A Deep Dive into the San Diego Fishing Industry

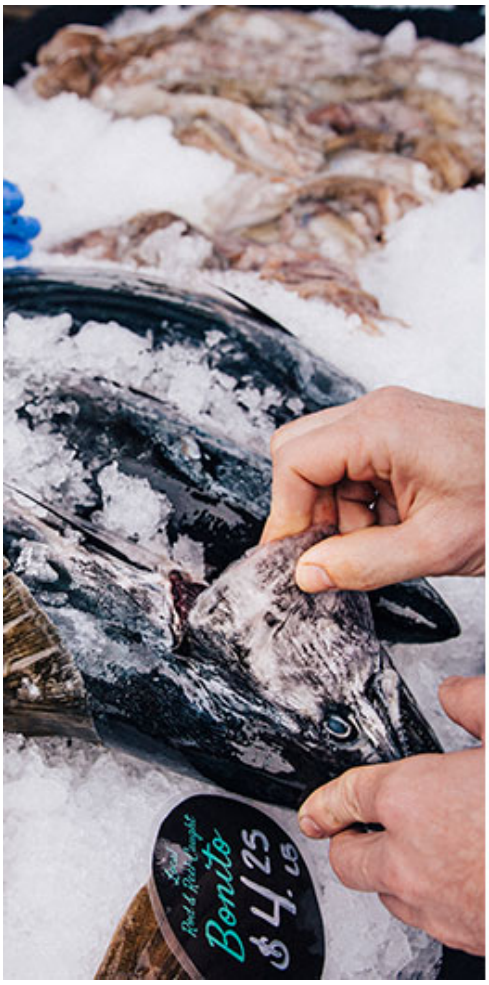
A little market, some big boats, and a $2 billion project are poised to revive San Diego's commercial fishing industry

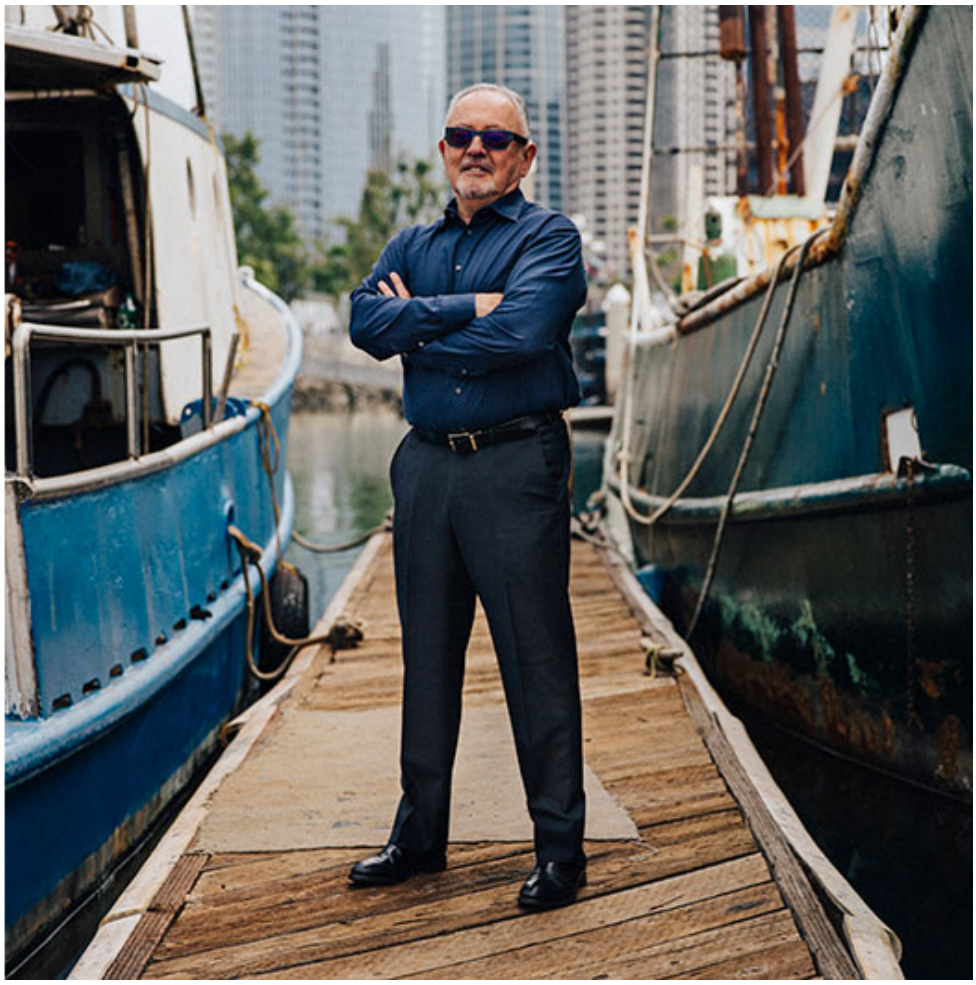
TROY JOHNSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEWEY KEITHLY

"The beginning was tough—they didn't trust us," says Yehudi "Gaf" Gaffen, CEO of Protea Waterfront Development, referring to San Diego's fishermen and women. "For decades they've been discriminated against and business has been taken away from them. People take advantage of them."

Gaffen and his company have won the bid to redevelop the San Diego harbor. Their $2 billion "Seaport San Diego" plan will historically alter the future of the city's waterfront—70 acres, to be almost exact. The fate of local fishers lies largely in his hands.

And a little fish market on a little dock may be the reason both Gaffen and the fishers themselves are so keenly aware of their vital importance.



