


In cod we trust*

A short hop from Boston on the Massachusetts coast, Cape Cod made its name and fortune from the huge quantities of the white fish that were once found here. As stocks dwindle, those who once relied on the industry are finding new ways to survive





Words / Nione Meakin → Photography / River Thompson

* But not for much longer?

C hatham, on the tip of North America's Cape Cod peninsular, is a classic coastal town of white clapboard houses and neat lawns, rocking chairs on porches and tourist boutiques. A popular seaside destination, its population of just over 6,000 is set to swell in coming months as well-heeled Americans return to their New England summer homes, and holidaying families fill the pale, clean beaches, as they have done for generations.

Yet, away from the lobster shacks and T-shirt shops something unexpected is happening. In the boatyards and huts on the fringes of town, and along the coastline of Cape's 100km spit, fishermen are navigating their way through some choppy waters. Since 2012, for reasons scientists are still trying to determine and fishermen can't agree on, the cod stocks that gave the Cape its name and prosperity have all but disappeared, leaving the fishing industry in the throes of a crisis.

By 2014, according to figures from the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, commercial fishermen caught some four million pounds of cod (less than two million kg). Twenty years ago, it was more than six times

that – 26,998,742lbs. Whether one blames overfishing, environmental changes or even – as some do – the growing inland seal population that feeds off cod before they can be landed, it's a serious and growing issue.

In an attempt to tackle overfishing and rebuild stock, cod-fishing quotas have dropped drastically, but it seems to be a case of too little, too late. Cape fishermen say they are struggling to hit even these lower quotas and many have given up trying. Any cod that can be found now are far offshore and fishing for them often involves a three-day trip with no guarantee of success.

So, while you'll still find cod on the menu in Chatham's many seafood





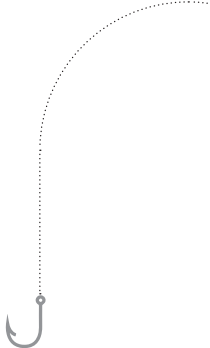
restaurants, these days it's usually not from the nearest harbour but imported from Iceland.

On the Cape, this isn't just about the death of an industry but of an entire way of life. As Mark Kurlansky explains in *Cod: A History of the Fish that Changed the World*, this humble groundfish was responsible for elevating New England from "a distant colony of starving settlers to an international commercial power".

Its sheer abundance off the coast here meant it became a pillar of the economy for the early European settlers, making many colonial merchants wealthy. By the 1700s it had provided a young America with trade confidence, and the country's »



Opposite page ✓
Cape Cod was built on its fishing industry; John Our has been fishing these waters for nearly 40 years
This page ✓
Rick Thompson works at Chatham Pier, unloading the fishing boats; crates of monkfish







Opposite page ✓
John Our's boat
This page ✓
Since the fall in
cod stocks, Our
fishes for monkfish
(pictured), dogfish
and other 'trash'
species (see right)

determination for free trade in cod was a factor in its struggle for independence.

The fish was celebrated on official crests, stamps, banknotes and in the buildings the industry funded – until it burned down in 1747, Boston Town Hall had a giant gilded cod hanging from its ceiling. The hallowed fish fed generations of families, provided countless jobs and appeared to be as reliable as the sunrise. Even as late as 1885 the Canadian Ministry of Agriculture confidently stated that “unless the order of nature

is overthrown [North American] fisheries will continue to be fertile for centuries to come”.

Now the gift-shop T-shirts featuring the American dollar bill reworded as “In cod we trust” come across as poignant. It’s not that, as the saying goes, there aren’t plenty more fish in the Atlantic. “Diversification” is the fishing industry’s new buzzword, and former cod fishermen are encouraged to branch out to the Cape’s many other species. Different seasons bring striped bass, blue fish, tuna, haddock and halibut, while scallop and lobster fisheries are booming (cod is one of lobster’s main predators).

Despite this, moving on isn’t as simple as it may appear. As cod has dropped off, people have started to hold on more tightly to their quotas for other species, making it tricky to switch fisheries. In some cases, the drop in income has left cod fishermen with outdated boats and little money to branch out in a new direction. For others, it’s a case of pride that makes them cling on to the past.

“Back in the 1970s and ’80s, the fishermen owned this town,” says John Our, his level gaze trained on the parking lot of Shop Ahoy Liquors, on Chatham’s Main Street. “That place used to be filled with our pick-up trucks. Now every year there are fewer and fewer of us.”

Our, 54, has been fishing off Chatham for 36 years, most of them for the cod that his father fished before him. In the early 1980s, the pair had to build a new boat because they were unable to carry the volumes they were catching. “We’d bring in 10,000lbs [4,500kg] every time we went out and we used to be fishing most months of the year. Then we went down to eight or nine months of the year and catching 4,000-5,000lbs each trip. Then all of a sudden the bottom just fell out of cod altogether.”

He is now the oldest cod fisherman in the Chatham fleet and holds the »



Monkfish



Skate



Scup



Dogfish



second-largest cod quota, which is a fraction of what it was less than a decade before. “It’s not economically viable to spend more and more time looking for something that’s not there.”

