

The Fish Dish, Episode #1, Craig Hoopman

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Marie: You're listening to The Fish Dish, brought to you by Eat Wisconsin Fish, a campaign of the Wisconsin Sea Grant Program. Are you fish-curious? Or are you a fish expert who wants to learn even more about Wisconsin's fisheries and cooking fish? We'll give you the latest "dish" on fish.

Your hosts are . . .

Sharon: Sharon Moen

Marie: and Marie Zhuikov

Together: two friends who have been working for Sea Grant seemingly forever and who know a thing or two about fish.

Marie: But that's "forever" in a good way.

Sharon: Sharon runs the Eat Wisconsin Fish campaign

Marie: and Marie is a science communicator.

In our first episode, we'll meet Craig Hoopman, a commercial fisherman from Bayfield, Wisconsin. Sharon got to spend time with him this summer and learned some fascinating things about being a commercial fisher on Lake Superior.

Sharon: Also, in each episode of "The Fish Dish," we'll feature a fishy recipe during the last part of the show called, "Fish-o-Licious!" Today, I'm sauteeing lake whitefish in homage to Lake Superior's main catch.

So, Marie, have you ever noticed that cute red and white store as you round the curve on Highway 13 going into Bayfield?

Marie: Ya, sure, you betcha. I've even stopped there and bought fish a time or two. It's Hoop's Fish Market, right?

Sharon: Yep, you're right. Craig took that building over a few years ago from Newago's and renovated it. Now it's one of the places he sells his catch. The main business end of his work, though --- where he brings fish in off the lake and processes them --- is farther down in town by Lake Superior on Wilson Avenue.

.... So, when I visited Craig this summer, it was at his Wilson Ave property where we sat on one of his boats and chatted.

I'm Craig Hoopman. I'm a sixth-generation fisherman, currently operating out of Bayfield. I own Dockside Fish Market and future restaurant and small bar, and I also run Hoop's Fish on Highway 13 on the south end of Bayfield.

I was actually taught by my grandfather, Morris Boutin, a fourth-generation fisherman in the summertime. I started at an early age, I was in the first grade. I got on the boats. I worked all summer. I stayed at my grandparent's house all summer long so that they didn't have to get up early and come pick

me up. I slept on my grandma's 'davenport,' they called it. She'd come by every morning and wake me up and pack my little lunch pail and send me off with my grandfather.

Marie: I love that he used the word "davenport." Growing up, my neighbors used to call it a davenport. At my house, we just called it a couch.

Sharon: I call it a sofa.

Marie: I never knew what they were talking about.

Sharon: Let's go to the davenport.

Marie: It sounds like a place. Like a town.

Sharon: So, davenport is not a port. Where this davenport we're actually talking about is, is on Stockton Island, because that's where Craig Hoopman spent a lot of time with his grandparents, Morris and Eleanor. They had a fishing camp around the Apostle Islands, out of Stockton Island, specifically. You've been to Stockton Island, before.

Marie: Yeah, it's a really neat place. Now, nobody lives there, of course, other than people temporarily during the summer. It's part of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. It's really pretty out there.

Sharon: I've been there, too. What I love about it is sitting on the singing sands. You can rub your fingers through it. It kind of hums. That's because the sand granules are a specific size and quality as opposed to sand from other beaches. It's just a unique type of sand that makes a song. I also love the bog there and the cranberries.

Marie: The sand, that's in Julian Bay, correct?

Sharon: Right.

Marie: He was very luck to . . .

Sharon: Have that as his playground? I'd say! But fishing is really hard, too. The people who go into fishing for a living must have it in their blood because it's not an easy game to play.

We leave the dock at 5 a.m., but we'll start to leave at 4 a.m. usually mid-July as it starts to get hotter during the day. We have to haul a lot of ice, it takes a lot of ice to keep the fish cold so we'll leave a little bit earlier and work before the sun gets high and try to get back to town. We'd like to be back in Bayfield by 10 or 11 o'clock at the latest so we can get the fish dropped off and get everything start processing end of it.

I've always had a love for it. This is all I've ever wanted to do. And it's exciting right now with my wife and I taking on these new ventures. My grandfather and I stood in the front yard on Wilson Avenue ten years before he passed away. We looked at each other and said, 'We should be cooking fish.' We just always wanted to do that, and I can't end my career without doing that. I just want to have this little fish and chips restaurant. A small little beer and wine place. I think we can get 300-400 people a day in here and give them access to all 400 feet of the property and look at everything – see the nets, see the boats. Not everyone that eats fish wants to buy a boat and a fishing line and a fishing license.