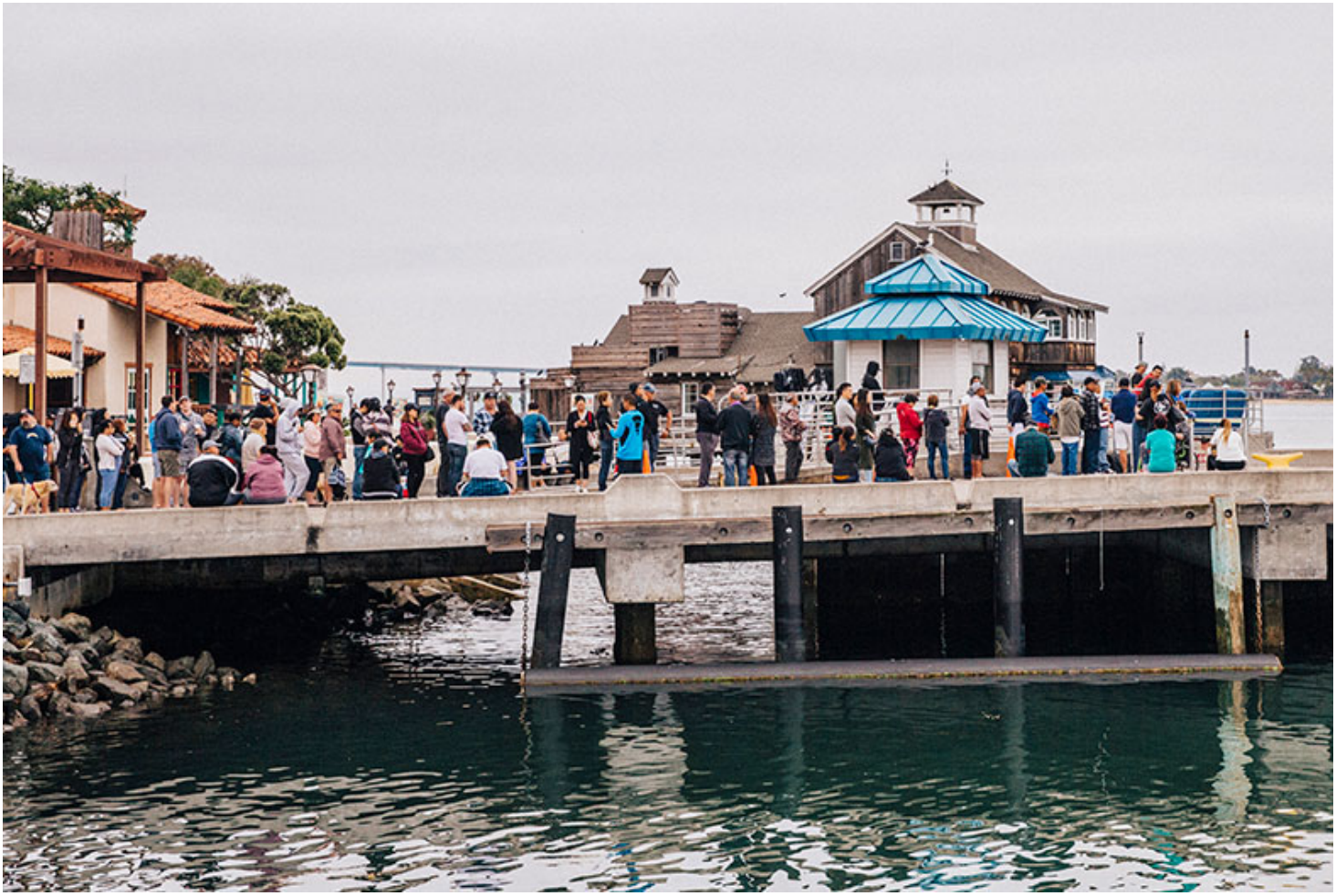


RIGHT: SEAPORT DEVELOPER YEHUDI "GAF" GAFFEN PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE DOCKS.

The Glory Days

There's a decent chance San Diego's fishermen and women have stopped reading this story by now, because it starts with a quote from a developer. Fishers have historically viewed developers as their most feared predator. In a city like San Diego, the water's edge is the gold vein, the bounty, the most valuable thing. And while many players are involved—the San Diego Unified Port District, the California Coastal Commission, the people of San Diego (who own the land)—the fight over it usually boils down to fishers versus developers. Boats versus hotels. Bait versus brunch.

Tuna Harbor—located at the end of G Street, sharing a parking lot with the Fish Market restaurant, the USS Midway, and the American Tuna Boat Association—is one of two remaining spots along San Diego Bay dedicated to commercial fishing (the other is Driscoll's Wharf). Longtime San Diego fisherman David Haworth stands on the edge and points at things. To parking spots that read "Reserved for Commercial Fishermen." To the swarm of pedestrians and tour buses clogging the lot. To an aging dock where lobster traps and nets are stacked like a working-class art installation. To the 100 or so boats, where men with reptilian skin tanned like news anchors repair, well, everything.



CUSTOMERS WAIT IN FRONT OF TUNA HARBOR DOCKSIDE MARKET AT 7 A.M., AN HOUR BEFORE IT OPENS.

“This is our Alamo,” he says, then laughs, acknowledging what happened at the Alamo.

San Diego was once known as the Tuna Capital of the World. At its peak in the early 1970s, the harbor was littered with gargantuan tuna boats, some with helicopters on the top deck for spotting fish. Every major cannery, including Bumble Bee, was based here. The industry employed over 4,000 people, the city’s third-largest employer behind the Navy and aerospace.

