

Sz3 Ep1 The Conch - Becca M.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:04] Hello. My name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast, The Conch. We're excited to continue our journey with this podcast, talking about seafood and the ocean and most importantly, showcase the incredible people working in the seafood sector, share their journeys, examine the challenges they face and the triumphs they've achieved. Today we are kicking off season three and so excited to have a very special guest joining us, Becca Millstein. Becca is the co-founder and CEO of Fishwife, a female founded and led food company aiming to make ethically sourced premium and delicious tinned seafood a staple in every cupboard. Welcome and thank you, Becca, for joining me today on The Conch. Let's do this!

Becca Millstein [00:00:49] Let's do it. Thank you so much, Julie, for having me. I'm so happy to be here.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:54] I'm so excited you're here, too. And we were just talking before we started recording that we have been kind of admirers of each other from afar for a long time. So it's really great to get you behind the mic and share your story. So let's talk a little bit about your story because I think it's a really interesting one. And what road did you take to get to this place where you are today?

Becca Millstein [00:01:18] Yes. It was a meandering one of so many of ours are. So, I graduated from college in 2016. I'm from the East Coast. I moved to Los Angeles to work in the music industry, which I did for about four and a half years. And I was doing brand partnerships, artist marketing, essentially. So, I did that for a few years. I was working at a music startup during the pandemic, a very community based, it was basically we work for musicians, which is a really fun idea. But when COVID hit, it was very hard on the business. I had a lot more free time. I was living with my friend Caroline during COVID, and we were quarantining together. Again, had a lot of free time and not a lot to do during that period. And we were eating a bunch of tinned seafood. It's just a very rare food product and that it is so good for you, so nourishing and shelf stable for many years, so perfect for a time when you are trying to limit your trips to the grocery store. So basically, we were eating all this tinned seafood and one day on a hike and this sounds a little bit trite, did have a light bulb moment on this hike that there was really no tinned seafood brand in the U.S. that was at all speaking to the cultural tides that were very much showing signals that tinned seafood was going to be a very on the rise trend. And I would say the necessary background to that is that when I was in college, I lived abroad in southern Spain and had traveled to Portugal. And I think that's where I had my own tinned seafood awakening, which is an extremely common story. And I know that to be the case because this summer alone, the amount of text messages I got featuring pictures of Portuguese conserva shops saying, "I'm here in Portugal thinking of you," which was like amazing to get and also like, wow, I really wish I was in Portugal. I think that's where, you know, I just saw really gorgeous, amazing, elevated artisanal culture around conservas, which is like not the status quo in the U.S. and never has been, as we all know. Well, anyone that's listening to the podcast that grew up in America knows that the conception around canned fish is, it is not alluring. It is not sexy. It is none of those things.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:50] No, it's not. And I have to say, I mean, some of my best ideas also come on the trail and when I'm out walking in nature. So that really resonates with me. And also, of course, having friends that are visiting Europe and also taking pictures of those incredible, so cute little conserva tins. It's amazing. And so how did your idea go from the trail to actually becoming a reality? Because, you know, I was also in

2020 quarantining like everyone and also had this light bulb idea to create SAGE. You know, it's interesting because I've had several people on here that started their businesses in 2020, kind of in the summer of 2020. Right? And like thinking about how to go forward in life. And so how did you take that from the trail to the shelf?

Becca Millstein [00:04:38] It's a great question. And yes, so cool to hear that you started working on this project during that time. Mm hmm. It is amazing to see what people can do when they have a little excess free time and space to really dig into their passions. Yeah. So we had this idea. We called a bunch of people that day to get an initial validation point because it just seemed so like the sky truly just like opened up for me. And I was like, oh my God, this is what I'm going to spend the rest of my life doing. Just had that feeling quite immediately. So anyway, I called a bunch of people, got some, got a ton of early validation, truly that first day. And then I would say we went through a period of time that I think is something that a lot of entrepreneurs aspiring, at first, go through, which is just like calling anyone that you know in your network that has started a business. So, for example, the day after we came up with the idea, I called my friend Greer, who is an entrepreneur in the fashion industry and makes amazing textiles. I bring this up because she's actually the one that came up with the name Fishwife.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:50] Oh, that's going to be my next....

