

Fish Tales of the Ice House Gang

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Navillus is Sullivan spelled backwards -- and with their Navillus Gourmet Fish Company, Sean and Mary Sullivan plan on turning the Cleveland fresh fish business inside out.

"I'm just a dead fish salesman," says Sean Sullivan. Indeed, Sullivan peddles dead fish -- over 30 varieties -- but he also wholesales clams, lobsters, oysters, crabmeat, caviar, lentils, mustard, hot sauce, mushrooms, vinegar, plum sauce, saffron, celeriac and scads of other restaurant staples. Dead fish, however, are the bones of Sullivan's \$5 million a year Navillus Gourmet Fish Company on Cleveland's near West Side.

In jeans and a well worn T-shirt, Sullivan may not look like a man who owns a multimillion dollar empire; but he's always believed in being "hands on." Sullivan began in 1985, trucking whole fresh fish from his then-home of North Carolina to his hometown of Cleveland. He was a one man, door to door operation, hawking his wares to the city's upper crust eateries. Sullivan found the market for his product limited, however, as he believed the freshest fish were whole fish, a k a "in, the round." Few restaurants or supermarkets knew how to get the best yield from a whole fish.

One year and many interstate miles later, Sullivan took the plunge and opened a retail store in Rocky River, providing fresh fish and the much needed in the round processing capabilities. Then, in 1990 Navillus moved lock, stock and barrel to an abandoned building at the corner of 52nd and Lorain, the former home of the Schulte Poultry House, where Sullivan's parents used to buy live chickens not just for Sunday dinner, but as pranks for friend's birthdays. As a nostalgic gesture, Sullivan insisted that the chicken feet marks etched in the concrete floor remain untouched.

The company's offices are sparse, save a Miss Seafood calendar, an aquarium with a queen triggerfish, a Cleveland Indians collage and a mismatched collection of desks and chairs. It is here that Sullivan and his wife, Mary, work side by side. Their life is fish, says Mary; they even spent their honeymoon scuba diving in Australia. Mary, sporting dangling fish earrings, speaks animatedly about business, family, friends, food and, as the company's public relations manager (she's a former Wyse Landau Public Relations assistant account executive), whatever else comes to mind that can further the Navillus cause. Furthering the cause is what has made Navillus one of the largest fish houses in Cleveland, as well as in the entire state.

A typical day at Navillus begins in the staging room, the first of three processing rooms. There, fish are received daily -- no sabbath for a fish monger -- with the heaviest shipments coming in on Sunday (to prepare for the week), Tuesday (to make it through the rest of the week) and Thursday (to get ready for the weekend). Processors, clad in thigh high rubber boots and aprons, check each and every item from each and every shipment. Shipments from Boston arrive three days a week; shipments from Canada and the Carolinas come in two days a week. "Most everything is trucked in, because, well, you know airlines," Sullivan jokes, as though he's lost a bag or two on a commercial flight. It is trucking, however, that Sullivan considers to be the most efficient, both in terms of time and temperature control.



In the staging room, each item is weighed in at the scale and given a computerized sticker. The weigh in is done for three reasons: to match the weight with the forthcoming invoice; to track the meat yield once it has been processed and filleted (the largest fish ever brought in was an 1,100 lb. blue marlin); and to palletize the shipments so that first in becomes first out and nothing becomes lost in a corner.

The second stop for the fish is the consistently maintained 32-degree fresh cooler. Temperature is critical to a fish monger. A fish can lose 2.5 percent of its weight *per day* if it's not refrigerated properly. Ice is the most critical element of the operation; but in the old Schulte Poultry ice house, Navillus can easily crank out 1,200 lbs. an hour.

In the fresh cooler; Sullivan lifts up a large salmon in the round, revealing its deep crimson gills and clear eyes. "This fish was swimming on Tuesday," Sullivan says on Saturday, of the "farm raised" Atlantic salmon from New Brunswick, Canada (the fish are raised in the ocean in special pens). "Most people think that a fish has to be killed and eaten the next day in order to be really fresh. That's a misconception." The average boat, Sullivan explains, is out ten to fourteen days. Add to that, processing and shipping, and the typical store bought fish is at least two weeks old, and probably more, before reaching your table. Navillus cuts shore to table time by more than half.

The clams are kept fresh and alive in a separate shellfish cooler set at a constant 45 degrees to avoid cross contamination from the fin fish: (Ice is a breeding ground for bacteria.) During this particular week in late September, three semi-trailers have already hauled a quarter million clams to stores and restaurants throughout the city. Cleveland, Sullivan boasts, is the clambake capital of the country.

Navillus also handles a lot of live lobsters. Lobsters are the one product they pick up at the airport, "because," as Sullivan explains, "if they're too long out of water, the mortality rate is too high. Besides, there are five or six nonstop flights from Boston each day. We can call in an order at 8 a.m. and pick it up by 5 p.m. the same day."

To supply the wholesale side of the operation with stocks and other staples, the Navillus complex houses a kitchen with three full time employees. "It's a chef's dream," Sullivan explains, "because they can cook and create without the distraction of screaming waitresses or unhappy patrons." Their best seller is a clam broth, as well as fresh chicken and veal stocks. "We can do it cheaper than a restaurant group can," Sullivan explains. Smoking fish has also become a specialty. Four smokers filled with applewood chips smoke shrimp, scallops, mussels and whole salmon.

So, just how does a typical consumer know if a dead fish is a fresh fish? "Use your common `scents'," says Mary. "Smell it. If it smells funky, then it's not fresh. It should smell like the sea." And, at Navillus Gourmet Fish Company, the characteristic smell of the sea is unmistakable.

Linguine with Garlic Clam Sauce and Chorizo

1/2 cup olive oil
10 garlic cloves, minced
16 oz. clam juice
1 cup white wine

1 tbsp. oregano
4 tbsp. chopped parsley
7 leaves fresh basil, minced
46 oz. chopped clams
1 lb. sliced chorizo
2 lbs. linguine
25 littleneck clams

Heat olive oil in pot. Add garlic and saute until golden, about 4-5 min. Add clam juice, white wine, oregano, parsley, basil, clams and chorizo. Simmer for about 25 min. Serve over hot linguine, and garnish with fresh steamed clams. Serves 6.

Recipe courtesy Michael Wehner, That Place on Bellflower, Cleveland.