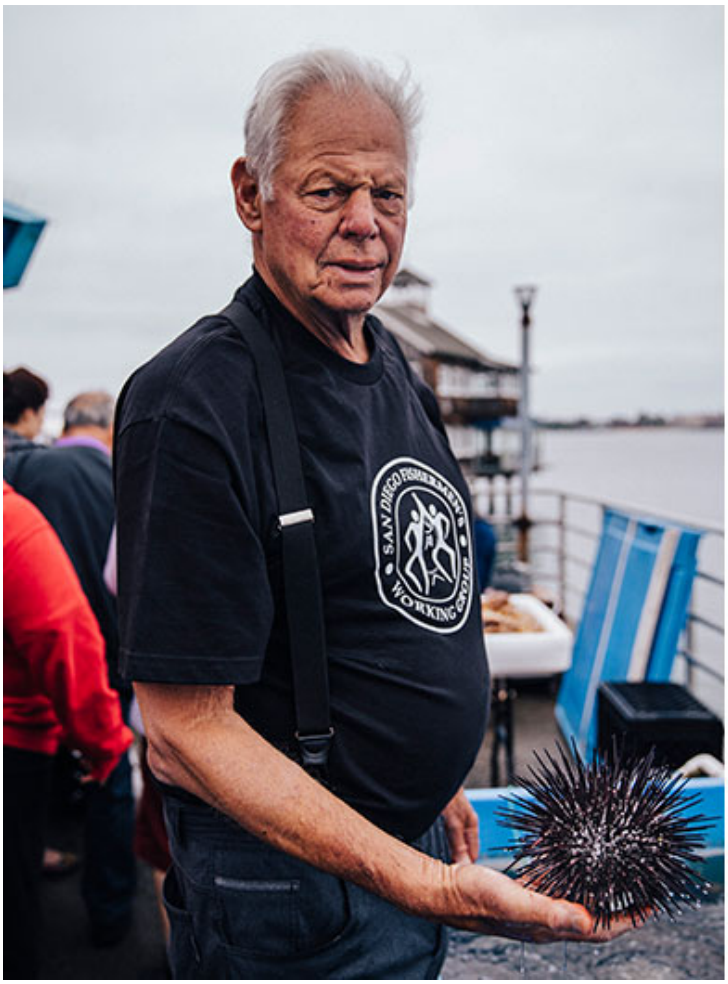
The Long Climb Back

Then fishing famously died, for many reasons. But mostly dolphins. During the gold rush for yellowfin and albacore tuna, nearly six million dolphins were killed, according to Sarah Mesnick, an ecologist in the Marine Mammal and Turtle Division of the Southwest Fisheries Science Center (SWFSC). Dolphins dying in nets was an international PR nightmare. Even suburban kids and moms thought bad thoughts about our fishing folk.

In response, the US passed the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, severely limiting how American fishers could earn their living. In survival mode, boats fled San Diego and changed flags—to Mexican, Ecuadorian, Western Samoan, anything but American. Abroad, they found governments who didn’t care much about bycatch (dolphins, sea turtles, etc.), quotas designed to preserve the ocean’s stock, or labor rights. A lot of them still don’t. “We know, because we fish next to them every day,” Haworth says.

San Diego’s harbor gradually replaced commercial fishing spots with cruise ships, yachts, recreational fishing boats, floating museums. The decimation of the industry did have some positive outcomes, though: Over the past 50 years, the US has become a world leader in sustainable fishing.

“The dolphin mortality has dropped dramatically, from hundreds of thousands a year to under a thousand,” Mesnick says. Fishing’s not an exact science. If you drop a hook in the water, something’s going to bite it. But from a statistical standpoint, less than a thousand is basically zero.



PETER HALMAY, UNI DIVER AND PRESIDENT OF THE SAN DIEGO FISHERMEN'S WORKING GROUP

Bluefin tuna—once the poster child for overfishing—are rebounding far stronger than official projections. An expert who agreed to speak anonymously said the US could raise its bluefin quotas right now. But the political nature of the fish has led government agencies to be extremely conservative, which means a couple more years. San Diego's rockfish were nearly fished out in the '80s, when everyone in restaurants ordered the red snapper (the menu misnomer for rockfish). Mesnick says they've rebounded, and local fishers are reporting huge stocks.

American sustainability efforts were carried out by commercial fishers. And the price was paid by commercial fishers. The half dozen I spoke with agreed that the restrictions were necessary after centuries of unregulated overfishing. "But we were told 'short-term pain for long-term gain,'" says Peter Halmay, a 78-year-old uni diver and president of the San Diego Fishermen's Working Group. "We've been under very strict guidelines for the last 20 years. And the stocks came back way faster than people anticipated. There's going to be a movement to open up these groundfish to pay back these fishermen for preserving it."

The Import Problem

The current reward for commercial fishers' sustainability efforts? Of the 7.1 billion pounds of seafood Americans eat annually, over 90 percent is imported. Theresa Talley, researcher at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, published a report that found only eight percent of San Diego's 86 seafood markets consistently carried local fish. This is bad news in many, many ways.

"US fleets pay more for gas, pay higher NOAA fees, regulatory fees, workers' comp fees... the list goes on," says Paddy Glennon of Superior Seafood, a decades-long proponent of sustainable seafood. "They don't have that in Mexico. In Mexico they can fish for sea bass 11 months out of the year. Our fishermen get a month and a half. I love our brethren across the border, but they're playing by a whole different set of rules."

"The thing that's sad about America," says Haworth: "Our negotiators are terrible. At one point we were allowed to catch 900 tons of bluefin. Then our negotiator came to us and said he agreed to reduce it to 600 tons—for two years. What kind of negotiating is that? Meanwhile Mexico got 6,000 tons and Japan got 15,000 tons. Our whole quota isn't even one load for other countries."

Countries outside the US—not just Mexico, but in Asia, Africa, everywhere—can undercut American fishers by charging a much lower price. “You go into any wholesaler and you’ll see 80 percent Mexican sea bass, 20 percent American,” Glennon says.

That gives light to the ultimate cruel irony: Americans’ desire for sustainable, ethically caught seafood has resulted in Americans eating far more unsustainable, unethically caught seafood. An aphorism I heard over and over again during my research: Instead of asking why American seafood is so expensive, customers should be concerned about why imported seafood is so cheap.

Dave Rudy, owner of Catalina Offshore Seafood, says that US fisheries and management are the best in the world. “But consumers still look for low prices. We have to constantly remind them that low-priced fish is not the best thing for you, and supporting local fishermen is important.”