Becca Millstein [00:05:52] Yes. So that was, again, like I think anyone thinking about starting a project as you did or as we did, just like reaching out to all the people, you know, in your network that have started businesses, whether in your aspiring industry or not. You get so much information. So, I went through that period and started looking to build a supply chain in Spain and Portugal because that is where the, again, the seed of the idea came from. And so I started getting that going, and we did end up working with a really amazing cannery in Galicia, but we really wanted to get things moving and maybe this is how you felt as well. I was like, I need to get this off the ground as soon as humanly possible because life, normal life, you know, quote unquote, is going to resume. And when that does, you know, I still had a job, I had a busy social life, etc. I was scared that the normal way of living was going to creep back in, and I was going to forget this thing that I was really excited about. So basically, that really fueled me to get out as quickly as humanly possible to like hold ourselves accountable. So, we were starting to figure out how to build business from a funding perspective, from a legal perspective, all these things. And then started to get in touch with fishermen in the U.S. and really just trying to find anyone that knew anything about starting businesses and or fish. In terms of where our actual supply chain that ended up bringing us to market, I got put in touch with a fisherman who had worked with a cannery in Oregon, and we started to talk to this cannery in Oregon. And at some point, it became obvious that it was going to be a faster process if we could work domestically. So that's just one piece to consider. But I would say the relevant piece of information, the most relevant for launching the business was that we devised a market test where we had built the brand and found the name, Fishwife. And then I had found an illustrator and Danbo Miller, who is local to L.A. and was the best friend of a designer that I had worked with on several projects in my former career. So we had the name. With Danny, we started building the brand. And then by August, we had come up with the idea at the end of April, by August, we launched a market test, which was called the Beta Box, and it was a box in our branding that contained three samples of products that we were testing. And those are all from the Spanish cannery we were chatting with. So they're actually only one of them we ended up launching with. I include that as a piece of information because people are always asking me like, how do you just start to like a. test the market and b. launch? And for us it was like we launched this

market test, got a ton of validation. We had these big national press outlets reach out to us about covering the launch. And so that kind of just really kept the momentum going. And then I was like, well, got to build some supply chains. And I get into that because that is one of the more interesting parts of the story.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:08:56] Yeah, I want to hear about that too, and I think that's so funny. It's really similar to how I did it a little bit in a way that I also had this idea and then I thought, okay, I got to validate it with some people. So I called like literally everybody. Well, I didn't call everybody because I was also really, I'm going to be honest, I was really trying to be proprietary. So I felt like everybody was sitting at home thinking and I was, like, also thinking. And I was thinking, well, what's the next thing that I want to do now that I have all this free time because I lost my job? Like, what am I going to do to catapult, you know, the sustainable seafood movement or sustainable seafood sector into kind of the next phase? That's also like, who am I to say that? But I was like, I'm going to do it.

Becca Millstein [00:09:39] I think you are the perfect candidate to do that. And obviously have proven that.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:42] Yeah, I don't know. We'll see. I mean, it's still you know, we're still testing it, as you say. You mentioned Greer, your friend Greer and the textile artist. And. Is that right? Textile artist?

Becca Millstein [00:09:52] She and her sisters run this company called Block Shop. And it's this amazing textile company based in L.A. They produce most of their products in India.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:01] Oh, cool.

Becca Millstein [00:10:02] Beautiful company.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:04] So Greer came up with the name Fishwife. Tell me about the name. And what is a fishwife?

Becca Millstein [00:10:10] A fishwife is a historical term. It's actually still very often used. I can perceive in the UK and I know that because when I Google fishwife sometimes it's like the Guardian articles and they're using the word fishwife in a modern sense, which is hilarious. But basically it originated sometime in the 15th century, and it was a word for the wives and daughters of fishermen because their husbands would go out to fish and the wives and daughters would sell the fish at the market. And because of the perishable nature of fresh seafood, they gained a reputation for being very loud, obnoxious, brash and hustling left and right, which I think is just such a hilarious term. So originally it was just a fishwife. If someone that sells fish the market, but because of their bold, brash attitude, it became a gendered insult for like a loud, foul mouth woman.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:11:10] They're trying to sell their fish, so they have to, like, be.

