

Award for Outstanding Achievement

The Real-Cost Café

A REAL FISH STORY

by Ryan Harmon

When going out for seafood, do you order your salmon farmed? Choose tilapia over red snapper? Or ask if the Chilean Seabass comes legal?

In the United States, two-thirds of all seafood (by value) moves through restaurants to the consumer and an additional twenty four percent is sold fresh or frozen through retail outlets. Surprisingly, much of this seafood is caught in waters troubled by “bycatch” (when unwanted fish and animals are caught and discarded); habitat damage along the coast — both above and below the water; aquaculture (fish farming); and probably the most troubling, overfishing — there are only so many fish in the sea.

At the Monterey Bay Aquarium in Monterey, California, the Real-Cost Café invites guests to learn about these fishy issues and become empowered in their daily lives to make choices for healthy oceans.

“We made a conscious decision to shift from our usual informational and intellectual approach to an affective approach, which we hoped would further engage visitors’ emotions,” explains Jaci Tomulonis, senior exhibition developer/writer at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

“We focused on our visitors’ emotional connections to the oceans and to the animals and plants that live there. We wanted to help them realize their important role in creating a healthy future for the oceans.”

Inside this interactive, 1950s diner-themed exhibit, guests can sit at a counter and choose from a variety of seafood dishes listed on six touch-screen menus. Each selection prompts a response from one or more of three characters: a chef, a waitress and a waiter, who appear life-size on cleverly-integrated 50-inch HD flat screen monitors.

The characters explain whether or not the seafood ordered by the guest is sustainable - meaning that it is caught or farmed in a way that doesn’t compromise the species’ survival or the health of the surrounding ecosystem.

Order Chilean seabass, for example, and the waitress (reminiscent of Flo in the 1970s sitcom “Alice”) humbles and chides you for ordering a threatened species. “Next time you see the bass,” she says, “just take a pass.”

Likewise, when rockfish is ordered, the waiter and waitress explain how these victims of habitat destruction live to be over 100 years old and don’t even begin breeding until they’re in their 20s. In homage to a classic episode of “Seinfeld,” the chef shouts, “no more rockfish for you!”

All the comments are served up in this lighthearted, tongue-in-cheek manner while delivering important conservation messages about the status of certain fisheries. Through the playful interaction, guests discover that some seafood choices have hidden environmental costs, but, by making responsible and informed seafood choices, we can all have a positive impact on the oceans.

By adding an element of humor to the program, the Aquarium felt it could effectively and directly deliver important conservation messages that forward the institution’s mission.

“With the final script complete, we set out to bring the Real-Cost Café kitchen staff to life,” said project manager Stephen Platenberg. “The chef, waitress and waiter were cast. A working kitchen was secured and each actor was filmed - one at a time - while the other two read their lines off camera.”

“We took great effort to edit each scene with similar empty space at beginning and end so that all scenes could play in any order without the appearance of a cutaway. The result is a seamlessly integrated blend of story and technology.”

After making their virtual choices, guests receive their virtual bill. It instructs them to go to the Real-Cost cash register, where they can pick up their own Seafood Watch pocket guide. The guide is designed to help them make healthy choices for our oceans when they’re buying fish in a market or dining at a restaurant.

“We wanted our visitors to leave the Real-Cost Café feeling like they’re part of the solution for ocean fisheries - not part of the problem,” said Tomulonis. “We hope that this objective will continue to be realized, hook, line and sinker.”



The Real Cost Café imparts a serious message with interactivity and a nice touch.



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