SWFSC’s Mesnick points to the dozen or so American fishers using drift gill nets to catch swordfish; they are often targeted by environmental nongovernmental organizations, or ENGOs. “These are the same fishermen who’ve been involved in fisheries management and research and reduction of bycatch,” she says. “They work with scientists to fish where they’re not hurting marine mammals and turtles. These are very advanced fishermen with very advanced gear. If you shut them down and still want to eat swordfish, you’re importing the swordfish from places who have none of that. So you’re hurting the species.”

San Diego fisherman Kelly Fukushima calls it “the transfer effect.” “Every time you punish a local fisherman, you increase the amount of bad habits you have to import,” he says. In our fight to save the turtles, we’re eating more turtles in imported seafood.

Or, as Glennon puts is: “That 59-cent can of tuna is not just tuna.”

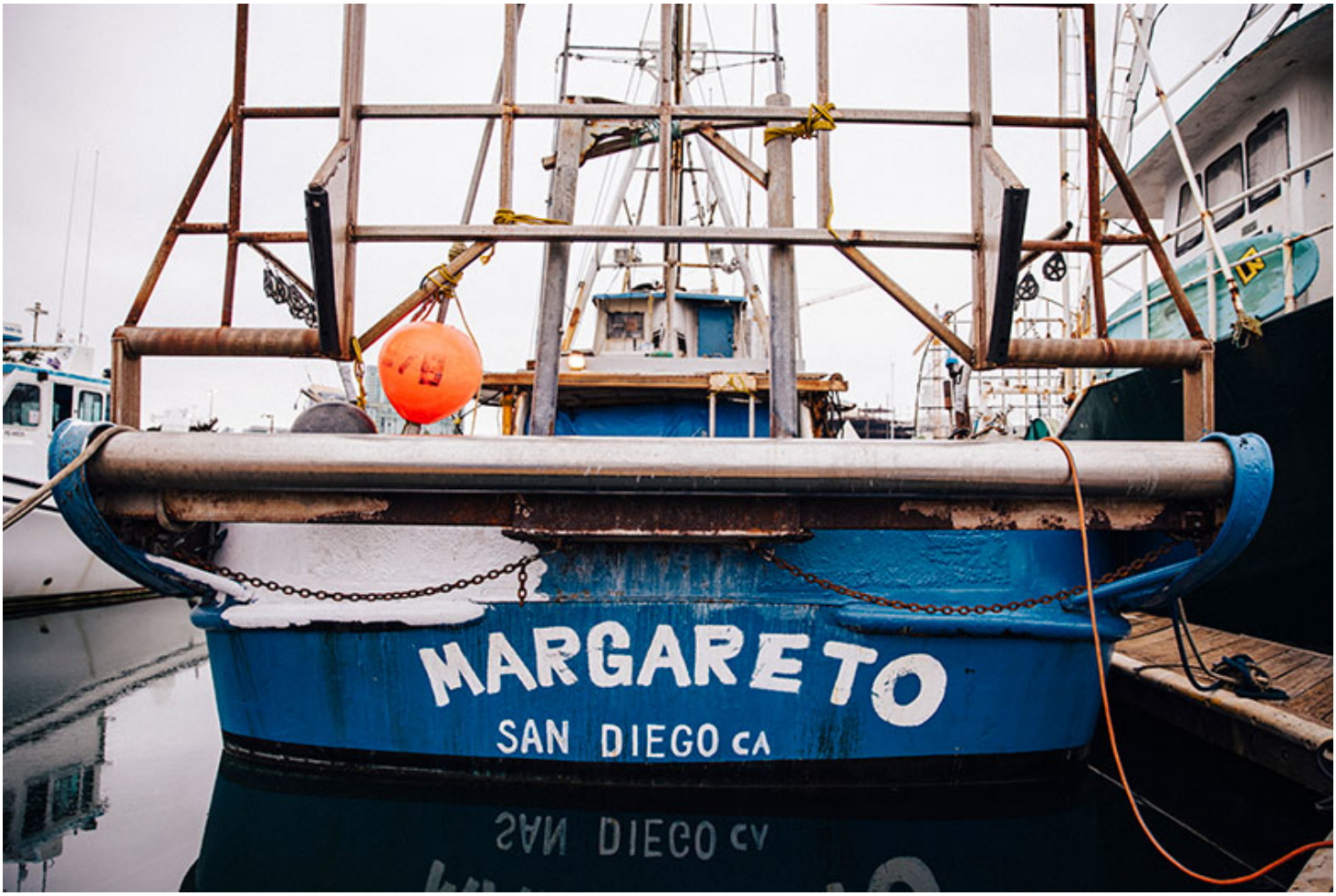
“Another mall on the water would be a huge disgrace to the harbor.” —Yehudi “Gaf” Gaffen

Commercial fishers make their living by being out on the water, not by attending meetings or launching publicity campaigns. Meanwhile, the ENGO Oceana launched a video series casting a negative light on commercial fishing. The titles include “Lauren Conrad Wants to Save the Sea Turtles,” “January Jones Is Scared FOR Sharks,” and “Miranda Cosgrove Wants to Keep Dolphins Singing.”

A representative for Oceana told me they’re supportive of American fishermen and women, and they’re all after the same goal: sustainable seafood. But every fisherperson I talked to took issue with ENGO's portrayal of them (so did the scientists). They argue that they’re not the problem, and haven’t been for some time. The problem lies with dubiously regulated fleets overseas. And videos using January Jones don’t seem intended for the market in, say, Samoa.

As one of the most sustainable sushi chefs in the country—Rob Ruiz of The Land & Water Co.—once told me: “One of the most endangered species in our waters is a fisherman.”

To change this and tell their real story, fishers needed a public place. And in California they found it at markets like Dory Fleet Fish Market in Newport Beach, and Tuna Harbor Dockside Market in San Diego.