Becca Millstein [00:11:14] They've got to, they've gotta scream.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:11:15] They have to be aggressive. You know, honestly, I mean, everyone's said this to you, I'm sure, a million times, but your branding and the name is just so perfect. And I love the illustrator you mentioned, Dan, and it's just so great. And I love all the different variations in the colors. And, you know, every time you launch

something new, it's just this new kind of cute. It's really cute, you know? And I think it's so funny when you think about canned seafood, tinned seafood, from the U.S., it's like wartime staple or something, right? And it hasn't been improved on in probably a century. And now, you know, this comes in and people are like, what is this? And how do I get one? And where do I find it? Like it's just great.

Becca Millstein [00:11:54] It's certainly a lot of fun. The brand building and the story building around each product is, I would say, definitely my favorite part of the business, just because, yeah, each of the products tells such a unique story. There's like layers and layers and layers of storytelling. I don't even think we're doing that job, honestly, on the storytelling around the products, I think I have a lot to learn just because there's so much.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:12:17] Yeah, well, you're not. I'm going to say you're not unique in the seafood industry for not being able to tell the story behind the seafood because. I mean, you actually do it way better than everybody. But the seafood industry is notorious for not being able to communicate well about their products. And that's why we're in a real, you know, of all the proteins they call it battle for the center of the plate. And seafood has lost or is losing pretty much lost. I think this the battle for the center of the plate. And, you know, we've had Linda Cornish on here from the Seafood Nutrition Partnership, who's trying to launch a national seafood kind of marketing council. And it's just like avocados, right? Like marketing avocados. Like why aren't we marketing seafood better? It's so weird. I just don't get it. But out of anyone, you know, you've done this great. And the question I have, you kind of answered it. I mean, you were feeling internal pressure to launch Fishwife during the pandemic, just so you didn't let it slip through when normal life, quote unquote, normal life returns. And so is that fair to say that if it weren't for the pandemic, that you wouldn't have launched Fishwife?

Becca Millstein [00:13:21] There's no question I would still be languishing in my unsatisfying music industry career. So, yes, yeah, yeah. It would not have happened.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:13:30] Yeah, that's the same here. I never thought I would be founder of this kind of thing and doing this. So that's a little bit of a silver lining, I think, for the pandemic. Of course, not a lot good happened out of that, but some good did. So I had Chef Charlotte Langley from Scout Canning on here on the podcast like season one. She was an early podcast guest and I asked her the same question. So, I'm going to ask you, you know, over the pandemic, really, and now we kind of see a few here and there, there's this proliferation of women-owned canned seafood companies or tinned seafood companies. And what do you think it is about this niche in the industry that appeals to women?

Becca Millstein [00:14:09] I think we do. It is noticeable in the burgeoning and new wave of tinned seafood categories that there are so many women identifying entrepreneurs. And I think that's possibly because it's just there aren't that many new entrants to the space. So, like of the five there are like four women run. But I would honestly expand that to just consumer packaged goods in the food and beverage industry generally. Honestly, when I look around, it very much feels like the majority of the founders of the companies that are really making waves are women. And I don't want to be binary with gender characteristics, but I do think women are amazing at storytelling on average better than the male, our male counterparts. I just think women are, you know, if there is one stereotype you can apply to women is that they are like better communicators and more intuitive. And generally, I will say it very generally and I think that like level of like intuition, communication and I would say listening, that is what has in my perception given rise to so many incredible women

entrepreneurs. Because I think a very key way and characteristic of all entrepreneurs we see these days is that you need to be listening to your customer, building with your customer, just like very much having an open dialog between you, yourself as a founder, and your customer. I think that's just many women's natural inclination is to listen and digest and synthesize and then act accordingly. So when I look at my peer group of food and beverage entrepreneurs, I have a ton of like amazing male counterparts, but it does feel like when you look at your average gift guide or your average specialty shop, they are dominated by women founded companies.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:00] Do you think that the larger seafood industry is taking notes of how Fishwife is growing and listening to the market? I don't know if you would have any indication of that, but I feel like they might be. I don't know. Do you have any idea?

Becca Millstein [00:16:12] I think we have started to bubble up. I would say, you know, MSC, we've connected a lot with MSC and ASC this quarter and learn from them, players like them that are thinking innovatively and are more progressive. They clocked our existence and were following along and noticed the disruption. I don't think the bigger players are aware of us yet.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:41] Really? Oh, well, we'll see. We'll see about that.

