

Red Cliff Tribal Fish Company

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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.

Marie: In this episode, we'll meet Daniel Grooms who works for the Red Cliff Fish Company in Red Cliff, Wisconsin. Red Cliff is at the top of Wisconsin's Bayfield Peninsula and is the home of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. The company processes and sells fish caught from Lake Superior by tribal fishers. In fact, it's entirely owned and operated by the Band. In the second, "Fish-o-Licious" part of the show, we'll be cooking some frozen whitefish in the . . . microwave?!?!.

Sharon: Yep, that's right! In the microwave! It'll be our quickest, easiest recipe yet. "Lake whitefish on the run," as I like to call it.

Marie: Sharon, how did you get to know Daniel and how is the Red Cliff Fish Company a bit different than other fish outlets?

Sharon: I met Daniel in the summer of 2021, soon after he became the business manager of the Red Cliff Fish Company. His enthusiasm for the work is infectious and he is clear about the company's part in supporting the Band's mission ... "to promote, plan and provide for the health, welfare, education, environmental protection, cultural preservation and economic wellbeing of Tribal members and to protect Treaty Rights now and in the future."

The Red Cliff Fish Company opened for business at a rough moment ... it was November 2020, during the first spike of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the middle of lake herring/cisco season. This means the fish were coming in fast and furious while newly hired staff were still working out the kinks and learning how to cut fish while running the retail market.

The company survived the mayhem, in part, because of their clarity of purpose. They work with about 15 commercial fishing vessels operated by members of both the Red Cliff and Bad River Bands of Lake

Superior Chippewa. The company provides these fishers with a competitive rate for their catch and a processing facility that understands the traditional cultural and modern hurdles they face.

Through the company, the Band seeks to provide their fishermen with decent livelihoods while working toward food sovereignty.

Marie: Okay, so explain food sovereignty for us.

Sharon: Okay, sure. Food sovereignty is the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate foods defined by their own food and agriculture systems. Ecology and sustainability are core to tribal food sovereignty.

One of the things Daniel said they are excited to be doing is putting food together in boxes for tribal elders, and that intent extends beyond Red Cliff through [Feeding Wisconsin](#). In 2021, Feeding Wisconsin piloted a Tribal Elder Food Box Program. The results are in. They distributed over 10,000 boxes averaging 20 pounds each to Elders of seven Tribal Nations. 41% of the food was purchased from Indigenous producers, such as the Red Cliff Fish Company. Boxes contained a combination of protein (including bison and fish) and produce (including berries, corn, beans and squash).

The Red Cliff Fish Company is also working to be a zero-waste sustainable facility, so all the fish waste goes to the Red Cliff community farm where it is being composted for use at the farm and in the community.

Marie: That sounds like a really good idea. So, let's meet Daniel.

Daniel: My name is Daniel Grooms I am a Red Cliff Chippewa member here. I moved here in '95 and grew up about three miles just down the road. I've been all over the United States and I've been here in the area. Mainly I was in golf, but I decided to take this opportunity to get into the fish industry more using my business background to promote the business. This is a wonderful opportunity that Red Cliff has to provide just for the local area but also anywhere possible to get the word out. It was a great opportunity for me.

Marie: Sharon asked Daniel if there's anything he wished the public knew about the tribal fishery.

Daniel: I think it had a lot to do with our treaty rights here and being able to hunt, gather, and fish is our big export. We have a lot of traditions and a lot of families here in Red Cliff that do commercial fish in the area. I think with the reservation in general taking a stand to that and actually providing an opportunity not only for on the reservation here but also provide a quality product to everyone else. I think that was a huge push, There's a lot of potential here and we're just working hard to make that a factor.

Sharon: So, I just want to pick up on the thread that Daniel mentioned about tribal Treaty Rights. They are really important for understanding the Great Lakes fisheries. Indigenous roles in natural resource management and their status as sovereign nations are often misunderstood or under-appreciated.

Their story starts over 3,000 years ago when the nomadic tribes of the Old Copper Complex were fishing the upper Great Lakes and left copper fishhooks and fish bones as evidence. Some say such prehistoric

fisheries provided "the most important single organizing concept for understanding the cultural development of this region."