The Little Market That Could

Every Saturday, a little pier near Seaport Village is lined with tables. Each table is teeming with one of the over 130 species caught by San Diego fishers. There’s urchin, black cod, mackerel, rock crab, spider crab, yellowtail, bonito, halibut, mahi-mahi, skipjack, wahoo, mongchong, opah, bluefin—you name it. A fisherman talks to a few customers, explaining what a sheepshead is, how to cook it. His wife stands nearby holding their newborn.

In 2014, San Diego fishers began efforts to sell their catch directly to consumers, just as farmers do at farmers’ markets. It required the passage of a bill (AB 226, aka “Pacific to Plate”), but Tuna Harbor Dockside Market finally opened for business in 2015 with a whimper: five fishers filling about a tenth of the pier outside Chesapeake Fishing Company.

“We just wanted to make sure the public had access to 100-percent sustainable, traceable fish,” says Fukushima.

“I thought we were gonna replace some of the middlemen,” says Halmay, one of Tuna Harbor’s founders. “Then I realized that wasn’t the goal. The goal was to simply show that fishing exists in San Diego.”

The market made fishing cool again. —Kelly Fukushima

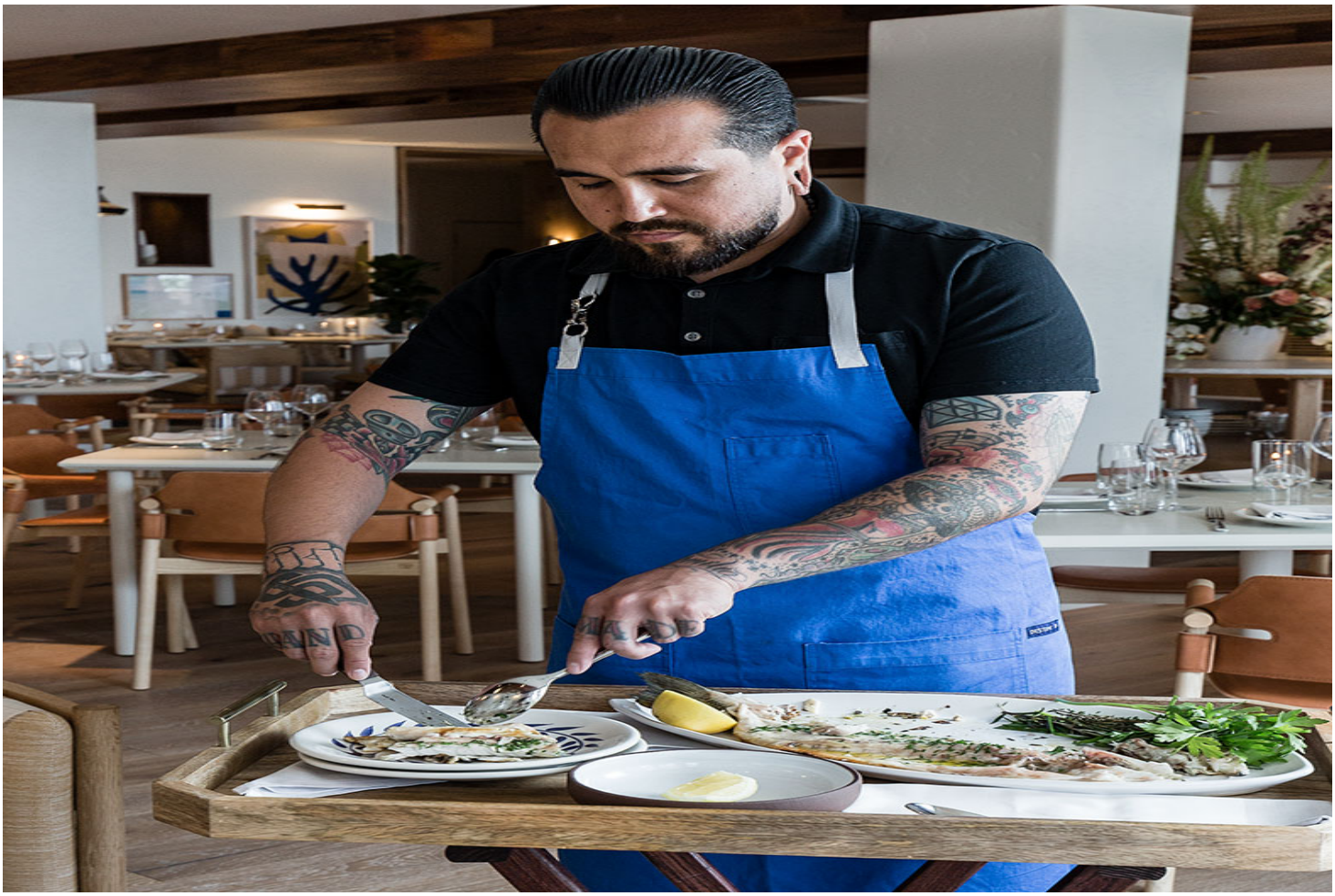
Market attendance was slow, but they kept showing up each weekend rain or shine. Then San Diego’s Asian communities discovered it, particularly Filipinos (San Diego is home to the country’s second-largest Filipino population). In many Asian cultures, seafood is an almost-daily staple. Fresh seafood is not a delicacy inasmuch as a standard. Asian customers also supported the diversity of seafood found at the market.

"We have different species that different ethnic communities like," says Halmay. "About 60 percent of our customers are Asian, and they know how to cook dogfish and mackerel. Your white La Jolla customer is buying the spot prawns."

Just as monocultures like corn and soy have devastated farmlands, a country that eats only a few species of fish creates a dangerous imbalance in the oceans. In 2015, only 10 fish species made up 90 percent of American seafood sales (salmon and shrimp alone accounted for 55 percent). Overfishing a single species—tuna—led to the collapse of San Diego's fishing fleet in the '70s.