Becca Millstein [00:16:44] Well, we'll see. I hope it doesn't really bother me. Yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:47] You know, the only thing I could think of is that they might come in and swoop in and give you some sort of amazing offer to buy you. But I don't know. I don't know anything about that kind of stuff, the CPG realm. So we'll see. I mean, we'll continue to observe what happens in the market. One thing I did notice, though, immediately about you and Fishwife is that you do a lot of partnerships. Well, not only do you do partnerships in terms of the seafood, right? Like you're partnering with Kvaroy Arctic and their salmon and you're partnering with Riverence in Idaho. So, you're partnering with them. So you're partnering in terms of your sourcing and you're also partnering in terms of like cool ancillary items like earrings and jewelry and rugs and cool things with artists like artisanal, cute things. So how does that come about? How did you think to do that? Is that something that you got from your previous career in the music industry or partnerships?

Becca Millstein [00:17:42] Yes, that's really what I did throughout my whole career was brand partnerships. And it was, you know, as I started to think about what I wanted to do with my career and I was graduating from college, partnerships were always just kind of at the top of the list. I think I just find them very interesting because you get to take like the key elements of these two different brands and smash them together. That resulting in combination brings out something totally new and surprising, I think in the CPG world, collaboration, these days are table stakes like everyone has them all the time because they're amazing customer acquisition levers. They're really, really great marketing drivers and they're just a lot of fun. They can also be extremely hard and challenging and a ton of work, obviously. Yeah, but I would say since day one we've been partnering with very small independent artists. First, we started partnering with poets and writers to write like, fishy sonnets, it's so hilarious. But if you go back to our Instagram two years ago, it was all sardine poetry and then then it kind of evolved to working with visual or material artists that would create these very small batches of products that our customers can buy. And now these days, we kind of have to shift our focus to bigger partnerships of more obvious ROIs.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:01] Right.

Becca Millstein [00:19:01] Honestly, I just love doing them so much. Like I loved doing all of the small artist partnerships and I just did it because that's what I naturally have always gravitated towards. But I think we are at the point in our business where we really need to have a strong business case for anything that we choose to spend time and resources on.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:16] Yeah,.

Becca Millstein [00:19:17] Like the Fly By Jing partnership, for example.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:19] Yeah,.

Becca Millstein [00:19:20] I don't know if you know about that. We did a partnership with Fly By Jing and we put their chili crisp in our salmon and that partnership is like, couldn't be better from any angle. It's like it was so easy from a recipe development perspective. And also, I'm very close with the Fly By Jing team, so it was just we worked very well in concert and then the collaborative product just has continued to pay dividends and dividends to both brands as we both continued to grow. Obviously Fly By Jing is leagues ahead of where we're at, but it just has been great and has allowed us to create a really profitable, amazing product. So that's like what our collaborations will look like in the future.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:58] That's great. So that's going to continue that partnership.

Becca Millstein [00:20:01] I mean I think our customers would murder us.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:20:04] Yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:20:04] It seems really popular. And did I read you shared an office with them or something?

Becca Millstein [00:20:08] I'm going to meet Jing for dinner tonight. We share an office. We're just like very close. Jing is an extremely close adviser to me.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:20:16] That's great.

Becca Millstein [00:20:16] Yeah. Feel very lucky.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:20:18] That's really great. So, I realize these partnerships, you know, they have to make sense for the business and they have, they're evolving and growing. And so, you know, we mentioned Kvaroy, you use for the salmon and then Riverence and you use for trout. And I know Riverence well. And I know Kvaroy, of course, really well because we actually partnered with them as well. How do you navigate at the beginning coming from the music industry, having this idea? How do you navigate the sustainability and responsibility about seafood when you're sourcing your products? How did you do that at the beginning? Because people pay attention to where their fish was caught and it's very important and who caught it, etc. You know, you mentioned the MSC and the ASC and so do you rely on certain advisors or certain sustainability guidelines around the sustainability of the seafood that you source?

Becca Millstein [00:21:05] Yes, very much so. So, at the beginning, I mean, you know,

Julie Kuchepatov [00:21:11] Yeah, I can imagine.

