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'Seaweed lady' on Cutting Edge

By Shannon Moneo

Sooke, B.C. — When Diane Bernard led some Korean and Chinese Canadians along the rocky, Pacific shore to sample bits and pieces of the ocean's bounty, the Vancouver visitors couldn't wait to get their hands on the *Porphyra* seaweed, commonly known as nori.

And when Ms. Bernard, who has turned fast-growing ocean plants into a burgeoning mini-empire from her home in Sooke, enlisted some high-profile male chefs to follow her lead and eat off the beach, they were sold.

The men couldn't get enough of the seaweeds, and raved about the rhubarb, sweet pea and fermented plum flavours of the green, pink, purple and brown weeds. They wanted to lug buckets of the nutritious plant back to their kitchens.

The stirred-up cooks became loyal customers, experimenting with the produce in a new wave of West Coast dishes. Some of them later introduced Ms. Bernard -- known to them as the "seaweed lady" -- to spa managers, opening another door for her Outer Coast Seaweeds products.



Diane Bernard, founder of Outer Coast Seaweeds, collects seaweed for her Vancouver Island business along scenic Whiffen Spit in Sooke, B.C. (Deddeda Stemler/For the Globe and Mail)

Ms. Bernard, a 53-year-old former municipal politician, began her seaweed business in 2001 at her Vancouver Island home. She now has four full-time employees, plus a California-based sales representative working on the Golden State's lucrative spa industry. During the May-to-September harvest season, she employs at least a dozen seaweed pickers

who work from shore at low tide, in a boat and underwater, diving to reach certain species.

Since 2001, Outer Coast's output has doubled each year. In 2004, the company harvested approximately 2,000 kilograms of the renewable resource, with 60 per cent of it dedicated to beauty and spa products and the rest going to restaurants simmering with creative chefs.

"Diane is a pioneer," says Robert Clark, the 41-year-old executive chef at Vancouver's famed C Restaurant, which got its start eight years ago serving only products from the water.

A decade ago, fresh Canadian seaweed wasn't available. Today, Ms. Bernard is the only supplier Mr. Clark knows of.

He has been buying her "pristine product" -- a kilogram each week of seasonal seaweed, bagged and iced -- for more than three years.

The highly textured, versatile plant is used as a garnish or added to salads, soups or C's famous nori-sesame scones.

And to put some zing in the rice, Mr. Clark will throw in a piece of kelp, leaving diners to wonder, "Why does this taste so good?" he said.

Infused with high levels of vitamins, minerals and trace elements, seaweed has been used for centuries by the Japanese. Roughly 21 species make up 10 per cent of their diet, with an average household using 3.5 kilograms a year.

The Japanese seaweed business, much of it wrapped around sushi, generates more revenue than Canada's auto industry, Ms. Bernard said. To put that in perspective, the Conference Board of Canada predicted Canada's 2004 auto industry would generate profits of \$2.5-billion.

In 1997, the North American edible seaweed market was worth a mere \$30.6-million.

Ms. Bernard, meanwhile, wouldn't disclose her revenues, but the married mother of two adult children did say she's not looking for investors. "For a little company in Sooke, I'm doing very well."

It could be said her seaweed success was spawned decades ago, beginning at the opposite end of the country. Spending summers with her Îles de la Madeleine relatives, the Toronto native recalls uncles who carried dulse in their pockets, chewing it like snuff because tobacco was too expensive. Sea grass insulated homes and stuffed mattresses; fishing boats used seaweed to keep the prized lobsters cold.

When Ms. Bernard, who has a master's degree in criminology and served two terms as a school trustee, did not get re-elected to a second term as local regional director in 1999, she began thinking of a new career.

A sea change was on the horizon. Looking out her window, over Juan de Fuca Strait, she saw bull kelp waving around and bits and pieces of various seaweeds strewn on the shore. East Coast memories came flooding back.

"I decided to take a wild resource I was comfortable with and value-add it to the highest level possible and kick it into the national and international market," she said. "The resource I was quite confident with was sitting outside my door."

Her seaweed-based unguents and spa products appear in tony establishments such as Four Seasons Resort in Whistler, Sooke Harbour House restaurant and spa, Malahat's Aerie Resort, the Fairmont Banff Springs hotel and several U.S. establishments. She said she recently met with a French company interested in her natural beauty products.

B.C. is home to 700 species of seaweed, nourished by cold, clean, fast-moving waters. In Ms. Bernard's harvest territory, an 80-kilometre road trip along pockets of the Sooke to Port Renfrew coast, roughly 250 species thrive in what she calls her garden. She consistently picks a dozen varieties, eyes on the skies and tide tables.

Bull kelp is the fastest growing plant in the world, shooting from millimetres to 20 metres within eight months. After March's spring solstice, seaweeds really take off. By June, Ms. Bernard and her pickers will be in high gear, either gathering the plant at low tide or in boats in July and August, using sharp tools to cut -- not tear -- the plant at just the right spot to ensure continued reproduction.

She pays approximately \$1,000 a year for federal harvesting licences and royalties based on the amount taken. Daily logs are mandatory to track how much, which species and from where it's taken.

If seaweed is harvested with clean cuts and no damage to the reproductive parts, it will continue to grow, said a retired Simon Fraser University marine botany professor and owner of Canadian Kelp Resources.

"For over 20 years, we've been harvesting in Barkley Sound," said Louis Druehl, 69, who sells his wild kelp to health food stores. It's like cutting grass, the seaweed expert said. If done properly, healthy plants reappear.

And another bonus is that the wild seaweed industry is "clean farming," said Mr. Druehl from his Bamfield home. Chemicals and antibiotics aren't necessary.

Ms. Bernard has relied on advice from professionals like Mr. Druehl and her 54-year-old husband, George Butcher, a marine biologist who works for the provincial government.

She also gives \$40 tours, using the two-hour visit to educate people about seaweed's growing cycle and sustainability while dispelling myths that seaweed is only good for the garden or that it's stinky.

"There's such a bizarre stereotype of seaweeds as yicky, but seaweeds are elegant, rich, beautifully textured," she says. "Pick them up, they ooze their beauty."

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