"Like a lot of things in life, being diverse and moderate is good," explains Mesnick. "Tuna are top predators. You can't just eat the lions of the sea. Eating through the food chain is good for your health and the sea."

The next wave to discover Tuna Harbor were the chefs. JoJo Ruiz remembers being picked up by Paddy Glennon for his first trip to the market. They arrived before dawn and met all the fishers and their families. "It's changed my entire cooking career and my life," Ruiz says. "A lot of chefs say the same thing. If it wasn't for the market, we'd still be using langoustines and turbot, stuff flown from all over the world."



CHEF JOJO RUIZ AT HOTEL DEL CORONADO'S NEW SERE~A RESTAURANT, DEMONSTRATING THEIR WHOLE-FISH PRESENTATION. | PHOTO: JUSTIN MCCHESNEY-WACHS

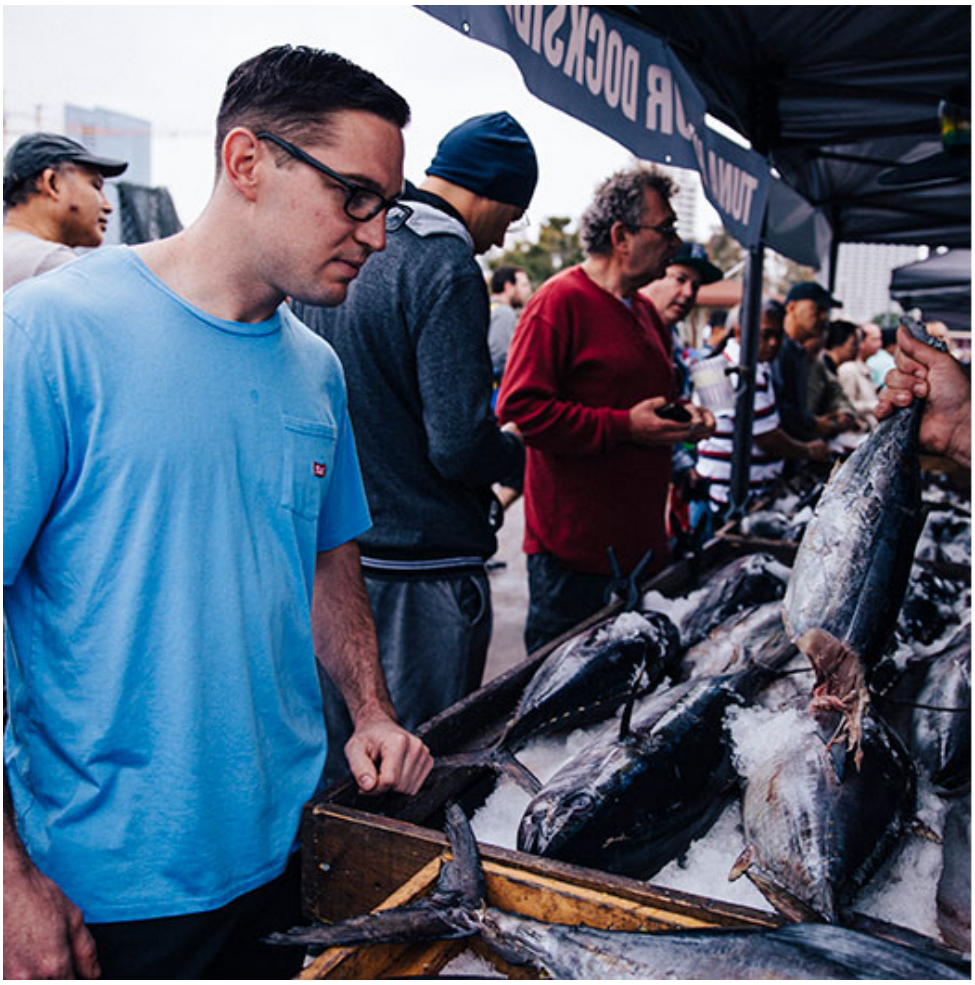
Ruiz, executive chef at Lionfish and the new Serea at Hotel del Coronado, credits the market for his being named a James Beard Smart Catch Leader for sustainable seafood. At Sere~a, he presents local fish whole to diners, lets them look their dinner in the eye and choose one, and then the kitchen fillets and cooks it for them. He swears not only by the ethics of sustainability and connecting people to their food source ("I want my son to have the same seafood I have"), but also by the taste.

"Fresh, local vermilion rock cod is 10 times better than frozen red Thai snapper used at most restaurants," he says. "Local halibut as a crudo is better than Alaskan halibut. Have you seen the claws on spider crabs? They're giant; big as my wrist."

There's a parallel between Tuna Harbor Dockside Market and San Diego's famed Chino Farm. It was Chino delivering the produce for the early farm-to-table movement. Alice Waters and Wolfgang Puck were regulars. Now Tuna Harbor is fueling the boat-to-throat movement, with regular customers from some of San Diego's top seafood spots—Juniper & Ivy, Ironside, Wrench & Rodent, The Land & Water Co., The Fishery, The French Gourmet, and Saiko Sushi.

"In my 20 years of commercial fishing, I've never seen such a big increase in the demand for local fish," Fukushima says. "The market really revitalized the fishing industry. It's attracted a lot of people to the waterfront and made fishing cool again. Fishing was seen as something only outcasts or criminals or people without real jobs do. At the market they see the fishermen, meet their families, see them working together."

It's that humanizing element—and the ability to be an "attraction," with people coming down to watch boats unload fish, snapping pics for the Insta—that may have motivated Yehudi Gaffen to make commercial fishers a focal point of his redevelopment plan.