Becca Millstein [00:21:12] I mean, seafood sustainability is so endlessly complex, and I say endless because it changes on a year to year basis. You know, a fishery is sustainable one year and the next year, we have concerns about it. It's like I've been on a journey of figuring out how to communicate this best to people that are not in this industry, because you never want to be the person that says sustainability is complicated and we aren't going to get into that because it's too complicated. That does nothing for anyone. And at the same time, if people want to talk about sustainability when it comes to seafood and our products, it's like we have to look at each and every product and its own sourcing story from every angle to explain why this product is sustainable, which I think is really tough because most people do not have the bandwidth to understand, okay, what are the feed inputs? Is there antibiotic use? Is it preventative antibiotic use? What is the density of the net pen? It's just very nuanced and the questions are so specific that need to be asked in order to determine these things. So I guess I would say in the beginning, obviously I knew nothing. I was very lucky to find sustainability advisors pretty early on. Jennifer Bushman was incredible, continues to be an amazing advocate of the brand, but she was definitely very instrumental in helping me get through the muddy waters of how to begin to source our products. Lindsay Haas, who worked at Sea to Table, really helped me start to read through the Monterey Bay ratings list, really familiarizing me with MSC/ASC. So I would say Jack Cheney, who is an amazing voice in the seafood sustainability space, works at FishWise. These people have all been super, super helpful to me. I think in the past I even tried to do it by myself more. And these days I'll just send, if there's a farm I'm considering or a fishery I'm considering, I will just send all the relevant information to one or a few of my sustainability advisors and ask them to generate a report for us. Because it is so honestly complicated. All the dynamics of when these fisheries are being rated, why certain ones have been rated and others not.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:21] Yeah.

Becca Millstein [00:23:22] So I would say these days and I'm sorry, this is so long winded.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:26] No, it's okay.

Becca Millstein [00:23:27] As I mentioned this quarter, we, for the first time, which is ridiculous, got put in touch directly with MSC and ASC. And they have been very, very helpful in helping us because we're now, you know, we're always building new products, building new supply chains, and they've been really helpful in vetting new partners. Now they can just say, okay, these are the MSC chain of custody certified canneries that we're working with and put us in touch. And that's a huge breakthrough for us. But I do work with a few people because you want to be able to look at each source from a few different angles.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:59] Yeah, and I think that's a great answer. It's really complicated. And the only thing I would say is that I have also partnered with the MSC. I worked very closely with the MSC and the ASC throughout my career. And, you know, they have a very specific type of fishery and farm that they represent. And there's these just thousands and thousands of farms and fisheries outside the scope, even imaginable scope of the MSC and ASC because of the real difficulty of attaining those kind of certifications. So, and I know you're not the type, I mean, we just met, but I feel like you're the type that is not going to, you know, say, this is the only thing I'm going to do.

Let's explore, like you said, each and every angle and not exclude anyone just because there might be a smaller fishery but with amazing like story, you know?

Becca Millstein [00:24:49] Exactly. And I don't know how, but that was something that I, I think I figured out really early on was that I think probably I was concerned working with some canneries in Alaska that were working for a sustainable seafood, wild Alaskan seafood, but they weren't certified. And I think that idea of not leaning on the certification was very evident to me early on. So it actually has taken us like a year and a half to even start having those conversations because I was, it's so funny, I was very kind of focused on working with partners that I believed in.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:23] Yeah, it's all complicated. It's super complicated stuff. So kudos to you for navigating and so much to juggle.

Becca Millstein [00:25:30] We started working with certain fisheries that I later learned did not fall in line with our sourcing standards as they developed and have discontinued certain products like sardines, for example. We have spent a year trying to figure out how to build more sustainable and delicious because the product sustainable, but it doesn't taste good, that doesn't help anyone. That one has been tricky for us. Quite a few species. It's hard to build a supply chain that you feel really, really strong about for the long term.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:59] Yeah, so good job on that figuring out the balance because as you know and as I said, it's really, really complicated. I mean, I know back in the day when I was working with Russian salmon fisheries, we could do everything we could to get them into MSC and get chain of custody and then they fell flat on the quality and we're like, Well, why are we doing all this if you can't even, you know, you got to have a quality product in order for people to buy it. I think, you know, I don't want to say first and foremost, but that's like one of the key things that you need to have down, right?

Becca Millstein [00:26:30] Honestly, it is first and foremost, at least for our clients that we've done, serving quality is number one. And I think that's not to talk about how hard my job is, but like having to build a product, we have to do what we have to take into consideration, obviously quality first and foremost, but if the sustainability story is not there in a way that we can clearly articulate and stand behind it, that doesn't work. So it's the quality, it's the presentation. For example, we ran into a situation where we had finally found certified sustainable sardine fishery, but the cannery that could source it could only pack two sardines in the can.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:12] Oh.

