

Neal Cooke Has ‘Tight Lines for Life’-- *Bringing the Pacific’s food to your table*

By Lisa Aston Bauer

You know how the saying goes: You can take the boy out of the ocean, but you can’t take the ocean out of the boy. Even though Neal Cooke’s been living in landlocked Colorado for about 20 years, his major draw remains the sea—where he fishes in open water for such fish as yellowfin tuna as big as some compact cars.

Like other folks who have gotten to be experts in their fields at a tender age, Cooke started fishing at the ripe old age of three, when he stunned his family by catching a seven-pound jack. It wasn’t an anomaly, because at seven, he caught a 27-pound mahi-mahi. He continued to fish with his father and grandfather in Florida, where he grew up, and they would travel to the Keys to fish. Cooke couldn’t get enough.

“I wanted better equipment, and at the time, I was too young at 12 to get the kind of job I needed to be able to buy that expensive gear,” he said. “So I began selling my fish to the mongers at the Miami fish market and in Coral Gables. I was hooked, so to speak.”

So were his father and grandfather, avid anglers in their own right, and fascinated by the little Cooke’s abilities to land the big ones. Every opportunity to fish took them to Key West, the Bahamas, and the Dry Tortugas. Even after he moved to Colorado with his father as a teen, he would travel back to his favorite haunts during spring and winter breaks, spending every spare moment looking for the next big one.

“My mom was not happy with me. I’d spend all of my holiday time with her out fishing.”

After attending high school in Estes Park, he considered moving back to Florida to be closer to his beloved ocean, but the congestion and cost of living turned him toward college at CSU with a minor in fishery biology.

“I could always travel to go fishing, and there are plenty of beautiful fishing spots in Colorado,” he admits.

He continued to sell the fish he caught, mostly to pay for his equipment habit. Then, in 1993, he took a 16-day fishing trip to the Revillagigedo Islands off the Baja coast of Mexico and caught so much fresh wild fish that he sold it to sushi bars, restaurants, and markets, and had enough left to give to friends.

“Everyone loved it and said it was the best tasting and freshest fish they’d ever had,” he added.

When he visited some of this area’s organic markets to see their selection of wild-caught salt-water fish, he was shocked. “There were so many employees handling the fish, and some didn’t seem experienced about cut. That, and the prices blew me away—they were charging \$26-30

per pound for sushi-grade tuna, with the sushi bar tuna going for about \$35 per pound. I knew I could market a fresher, better, and less expensive product myself,” he asserted.

That’s how Neal Cooke found himself in the fish business, even though he had never left it. He formed Cooke’s Fisheries, out of which he buys fresh, wild-caught salt water fish and shellfish from other commercial fishers, and resells at farmers’ markets around the area, and also hosts his increasingly popular all-you-can-eat “sushi nights” at local restaurants. For a fixed price, Cooke provides an assortment of incredibly fresh and generously cut sushi offerings of fish he has hand selected and cut himself.

Cooke is a regular fixture every Thursday afternoon, 3-7, at the Berthoud Farmers’ Market, selling such fresh-frozen Alaskan species as halibut and salmon, and South Pacific species as Wahoo, mahi-mahi, tuna, and yellowtail. He also sells many species of shrimp, crab, and lobster. All are wild caught, except for the shrimp.

“I’m fanatic about freshness. Most of my fish is only one to two days old from catch, and the rest has been flash frozen right after being caught. My goal is to have the freshest fish at the lowest prices.” Almost half of his product is sushi grade, with that grade tuna going for only \$10-14 per pound.

His friend and fishing buddy Blake Blewitt helps him at various area farmers’ markets, and is very knowledgeable about Alaskan fishing and filleting, and accompanies him on his guided sport fishing trips to Baja Mexico. Cooke’s three to four day trips are in May, and eight to ten day trips in December.

He envisions hosting more regular all-you-can-eat nights, so that folks can sample lots of fresh, mouth watering healthy fish at a good price.

“I love seeing people eating my products and being amazed at the taste and freshness.”

The Berthoud Farmers’ Market is only one way to access Cooke’s fish at very reasonable prices—he sells individually and supplies gatherings and parties. “I make less money per pound that way, but the satisfaction is much higher.”

Cooke offers his three tips for determining fish freshness:

- § Fresh fish has no “fishy” smell
- § Layers of flesh bounce back when pressed, and do not separate
- § Eyes of whole fish are clear, not fogged or reddish
- § Know from whom you buy

For fresh fish orders, information, or sport fishing trips, visit Neal Cooke every Thursday afternoon from 3-7 at the Berthoud Farmers’ Market through October, or contact him at (970) 412-7519 or canes2345@yahoo.com.

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