IRONSIDE FISH & OYSTER BAR'S CHEF DE CUISINE, MIKE REIDY

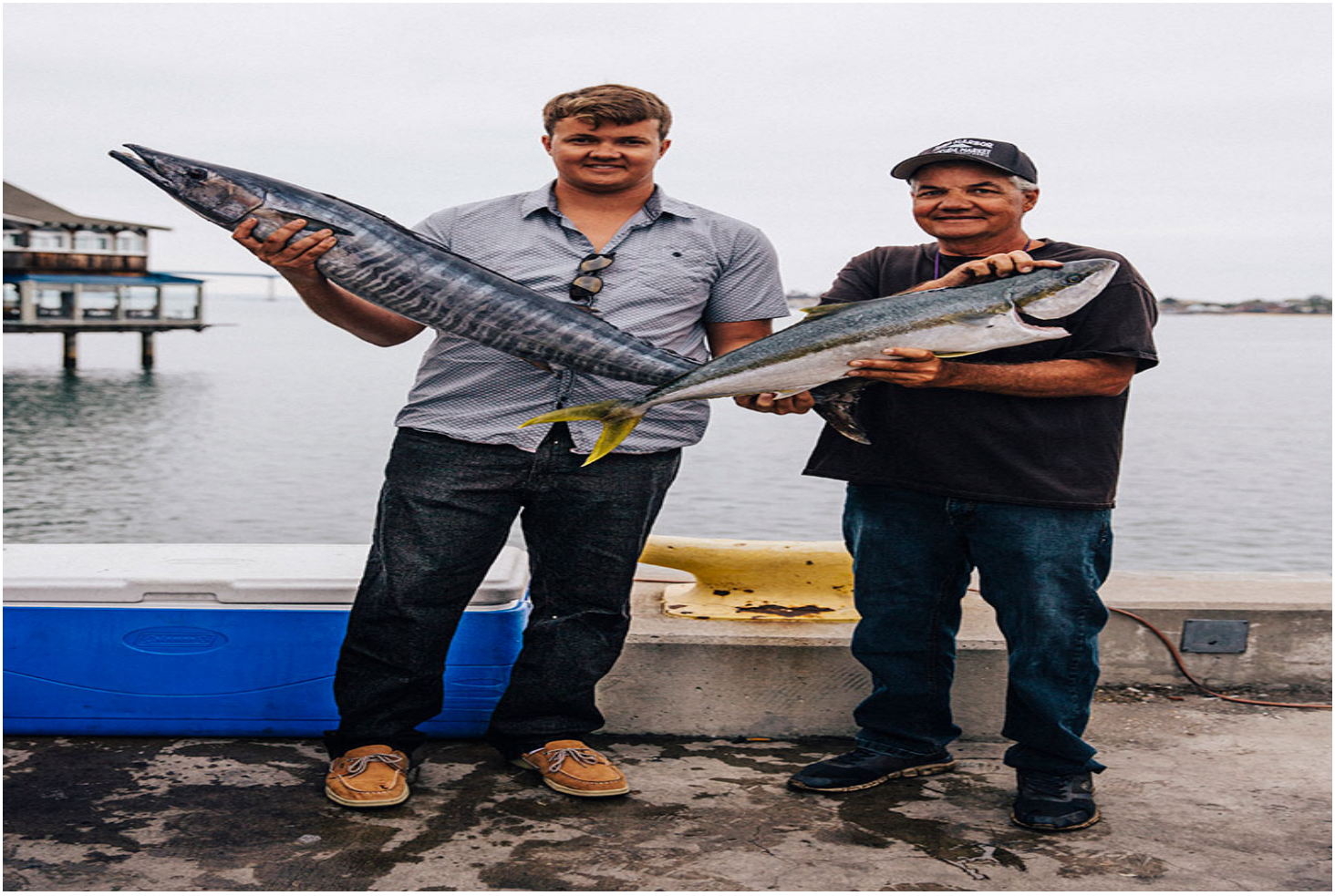
The Future Is Now

The seaport plan includes hotels, a veterans' museum, restaurants, almost 400,000 square feet of retail, an aquarium, and a 480-foot "Spire" observation deck. If all goes well, they'll break ground in early 2024. But the plans and discussions that will guide these tectonic shifts are happening right now. Waterfront businesses must speak up, or risk being left out.

"Another mall on the water would be a huge disgrace to the harbor," Gaffen says. "Another Disneyland would do a disservice and have no place. There has to be authenticity of a waterfront project."

When the port first asked for redevelopment proposals, Haworth says they warned the fishers. "They said, 'Listen, guys, you better negotiate with the developer, because we don't have any money for Tuna Harbor. If you want it revitalized you better make the deal."

The initial discussions with Gaffen were heated. Fishermen and women are notoriously defensive of their territories, because their territory has been taken from them—once allotted nine acres on the harbor, they're currently down to 3.9. So Halmay and a few others formed the San Diego Fishermen's Working Group. They started showing up to seaport plan meetings and port meetings, having productive sessions with Gaffen and his son-in-law, an ex–Navy SEAL named Alex Buggy.



NICK HAWORTH AND HIS FATHER, DAVID HAWORTH. DAVID'S FATHER, RETIRED, IS ALSO A FISHERMAN.

"Where there's two fishermen there's usually six opinions," Gaffen laughs.

"Forming the fishermen's group let us speak with one voice," Halmay says. "We had to stop fighting fires and build a fire station first. The working group is that fire station."

For instance, they sent Gaffen's first proposal back with some curious markups. "The first few designs and drawings came back and they had them labeled HS1 and HS2," he explains. "And I remember saying 'What is that?' It was Horseshit 1 and Horseshit 2. On a fisherman's list of people they trust, we're not on it."

Gaffen and the seaport plan have to balance every interest, not just the fishing community's—yachts want space in the harbor, people want parks, tour buses want parking, restaurants have wants, hotels have wants. So many wants. Plus there's the money issue. Unlike other governing agencies, the port doesn't receive any public funding. They depend on money from leases, and commercial fishing has not been an economic boom for San Diego since the collapse. Not compared to, say, a luxury hotel. Not even close.