Our doubts he will see cod return to the Cape, at least in the numbers they once knew, before he retires. Personally he blames the seals, but he’s aware that others disagree and that culling the sea mammals is a solution with few supporters. Like many of his colleagues, he has now started fishing monkfish – also lucrative, currently plentiful – for the three or four months it’s available each year.

To make up the rest of his pay packet, he’s reluctantly become one of those who are staking a future on less-popular but more sustainable species, including dogfish, skate and scup. Often referred to as “trash”, these fish – types of ray and shark – were, for hundreds of years, just thought of as infuriating by-products of the cod catch. They’d be picked out of nets and thrown back in the sea while attention was lavished on the prized white fish.

Now, however, these fish are a growth industry, particularly in Europe. In the UK, dogfish goes by





From left
Mac's is a popular Cape Cod
chain of eat shops; local
fisherman Doug Feeney
champions dogfish as a
sustainable alternative to cod

the name rock salmon or huss and, according to Richard Peirce, chairman of the Shark Trust, often masquerades as cod in fish 'n' chip meals. As demand continues to grow and Asian markets have begun to develop, these fish may represent the best chance former cod fishermen have of continuing to eke out a living.

For some of them, those who are happy to move with the times, this burgeoning industry even makes for quite a rosy picture. Down at the Chatham Boat Company, Doug Feeney puts the finishing touches on what he hopes will become his future. He's two weeks away from launching his new boat, a revamped Stanley Greenwood Novi. The heavy-duty vessel will be used to bring in as much dogfish as limits allow, and is large enough to allow him to prepare the catch

onboard, bypassing the cost and control of the processors.

Instead of continuing to view it as trash, Feeney sees dogfish as an opportunity to carve out a more sustainable future. In partnership with Brett Tolley, community organiser for the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, he's heading an ambitious crusade to build markets, increase profits and support the next generation of fishermen.

"We've been researching ways to handle dogfish so I'll brine them and I'll flay them for certain markets. A lot of guys just throw them on deck then send them off for processing where you'll be given a price you have no control over. We want to take back that control."

Last year, Feeney travelled to China to sell it at the Qingdao Seafood Expo »

WHAT EXACTLY IS DOGFISH?



A small coastal shark that can grow up to 1m in length, dogfish was certified by the Marine Stewardship Council a few years ago because of its expanding population. In 2014, the *Portland Press Herald* reported on an estimated 230,000 tonnes of spawning dogfish – females of reproductive age – in the Gulf of Maine, compared with only 10,000 tonnes of spawning cod. Chatham catches about six million pounds (2.7 million kg) of Massachusetts' nine million pounds of annual landings, and with the daily fishing boat limit set at 5,000lbs, it is considered to be sustainable. While it doesn't command high prices – John Our gets US\$2 (NOK16) for a large dogfish compared with \$50 or \$60 (up to NOK490) for a large monkfish – they are plentiful, and easy to catch and prepare.



and is now getting orders as a result. There is already a market in Asia for the dogfish's fins and skin, but he aims to start selling the whole fish. He'll shortly start filming his fishing trips to familiarise Chinese consumers with the species.

A tougher challenge will be overcoming consumer resistance to dogfish on his own shores. Americans have been slow to embrace a fish that used to be thrown away, but Tolley is hopeful that will change as people wake up to what's happening.

"Dogfish is an abundant species on the East Coast and if we want a more healthy ocean, we have to embrace what's being caught in season and embrace family fishermen like Doug," he says. "There's a big difference in the story of the fish he's catching and the more industrial fishing models you might see around the world. This is a step towards more transparency in our seafood chain and a more sustainable future."

In addition to getting dogfish on the menu in hospitals, food banks and universities, the pair are working with Cape Cod restaurateurs, including Steve DeLeonardis, to try to boost local interest. DeLeonardis, who owns two restaurants, both called The Corner Store, in Orleans and Chatham, has been offering his customers dogfish every Friday from the start of the season in June through to the end of September. Calling it by its newly rebranded title, Cape Shark, he has created the "SharkRito", a hearty



burrito filled with beans, salad and pieces of dogfish that have first been soaked in milk to add tenderness and then fried in a lemon-pepper batter.

"The goal for me is the home-grown local movement," he explains. "It's cleaner, fresher, has a smaller carbon footprint and if it's opening people's minds to something that's here rather than increasing demand for something that isn't, that's good for everyone." But what does it taste like? Well, to this inexperienced palate, it's light, flavoursome and juicy. Not all that dissimilar to cod, really.



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While you're in Boston



STAY

Chatham Bars Inn
For centuries society Bostonians have fled the city to summer in Cape Cod. Channel that spirit with a trip to this sprawling period hotel and sip one of Aunt Lydia's Margaritas on the wrap-around veranda, before dinner in one of the three in-house restaurants. lhw.com/chathambarsinn



EAT

By Chloe

Anyone who doubts that meat-free has gone mainstream on the US East Coast just needs to look at Chloe Coscarelli. The 28-year-old heroine of New York's vegan community only opened her first meat-and-dairy-free eatery last year, but now has four in that city plus this brand-spanking Seaport Blvd venue.

bychefchloe.com



DO

Boston Harbour
Summer cruises are all the rage, whether it's a booze-fuelled Boathouse trip from the seaport (every Friday), or the high-minded Architecture Cruise, which highlights the design classics of the Beantown skyline. spiritcruises.com, charlesriverboat.com