People who come to Bayfield, they don't order steaks or hamburgers. They come to the bay area – Ashland and Bayfield County -- to eat fresh fish. This is how we provide that to them.

Sharon: so, I personally love fishing and I try to get out as much as I can but I don't fish for whitefish, which is the main catch that Craig and his operation are catching and all of the Apostle Island fisher families. If I'm going to eat lake whitefish, I'm going to have to buy it. I'm so thankful that he has a boat and the nets and a license to catch fish for us. So, Marie, how do you get your fish?

Marie: Well, first I want to know what kind of fish you do catch? It just begs the question.

Sharon: I like going for brook trout and bass. If I'm on a lake, walleye. But if I'm on a river, brook trout. I've learned to fly fish over the last couple of years. It's been fun.

Marie: I have fished in the past.

Sharon: I know, I fished with you.

Marie: Yes, but I have decided just recently, that I'm more of a person who wants to make friends with fish and feed fish than actually catch them. I caught one this summer. It was a nice little northern. And I could not get the hook out. The hook was set in a weird way.

Sharon: I dislike when that happens.

Marie: And my husband said, "If you catch a fish, it's up to you. I'm not helping you get the hook out." And so, I tried and I tried and this poor fish was getting stressed out, so finally I ran to my husband. And he got the hook out right away. Right away!

Sharon: Of course. You loosened it.

Marie: I guess, maybe.

Sharon: Just like a jar lid.

Marie: So, I put the fish back in the water and I just decided right then, you know . . .

Sharon: This isn't fun anymore. You know, if it's not fun and you're sensitive about looking your food in the eye, fishing's probably not your thing.

Marie: It was very stressful. I'm glad there's people like Craig Hoopman and other commercial fishermen because fish is so good.

Sharon: Yeah, fish is so good for us. It's full of omega 3 fatty acids and that helps your brain develop. And they're finding it prevents some diseases that can make the latter part of your life hard, like Alzheimer's and dementia. So, I eat as much fish as I can, whether I catch it myself, or friends catch it for me or people like Craig catch it. But he is right, it's super expensive to have the type of boat and operation they have. There's also a lot of licensing that goes along with all this equipment because it's a commercial endeavor. So, they have the DNR and then the Wisconsin Health Department looking at their operations pretty regularly. Keeping an eye on them.

Marie: So, when you went on your Bayfield trip to meet with the commercial fishers around there, what was your goal?

Sharon: As part of my Eat Wisconsin Fish job, I'm working with commercial fishers and people who raise fish on aquaculture farms or fish farms. When I went to the Bayfield area, I stopped by each of the commercial fishing operations to ask them what their needs are. How can an organization like Wisconsin Sea Grant help them succeed, especially through the pandemic and some of the things that have happened in the last couple of years. They've had to change their operations a bit because of the COVID protocols and the restaurants closing. So, when I was going around to these different operations, I asked, "What's the hardest part? What do you need help with?" It was interesting. One of the primary struggles is finding help. Across the board, it was, "We need help now!" It was hard to find people who wanted to work in the industry and stay there. I also talked about working with the DNR regulations and it's kind of like this dance that has to happen to keep a sustainable fishery alive and well, and they wouldn't mind more DNR people going out on the boats with them. The DNR already puts people out on boats as best they can, given the amount of funding available.

Marie: They put them out on boats just to watch what's happening?

Sharon: Right, right, because they feel like the DNR doesn't know how many fish there really are there. And if they're there watching how many fish come up in the nets, they would see how wonderfully abundant the Apostle Island fishery is.

Marie: Our conversation makes me realize we haven't really explained what Eat Wisconsin Fish is.

Sharon: That's true.

Marie: So, what is it that you do?

Sharon: Eat Wisconsin Fish is an initiative of the Wisconsin Sea Grant Program. It started in about 2013 and was active until 2016 and then it kind of took a break. And then during the Covid crisis, they brought me on board as the new Eat Wisconsin Fish outreach specialist. My goal in my job is to help the commercial fishers and Wisconsin's aquaculture farms – the fish farms – thrive and help their products get to consumers in a more seamless way. So, when you go to the grocery store, and you look at the fish counter and you think, "I want to cook fish for dinner," maybe, instead of reaching for the salmon raised in Chile, you would choose lake whitefish or salmon raised in Wisconsin, which is a good option. And so more people know about their food and the food supply chain, I think the better decisions they can make.

