



# Is retail's future a secret?

## IS this the future of seafood retailing in Australia?

A single, small outlet in the food court of the Garden City Shopping Centre at Booragoon, towards the seaward end of the Perth-Fremantle sprawl?

Is its creator, Paul Catalano, the prophet who will lead nervous, unconfident consumers out of a dripping and somewhat smelly ice age of grey fillets, sunken eyes and gaping mouths?

Let's hope so. The origin of Seafood Secrets, he says, was "a passionate desire to dispel myths, eliminate confusion and fulfil the often-disappointed expectations of seafood lovers". Its points of difference:

- No leaks, no odours. Hygiene absolute. Eyes closed, you wouldn't know it's a seafood store
- All seafood, chilled and frozen, portioned and pre-packed in 'quality-lock' plastic, from live mussels and red bullseye fillets to fishheads and frames
- Labels in eight colour-codes to supplement price and species information. Choose from mega-omega, smart buy, chilled, never frozen, heat 'n' run...
- A second level of shelf colour-coding to guide self-selection, with progressive pointers to choosing your fish, pre-cooking and cooking options, finishing flavours and side dishes
- Customer touch-screen printouts, cooking demos three days a week and regular workshops

"It's retail R&D in motion," said the 37-year veteran of seafood processing, wholesaling and exporting - now a somewhat reluctant retailer.

The move to retail was spurred by his belief that "there has to be an alternative that gives consumers confidence, now that specialty seafood stores are a thing of the past in major shopping precincts and the primary window to the public is the supermarket".

"In our business we spent years developing quality and consistency from boat to factory, so we could systemise them and grow.

"So there we were with a product that had been nurtured from boat to retailer, but at the retail point there were variables beyond our control.

"We also weren't getting a return for our quality – not because consumers weren't prepared to pay – we just couldn't penetrate the market to win the confidence of

the consumer. The critical buying decision was in the hands of the retailer.

"We also knew from experience that retailing wet fish well required a high level of sales and stock management expertise, but even then the changes caused by seafood reacting to the retail environment wouldn't allow us to deliver the consistency we had achieved to that point.

"Selling 'fresh' seafood that is deteriorating by the hour in a retail outlet is harming our industry."

Hence Seafood Secrets – Paul Catalano's way of delivering consistency from boat to consumer by locking that straight-from-the-water quality into sealed packs containing customer-friendly portions; and labelling them to communicate with the customer truthfully, helpfully and consistently.

"More eco-friendly too. We use less packaging by doing it once only – at the source."

### Going it alone

As R&D, it's been costly. "We were unsuccessful with a first application for R&D funding through the National Food Industry Strategy, so we decided not to seek support from any other agency as it would slow our project and demand internal resources we didn't have.

"And there were too many facets to our concept to marry into a single funding application – from the boat, through the factory processes, to the development of packaging and quality retention.

"This, before we even started on the strategy for retail design, equipment and delivery. The project kept evolving and it wouldn't have been flexible if we were working with support funds.

"Now it's different. We can pinpoint the obstacles we want to overcome and we'll be looking for whatever support we can muster.

"We would particularly welcome help with marketing to educate consumers in two major areas – on the quality and food safety aspects of fresh fish in a pack and the repositioning of frozen local seafood as a quality, convenience product.



Paul Catalano – Customers shouldn't have to be seafood experts.

“The industry has made enormous inroads into improving harvest and post-harvest practices. Is it not time now to capitalise on this work by educating the consumer about the benefits of choosing local?”

### Re-inventing fresh

For fresh fish, the Seafood Secrets challenge has been to re-position it in the market through consistency, convenience and quality retention.

“These things should be a given, just as they are for many other foods.

“Consumers don’t buy a carton of fresh milk with a use-by date, drink it and say ‘wow, what a great bit of milk that time’.

“They have an expectation. They have been conditioned to a standard. They don’t have to think: what was the quality like?

“It can be the same for fresh seafood. Why should consumers have to evaluate: where will I buy, what’s it going to be like, am I being told the truth, does it have bones, how will I cook it?

“Sure, there will always be those who love the romance of the wet fish market. But let’s get real.

Most people shopping for their families want to know they are buying safe food that meets their expectations – and just get on with it. They shouldn’t have to be seafood experts.”

Seafood Secrets is working its way towards black

ink, buoyed by the response from a growing clientele hooked on the benefits. Along the way, there have been surprises.

“We thought a primary market would be busy double income families. But they’ve been outnumbered by retired people, many of them now singles, who say they find the convenience and economy of portions irresistible.”

The Seafood Secrets offering is overwhelmingly Australian, ranging from Queensland (fresh) prawns to Tasmanian salmon. But if it can’t be supplied locally and customers want it, Paul Catalano will stock it. Hence rudderfish, whitebait – and shrimps from Iceland. All pre-packaged, all in open-top temperature-controlled cabinets around three walls of an outlet with a floor space of just 70 square metres.

“When we opened in February this year I was nervous, waiting for customers. One of the first was an Asian woman, clearly knowledgeable - she knew what she was about.

“When she made a selection and brought it to the counter I saw it was a pack of heads and frames. There was this sense of relief and I thought: ‘Yes! We’re on the right track.’”

**MORE: Paul Catalano, phone 08 9379 3044; email [paul.c@catalanoseafoods.com.au](mailto:paul.c@catalanoseafoods.com.au); [www.seafoodsecrets.com.au](http://www.seafoodsecrets.com.au).**

NEXT edition: If fresh is best, why frozen should be chosen.



Airy and enlightened retailing