Fast forward about 2,700 years. Since the earliest European contact with Indigenous people from the upper Great Lakes, almost all written accounts mention the importance of the fishery.

I won't get into the troubled history of conflict between Indigenous Americans and Europeans except to say that a series of 18th- and 19th-century treaties between the U.S. government and tribes meant that the tribes, like the Red Cliff and Bad River Bands of Lake Superior Chippewa retained right of continued occupancy. Importantly, the 1842 Treaty with the Lake Superior Chippewa confirmed the existing rights of hunting, fishing, and gathering with more than ten-million acres of ceded land and water. The Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission helps to manage these rights. The Chippewa Ottawa Resource Authority does the same for tribes in Michigan.

Legal re-affirmations of these rights began in the 1970s because of regulation changes that were being made by the states in fisheries management. The biggest areas of contention included the exclusions of gill nets as a gear in Michigan and spearfishing repression in Wisconsin and Minnesota. The allocations for harvest are hashed out between state and tribal governments every two decades or so through Consent Decree negotiations.

Just to clear up misconceptions, which still can cause discord: treaty rights are not renegotiated during Consent Decree meetings. Courts do not grant the Ojibwe treaty rights. These rights were never given away; they live within the communities as a belief, value and cultural systems. Consent Decree negotiations, like the one going on currently between the State of Michigan and the tribes consolidated through the Chippewa Ottawa Resource Authority define the nuances of tribal versus state harvest allocations in different management units.

So, it's important for the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa to honor and exercise their Treaty rights but there's a major problem: the lack of a workforce, and their location can be challenging.

Daniel: Consistency with your work staff. It's still the pandemic. It's tough getting people here and that kind of stuff. For me, on the business side, I don't mind being here out on the floor tossing fish. I actually really enjoy it. But my job is also to get us more customers, to market, to develop our website, the clothing. So, for me it's a little bit tough just handling that aspect of it. With more staff, that opportunity for me to actually be in there grows and also our client base also grows so we can again process more fish.

It was tough. The facility here opened in November. We hit herring season hard but the other factor was again staffing. I think they had three main staff. They were here every day but you just get burned out. That was a lot to deal with. And again, winter in Bayfield in general, it's brutal here. Everything shuts down the end of October. Our tourist season kind of ends around that time. And in Bayfield itself, a lot of establishments just close. Everything's seasonal here, so I think the town itself took a big hit. More things were closed than they normally were. It made for a long winter.

Marie: Sharon, let's talk about some of these workforce issues. I hear, through the grapevine at work, that you have a project in the works that might help with this.

Sharon: Right, so Wisconsin Sea Grant is working with Michigan Sea Grant on framing up an apprentice program for not only the tribal fishers of both of our states but also the state-licensed commercial fishers who are suffering the same problems of lack of a workforce and wondering who the next generation of fishers is going to be. And so, we're interviewing the fishing community in all of the Great Lakes and figuring out what new fishers need to know and where they think this new breed of fishermen are going to be coming from. It's interesting. We have commercial fishing families who have been active for four to five... four to six generations and they're wondering, "Where's the seventh generation?" And then the tribal fisheries, who've been fishing for thousands of years and they're like, "We don't have a workforce, either."

Mainly it's because a lot of the good jobs now are sitting at your desk in front of a computer and a lot of the kids are being trained on computers, and so that hands in the fish guts is getting a little harder to find – people interested in doing that. So, we're kind of learning is kids with that inclination, you can identify them when they're young. They're the ones who want to be outside a lot, who want to get up early and sit on the docks and watch animals. And I think that's where we're going to find our next Great Lakes commercial fishing group, is trying to identify those kids and share the opportunities. It's a good living. It's a hard living. It's an unusual living but it can be a good living.

Marie: And didn't you get a grant to do this?

Sharon: Yes, yes, so we were given the seed money from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who passed it through the National Sea Grant Program. So, we have six months to figure this out and there's a little bit of ex... more money available once we get this framework set that maybe we could launch a pilot program.

Marie: Okay, so you got money like for the planning...