There's some really compelling reasons like the economy of Wisconsin and the way the Wisconsin food industry is managed by the health department. You're getting a clean, fresh, local product and supporting your community by buying local. So, it's my job to help that happen and to support these two industries – the aquaculture and the commercial fishers.

Marie: Cool. Eat local.

Sharon: Yeah. And it's good for you!

Marie: Just a reminder to our listeners that we'll cook some fish near the end of this podcast, so you'll want to stick around for that. And so, Sharon, you talked to Craig also about challenges in the fishing industry.

Sharon: I talked to Craig and the Halvorsons and Red Cliff Fish Company and all sorts of people around the Bayfield Peninsula. So, here's what he had to say about the situation.

I think right now, it's trying to adapt and still financially be able to stay in the game with the cuts, restrictions. You know, our herring quota was cut 35%. Our lake trout quota was cut by 34%. So, you always have to try to keep building a better mousetrap to figure out the marketing scheme. Because at the end of the day, I still have to pay all my employees, I still have to pay insurance. I have workman's comp, which is extremely high on deckhands on these boats and it's just trying to figure out how to keep it going. Our winter fishery is basically gone due to the cuts, so you have to make all of your money in basically six months and try to stretch it out to pay everybody for the entire year.

Marie: That's so interesting what he said about having to make all their money in six months and then stretch it out for a whole year. I'm glad I don't have to do that!

Sharon: Right, I know. That takes some planning and some discipline to manage your business.

Marie: Creative budgeting.

Sharon: For a year off of six months. But they seem to be doing well because they are opening this other restaurant shop right there on the dock.

Marie: When is that supposed to open. Next year?

Sharon: Right. So, the market's already open but the restaurant part will be coming right up in 2022. So, I'm curious, Marie, did you ever hear the call of the sea – did you want to be a fisher or go to sea?

Marie: I wanted to be a marine biologist. I wanted to be like, you know, there's Jacques Cousteau, I wanted to be the female version, Jackie Cousteau, or something like that. But then I ended up going in to writing and now I write about water research, and do things like this, so that's about as close to marine biology as I'm going to get. How about you?

Sharon: No, but I did grow up on a Christmas tree farm and I worked on a horse farm, so I always thought I'd have a career where I was outside with the sun as my clock and the weather as my boss. And I kind of am in some ways, still, because I get to go around and talk to these fish producers around Wisconsin. It's been a lot of fun and really educational. It's amazing how many different types of ways people are procuring fish here.

Marie: And so, Craig talked to you about the future, didn't he?

Sharon: He did, and what he wishes people would know about the fishery.

I think the education of people to show them the practices that we have. I think that needs to be more in the public eye. And also the future. I don't see the interest in younger generations. I've got a family friend right now who's been asking me for years. He's 13 years old right now and he's set on becoming a commercial fisherman . . . he's a great kid and wants to do it but my daughters are both – one's a teacher and one's in the medical field – and my son just graduated high school and he's going to go to a tech school in Eau Claire.

I think the biggest thing is that they see how hard we have to work. It's a great life but part of me, I don't know if I really want that for my kids because it's such a – you're basically married to this job. When you

put nets in the lake, it's like a dairy farmer. You don't get to leave, you don't get to do anything. You have to tend to business and it's hard. I really enjoy it but it's a strain.

It's actually sad because this is a good business. You can make a good living. Yes, it's hard work, but you can make a good living. It's just like any job. There's ups and downs whatever you do.

I think the fishery itself is as strong as it's ever been that I've seen in my career. I think it's the nicest fish that I've ever seen in whitefish size and sheer number of lake trout and other game fish as well. I'm fearful of the fishery for the next generation coming up. That's probably my biggest concern is when we're gone. They call us the kids now and I'm 51 years old.