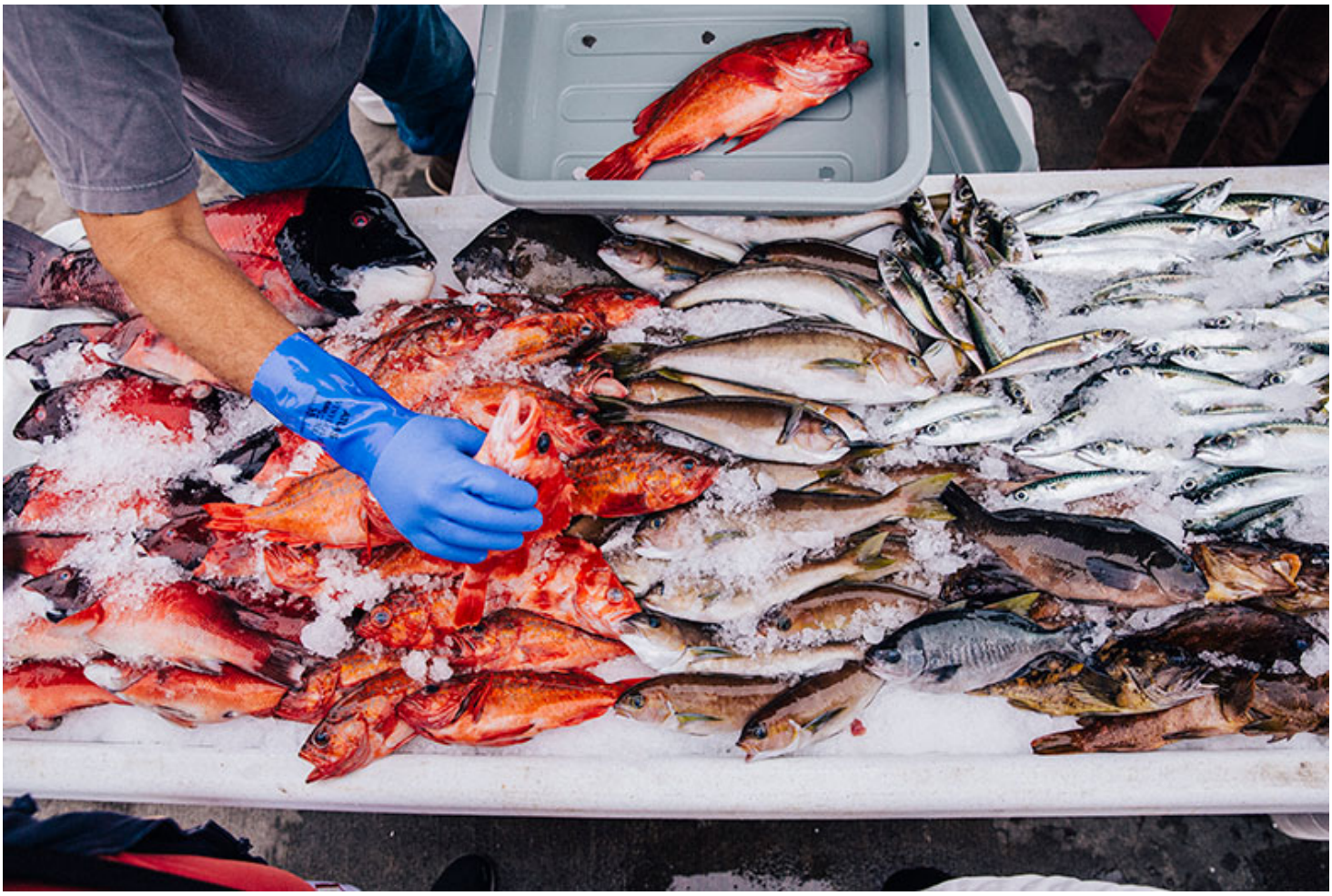
"If it wasn't for the market, we'd still be using langoustines and turbot, stuff flown from all over the world." ——JoJo Ruiz, Executive Chef, Sere~a and Lionfish

It was so fortuitously timed that Tuna Harbor Dockside Market has grown into a legitimate attraction. But even that was small potatoes until—seemingly out of nowhere—the big boats started showing up again.

"These tuna boats came in at just the right time," Halmay says. "Just as Gaf was asking us, 'How do we know you're going to have this demand?'—here they came! I said, 'Hey guys, here's your demand!'"

The three big boats—carrying between 20,000 and 40,000 pounds of tuna—belong to Hawaiian Fresh Seafood, which just relocated to San Diego from Honolulu. Owner Frank Porcelli (a grad of Poway High) says he has plenty more boats he's ready to bring in, many from the overcrowded Honolulu Harbor. But in order to accommodate this growth, San Diego desperately needs more infrastructure—slips, storage for traps and nets, ice machines, loading docks, cranes, and so on.

In September 2018, Gaffen and the Fishermen's Working Group signed a memo of understanding. In it, Gaffen promises a list of items to "facilitate the revitalization of San Diego's commercial fishing industry"—making improvements to Tuna Harbor, building a new processing plant, a bridge where visitors can watch fish be offloaded, and most importantly keeping yachts and recreational boats out of their "Alamo."



Some are skeptical. The seaport plan to build a veterans' museum and a processing plant on the G Street Mole (not to mention the new Manchester Group hotel across the street) will bring more traffic to what is already one of San Diego's most congested parking lots. "They're trying to stuff 10 pounds of [stuff] into a five-pound bag," Fukushima says. Nearly all fishermen I talk to doubt whether Gaffen and the seaport plan can pull this off without grinding commercial fishing to a halt.

Gaffen and Buggy are confident they can. They'll build a workable space for San Diego's fishers—and help establish the city as the capital of sustainable seafood.

"It's a differentiator and it's authentic," Gaffen says. "Commercial fishing is starting to come back. It's a vital security need. If we can catch local, sustainable seafood for our community and restaurants—it's a legacy I'd be really proud of."