Sharon: Yeah, we got money for the planning and certainly the tribes were part of that. They wrote a letter of support as did the state of Wisconsin for this because everybody recognizes that we need a new workforce. But I don't think this is the only industry that's feeling like that, either.

Marie: Uh huh.

Sharon: So, we're competing for those few people who really want outdoor jobs – with farming and other agricultural pursuits.

Marie: Uh huh.

Sharon: Food system pursuits.

Marie: Huh. So, in the meantime, until the apprenticeship program actually gets out on the ground or on the water....

Sharon: On the water, I like that...

Marie: ...Or in the fish house or whatever...

Sharon: Right!

Marie: ... Daniel is getting more proficient with his fish processing skills and that the Red Cliff Fish Company he works for gets help from the tribe sometimes.

Daniel: So, I was pretty happy that I noticed this morning that my cuts are a little bit quicker and I'm making a little less mistakes. I'm happy about that myself. Help in general is always good. We have other agencies in Red Cliff here that do lend a helping hand. They'll come down and offer up their time and their hours to be here and help us process in a pinch and we're very very appreciative of that. That goes a long ways as well.

Marie: So, Sharon, I want to go back to the comment you made about people don't want to get their hands in fish guts or did you say they do want to get their hands in fish guts?

Sharon: Not many people these days are interested in getting their hands in fish guts. I personally don't mind. I don't know if I could do it every day. But to be a fish processor, you have to be okay with that. And I think it was interesting what Daniel said about fish processing because it surprised him also.

Marie: Yeah, and he's saying that it's cleaner than you might think.

Daniel: I think in general with our safety standards we have here on just food in general we're very very cautious and very up to date. Both of us are constantly on the staff to make sure that our standards are met. So, we're providing a quality product but in here we keep it as clean as possible. Even after we're done cutting we'll clean.

It's cleaner than most people think, I would say. The whole process, with me coming from the outside in and not having a ton of fishing background, I was very surprised. I thought it might not be as clean as I thought. But it really is. Animals love me now. I smell like fish when I go home. There's a benefit to that but I would say in general it's really a clean process.

Marie: I love where he says "animals love me now." They probably, like, just follow him around when he goes home. (Laughs) Another question you asked Daniel when you were over there at the fish company was who their customers are. Not just the cats!

Laughter

Sharon: It's more than animals.

Marie: Following him around.

Sharon: Although I suppose humans are animals, too. Yeah, their customers are an interesting mix of tribal members, and people from the community, and there's a lot of tourism that goes on up in the Red Cliff area, Bayfield County. So, they have a really great variety of customers. Here's what Daniel has to say about that.

Daniel: I'd say anyone who loves fish, really. We are fortunate to be in an area where we are small-town based, Bayfield being just three miles south, Washburn and Ashland in the bay area are not overly large. A lot of potential for restaurants and we have a lot of tourism here. One of our better market is to touch base with all our visitors. We have a lot of folks who have tried our fish and have come out here to buy

some more or are excited once we get our website going for the potential to buy some fish online to be sent out. I would say in general our market is mainly here. Other than that, another huge focus is other reservations that may not have the capability of commercial fishing in general. So, to provide a quality product from our harvest to them. They can benefit from our treaty and also hunting, gathering and fishing.

Marie: And then you also asked him what Sea Grant can do to help. You know we have the apprenticeship program and that will be a big help. But here's his perspective on other ways.

Daniel: I would say just getting us out there. Having the opportunity to use as a resource, to present our product on another platform, other than just right now which is word of mouth. We have a web site but it needs work. I think it's definitely a good opportunity to further advance ourselves as a company that provides quality products and we're very happy and proud of what we do here. I think that story can go a long way.

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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 (which is eatwisconsinfish.org) along with photos. Plus, it's also on the Fish Dish podcast webpage (seagrant.wisc.edu/audio). What dish do we have today, Sharon?

Sharon: I'm excited that we're going to be cooking Lake Whitefish on the Run, which is pretty much just steamed whitefish and you can put lemon on it or pepper or garlic. Whatever you'd like. And so it's a really family friendly meal.