Sharon: So, I'm glad Craig brought up the graying of the fleet and now he's the young kid on the block because it is hard to find help and there aren't a lot of young people stepping into this career. And that's something that Sea Grant across the country is engaged in. In fact, right here in Wisconsin, we're working on a fisheries apprenticeship program and also a fish processing component to that apprenticeship. That stemmed from a conversation I had with the Red Cliff Fish Company. They were just talking about how there is not a lot of young people from the tribe entering into the business and they're concerned. So, this apprenticeship program we're putting together is going to rely heavily on the fishermen themselves telling us what they need on board and what the skill set of able help will look like for the future. So, I'm kind of excited. I'm excited about this project and we're just getting it off the ground. It should be framed up by the end of February and we'll see where we can take it after that.

Marie: So, it's kind of like an organized effort to get the youngsters interested.

Sharon: Right. So, hopefully, by next fishing season, we'll have our first apprentice partnered up with a fisherman that will actually be able to help them. And the apprentice will be trained on both safety and fish processing, so they can just start trained. That would be so helpful for these fishing families and these fishing companies that are trying to put food on people's tables and plates.

Marie: It seems like there's some misconceptions about the commercial fishing industry and whether the harvest in Lake Superior is sustainable or not. From the conversations we've had before, I know you said that Craig's trying to address some of those issues?

Sharon: Right. He is really interested in working with the public and showcasing his operation to the public so they can see how many fish are released and how careful they are when they're handling the fish. Meanwhile, the Wisconsin DNR is just an exceptional organization about managing fish. Up there in Bayfield County, they have a fisheries manager and modeler and then Scott Sapper goes out on the boats with the fishermen as he can. They all work in collaboration to set these fishing limits and quotas and manage the fishery. Not only does the Wisconsin DNR get involved in that, also the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission is also part of that – the Red Cliff Band, the Bad River Band have commercial fisherman out of the Bayfield area. They work to strict standards. It's a professional way to make a living. They don't want to run out of fish, so they are careful about how much they pull in.

Marie: And Scott Sapper, I assume, he's a DNR person?

Sharon: Yeah, he's a DNR fisheries biologist.

Marie: (Laughing) Yeah, you're just name dropping. Showing how much you know.

Sharon: (Laughing) I just know everybody now.

Marie: Yeah, so let's hear what Craig's doing to address some of the misconceptions out there.

That's why I put these videos out on Facebook. I like showing in this trap net industry, the amount of fish that we are releasing unharmed back to the lake. These videos show the brown trout, the lake trout that are over 25 inches, all white fish that are under 17 inches being released back to the lake. Everyone who watches these posts says, "I had no idea that you release."

If I catch 1,000 fish, I'm probably releasing 3 to 4 to 5,000 fish on that day. They watch them swim away. They see the condition of the fish. It just goes back to education.

People really want to know where their food is coming from. . . In my career, I've never seen so many people ask questions about, "Is this fish fresh? Did you catch this fish today? Is it frozen? Has it been frozen? How do you process it?" It's great. It's helping my business a lot.

Sharon: I think it's fabulous that people like Craig – commercial fishers – are wanting people to see their operations online, and on Facebook and on all these social media platforms that we have. The more they can get the message out there that they exist, that there's still a vibrant fishing industry in Wisconsin, I think the more people will think about it when they go to the grocery store or the restaurants. It's like, "Yes, I would like some fish catch fish out of this lake." To me, Lake Superior is like the most exceptional lake in the world.

Marie: And the fact that he sees that people grilling him, so to speak (ha ha), about if the fish are fresh and that type of thing, that he sees that as a positive.

Sharon: Right, right -- that people are curious. I think a lot of people have become a lot more food conscious as some of these celiac diseases and gluten intolerances have manifested. When I was growing up, man, it was just peanut allergies that you had to watch and that some people didn't take lactose too well. Now, there's just this whole new field of allergies.

Marie: Do you think it's really new or that we just didn't recognize it back then? Like, people thought it was a sensitive stomach or something like that.

Sharon: We probably didn't recognize it.

Marie: But it could be. We'd have to have a medical person on to talk about that, and that's a whole different show.

Sharon: Right.

Marie: So, we'll save that for later.

Sharon: I just think it's brave of Craig to want to show people what can be a tough, visceral job. You're not always probably looking your best. I think I'm too vain to want people to see me in my dirtiest state.

Marie: Like when you're covered in fish guts!

