle Times. Hailing from Maryland, Bechky also spent a summer writing for District Fray Magazine in Washington, D.C. At their college paper, the Daily Northwestern, they served in several roles, including print managing editor, city editor, and development and recruitment editor. Outside the newsroom, they enjoy knitting, cooking and watching “Star Trek.”

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