Marie: And, we're cooking this from frozen, right? In the microwave?

Sharon: Right, right. So, you can't.... fish is one of those wonderful proteins that you can go right from the freezer into the microwave. Just add a couple extra seconds on, like 30 seconds for a thin slice of fish or minute if you're cooking salmon or something like that that's thicker.

Marie: So, if it's like frozen you add on extra time.

Sharon: Right.

Marie: Okay, yeah, we thought that this would be a good recipe because it's really super simple – simpler than some of the recipes we've been having lately. And it's also really good if you're tired on like a Friday and it's been a long week and everything is frozen. (Laughter)

Sharon: Which often happens in my household. It's so nice to have something that you can just whip together really quickly and make a tasty, almost gourmet meal if you want to. It's so much more healthy than fish sticks because they're not fried and breaded. It's a steamed fish.

Marie: Mmm uhmm.

Sharon: Say, did you hear that Stephen King put up a recipe for microwaved salmon and he got some backlash on that?

Marie: No, I didn't!

Sharon: Yeah, I guess he tweeted about it just this last week or something. He wrapped a chunk of salmon in wet paper towels and microwaved it for two minutes and then tweeted about it. People were like, "How sacrilegious to microwave a fish!"

Marie: Laughs

Sharon: So, it created this whole discussion online about microwaving fish, which was interesting, I thought. But I also want to address the elephant in the room where people think that the number one issue everyone has with microwave cooking is thinking that it zaps the nutrients out of our food. But, according to an article from the Harvard Medical School, "Cooking with a microwave can actually preserve nutrients that break down when heated over more traditional cooking methods."

Marie: Well, that's good to know.

Sharon: Yeah, yeah.

Marie: Now, I remember you telling me when you were at the Red Cliff Fish Company you were talking to someone on the staff there and they had an unusual whitefish dish.

Sharon: Correct. And its probably... I have not tried it yet and it's probably going to be last on my list for doing because it's a whitefish dessert. And so, he took some whitefish, some heavy whipping cream, almonds and strawberries and he did it in a slow bake and it's like his whitefish dessert. I love fish but I haven't had a fish dessert yet.

Marie: Wow, Stephen King should try that one! Talk about backlash! (Laughter)

Sharon: Right, right.

Marie: But huh, it sounds interesting. Well, it's something for a future show maybe. (Laughter)

Sharon: Actually, I encourage any of our listeners to send it dessert recipes using fish. It would be an interesting special.

Marie: Yeah, send them to Sharon. (Laughter) Smoen@aqu.wisc.edu. (More laughter) Okay, let's go cook some whitefish!

Sharon: Sounds great.

Marie: (Sounds of a knife scraping a cutting board) Sharon is cutting a lemon into slices and we have a piece of frozen whitefish from Bodin's Fishery?

Sharon: Yes, we got it in Bayfield. You can also get it from Red Cliff. Many places, actually. Door County, too, going to the fish markets there and pick up your fresh whitefish or your frozen whitefish. (Sound of plastic fish wrapper crinkling.) And so, what you're really going to do is steam this. You might not want

to heat up the oven or light up the grill. We're going to do a steamed whitefish. So, we need a microwave-safe dish, which Marie is getting for us.

Marie: Now, do you rinse it (the fish filet)? I usually rinse it.

Sharon: I rinse it, too. (Sound of water running.) We don't have to pat this one dry because we're going to add water to it, or a liquid to it, anyway. Then, when you're holding it up, you can see that there's some thin parts and thicker parts. So, to make things cook evenly, you fold the thin parts under. That makes it cook evenly.

Marie: Oh, I did not know that!

Sharon: So, then you don't get any dry parts. We're in like a 9 by 9 glass dish here – baking dish. And now you can put whatever you want over the top of it, depending on your food preferences or allergies of your family or yourself. I'm going to do lemon. Is lemon good for you?

Marie: Ya, love the lemon.

Sharon: And acid like lemon or kimchi also goes well with fish. So, you can make it classic with lemon like we're doing today. So, something with an acid base or a vinegar base with your fish. We also have a bunch of good sauce recipes on the Eat Wisconsin Fish website because basically, fish is so easy to cook. You just dress it up differently with different spices and sauces.