Sharon: It's so wonderful that people are tuning in. So, I hope that our listeners will consider finding Craig Hoopman on Facebook and some of the other fisherman out there, too. So, aside from working

with the public, and showcasing his work to the public, Craig also has some aspirations related to the management of fish and government.

I think it would be great to work hand in hand more with the DNR and the natural resources board in educating so that everyone is aware. I believe that more people need to be involved in the rule-making process. I really do. I think that the tribal fishers and the state fishers, we do work together but when it comes to negotiations, state fishers are not allowed in the meetings. So, we cannot take part in any of that. And that's just due to the negotiations that were set by the treaties. I get that, but, we still need representation. The sports industry needs representation. We need people all to come together and have more conversation.

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Marie: And now it's time for the Fish-o-Licious part of our podcast, where we discuss fish recipes, which, by the way, you can find on the Eat Wisconsin Fish website (eatwisconsinfish.org) along with photos. Plus, The Fish Dish podcast webpage. We're in my kitchen today. What dish are we going to cook, Sharon?

Sharon: I put a Greek rub on two lake whitefish fillets, and I started sautéing them about 5 minutes ago in a little bit of olive oil. While I plate the fillets up, I want you to hear what Craig says about lake whitefish . . .

It's just an awesome fish. It's an awesome eating fish. Our fresh whitefish and our smoked fish and our smoked trout fillets. I take a lot of pride in this. We take all of our fish from this boat. I take it to Port Wing, WI. It goes to Everett's Fish and they smoke all of my fish for me. It's the original wood smoke. They actually build a fire in the smoke house. There's no propane, there's no pellets. It's all-natural smoke.

They're generational fishermen just like my family. They do an awesome job and they turn out a heck of a product. All of my fish that they smoke for me comes back to my two locations.

I actually make my own breading. I've got about ten years into it of the different spices. I'm trying to perfect it on what people really like. I do a lot of fundraisers. I do a lot of donations and I cook a lot of fish for different events. It's a breaded and egg washed, and then pankoed whitefish and deep fry it. That's kind of my signature. I also like this Cavender's Greek seasoning on a flat top or on a grill is really good, as well.

Sharon: The reason we're eating this type of fish today is I'm not a big fan of deep-fried foods and there are people in my life who are sensitive to gluten so I went with Craig's suggestion of using this Greek seasoning on the top of the stove. It's a super easy and quick recipe.

Sound of fish frying.

Marie: We have two big fillets in there and we have three. Are you going to cook the third one separate?

Sharon: Yeah, it won't fit.

Marie: A nice problem to have.

Sharon: Yeah, an abundance of fish. So much fish!

Marie: I'll get some plates to put the fillets on. The finished fish.

Sound of plates on counter.

Sharon: I can smell the fun spices.

Marie: Yeah, I've never had a fish with so many spices.

Sharon: No, I wouldn't have thought about doing it this way, either, until I listened to Craig again. But even when he said it there, everything was happening so fast, I had to listen to it again.

Marie: Yeah.

Sounds of forks on plates.

Sharon: All right, here's Marie eating her first bite.

Marie (with mouth full): MMmmm, that's good! That's different.

Sharon: Yay, she likes it!

Marie: But in a good way.

Sharon: In a good way. It's fun to have the flavors of the world right here in Wisconsin.

Marie: Yeah, usually, if I spice fish up, I just do dill on it. Or if I'm breading it, I'll put some garlic powder or onion powder in it or something like that. But I've never had this many spices all together on a fish before. It's good.

Sharon: I'm really loving my piece, too.

Maire: I also wanted to say, Sharon's having her fish with some plain yogurt and parsley on it, which makes it even more Greekish. I like tartar sauce, so I make tartar sauce just out of Vegenaise and some capers – kind of a fancy tartar sauce that way.

Sharon: It looks fancy, too.

Marie: So that's how I'm having mine, and it's very good.

Sharon: Again, I'm really enjoying this.

Marie: Excellent!

Sharon. Yay. Thanks, Craig Hoopman for the idea, for everybody listening to the show. Hope you enjoy the recipe, too.

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Marie: That's it for this episode of The Fish Dish. For more information and fish recipes, visit Eat Wisconsin Fish on the web at eatwisconsinfish.org, plus Twitter and Facebook. Thanks go to Bonnie Willison and Jennifer Smith with Sea Grant for their behind-the-scenes work on this episode, and to the band Woodblind for use of their music. Thanks for listening!