Ah, so we have lemon on here. What else do you like on your fish?

Marie: Salt and pepper.

Sharon: Perfect choices.

Marie: Sometimes dill, but...

Sharon: Tarragon is supposed to be one of those fish-friendly spices.

Marie: Oh, I haven't tried it with tarragon. We have that.

Sharon: Let's do, let's do, we have lemon, salt and pepper, let's put tarragon on top. Alright, when we say we're microwaving the fish, we're actually kind of steaming the fish. What I'm going to do next, I'm going to put in a teaspoon of white cooking wine. So here we go with that, *glug, glug*. Oh, there we go! And then after we pour that over the fish, I'm going to take some microwaveable plastic wrap. (Sound of cardboard box bumping.)

Marie: She has to find the end first! (Laughter)

Sharon: It's stuck to itself! I hate when it does that. You can also use a baking dish that has a lid to it, which ...

Marie: My baking dish does not have a lid.

Sharon: And you kind of seal it down so the air can't escape. (Sound of plastic wrap stretching.) Now, with fish, you kind of have to keep an eye on it and you have to also know thine own microwave. Some microwaves cook faster than others and so if I was doing this at home, I'd but it in probably for 4 minutes and then give it a look-see. But I don't know about the microwave we're using today.

Marie: That is kind of a slim fillet, so I'd probably do like three and a half minutes.

Sharon: Uh huh.

Marie: And I usually poke some holes like with a knife in the plastic. But, so, this recipe says you don't do that?

Sharon: Right, but I'm okay with a hole or two because some baking dishes have little holes in the top of them.

Marie: Oh.

Sharon: Just to let a little of the steam out. So, I'm just going to jab one little hole in the middle just in case our fish needs to breathe. There! (Laughs. Sound of plastic being poked.)

Marie: It's off to the microwave with you!

Sharon: All right! Here we go!

(Sound of microwave door closing and the beeping of the cooking time being set on it.)

Sharon: If you're going from frozen to cooked, you need to add like a minute to the whole cooking time but then again, it's important to keep an eye on what's happening in there. You don't want it to get overcooked then that's what makes it leathery and not as good to eat. While that's happening you can get your vegetables ready.

(Sound of microwave beeping that it's done cooking.)

Sharon: Oh, it's done! I'm so excited, it's going to be yummy!

Marie: All right. So, Sharon has artfully arranged the fish with an edible violet flower on it and some lemon and some chives ...

Sharon: It looks like springtime.

Marie: It does! (Laughter) We just had Easter and this flower is pinkish-purple so with the yellow lemons, it looks like an Easter egg! (Laughs)

Sharon: I think it's really good to accent white fish with some color. So, having some edible flowers around and some lemons is always a good idea.

What do you think, Marie?

Marie: The whitefish flavor really comes through. That's the nice thing about microwaving fish is that the fish flavor doesn't get covered up by a lot of other extraneous things.

Sharon: Right. I like that we kept it simple today with just salt and pepper and a little tarragon, accented with the lemon and chives.

Marie: Uh hum, very good.

Sharon: I think I might have overdone it just a hint.

Marie: Overcooked it?

Sharon: Uh huh.

Marie: Sometimes you have to learn by trial and error.

Sharon: Exactly, and that's kind of the fun of cooking. Or, the art of cooking. You get better the more you do it and the more you learn your equipment. So, if I was going to do this again, I might not cook it at the full power. Because you can cut it to 50% maybe. Or just keep it in there for a little shorter of a time. Like I said, at home, my microwave is a little slower than yours. So, anyway, it's still delicious, and heart-healthy; full of Omega 3 fatty acids.

Music from Zenith City by Woodblind

For more information and our lake whitefish on the run recipe, visit Eat Wisconsin Fish on the web at eatwisconsinfish.org, plus Twitter and Facebook. Thanks go to Daniel Grooms, and to Bonnie Willison and Jennifer Smith with Sea Grant for their behind-the-scenes work on this episode. Thank you for listening!