Becca Millstein [00:27:13] And it did not have a pleasing presentation. So, it's the quality, sustainability, the presentation, and the price point and hitting all four of those marks is extremely important.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:26] Yeah, I can't even imagine. Well, that's why I'm not in the tinned seafood business because I just don't have. I do. I literally. I know I could never. I couldn't succeed.

Becca Millstein [00:27:36] Oh, yes you could.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:36] I don't know. We'll see. So, I'm going to skip around because we're talking about seafood and your kind of marketing and brand presence, which really took the country, I want to say, by storm. Are you selling internationally, by the way?

Becca Millstein [00:27:49] We are not. I mean, we're just we're pretty laser focused on building out in the U.S. market. The next will be Canada and that will be next year. But it's so much building and expansion to do in other states and have so much more left. We're just really honing on that.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:28:04] Gotcha. And your Instagram, by the way, is also incredible. And so at one point, was it last summer or the summer before someone posted, I think, or you posted, I think it's someone else posted like "hot girls eat tinned seafood."

Becca Millstein [00:28:16] Yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:28:16] That was someone else, right? Was it you?

Becca Millstein [00:28:18] It was a woman on Twitter. Name was Layla or Lila. I'm forgetting her last name, which is terrible. But she posted it and then I took a picture of it and reposted on our social media. And then our illustrator had the brilliant idea to put it on the back of our two first merch pieces, which are a shirt and a tote. And then it was just kind of a big ole moment.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:28:38] It went crazy, right?

Becca Millstein [00:28:40] It definitely, it had a moment, which, crazily enough, has not subsided.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:28:45] Really. Okay. Because I want to talk about that really quick. So I did a little research. I mean, of course, I've heard, you know, the "hot girl summer" and the "hot girl walk." So, it's really morphed. But originally it was the rapper Megan Thee Stallion made the terms "hot girl" and "hot girl shit" famous in 2019 and it really, really blew up after that. And then, of course, you know, "hot girls eat tinned seafood" also around that time later, but still in line with that blowing up. So, I'm going to read this quick little statement. So according to author Ebony Perro, "Megan stressed self-representation, arguing that real hot girl shit equals being free and unapologetically you. Showing off your confidence. Hying up your friends. Not taking shit from nobody, etc." and then adding, "A few months later. She further explained that being," (so "she" is Megan Thee Stallion), "explained that being a hot girl is about being unapologetically you, having fun, being confident, living your truth, being the life of the party, etc. and that her inclusion of 'etc.' in her tweets leave space for hot girls to self-define. Her tweets articulate hot girlhood principles, being free, unapologetic, confident, and seeking joy that are woven through her lyrics and adhered to and expanded upon by her followers." So, in the spirit of self-definition, what does being a hot girl who eats tinned fish mean for Fishwife?

Becca Millstein [00:30:11] Oh my gosh, that is so funny. Well, I would say this kind of top of mind because I was having conversations with an investor today, which is, I think one of the trends that we are really seeing all around for new CPG companies in the U.S. are ones that are inspired by European culinary and just like lifestyle culture. And this gets to the point of the hot girl thing where it's like I think the European and the hot girl thing share an element of casual, easy elegance or fun sparkle. So, I think when you think about a tinned fish-specific hot girl, it's someone who comes home, cuts a baguette, like sprinkles

some olive oil on it, cracks a tin, and it seems like really easy and fun and a little bit sexy. And that is, I think, what attracts people to tinned fish a lot of the time and also this European style of eating and also like the concept of hot girl behavior. That is my personal very tin fish-informed take on the whole movement.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:31:16] Yeah, that's amazing. It just keeps going, right? You said people keep bringing it up.

Becca Millstein [00:31:20] Yeah, it's crazy. We sold out of these shirts last summer almost instantaneously, and people kept asking for me to bring them back, and I was like, No, I don't want to beat this dead horse. Like the hot girl tinned fish thing has happened. And this past summer. I started to see press articles coming out again, being like, it's still the hot girl tinned fish summer.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:31:43] That's so funny.

Becca Millstein [00:31:44] Yeah, I guess it is. So, we've launched the shirts again and they continue to sell out.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:31:50] That's amazing. The whole thing is just so interesting to me, and I think you're right around the connection between this European ease of eating fish out of a can, but good fish, right, really, really good and like really good oil, olive oil and all that stuff. And then I think that's reflected in a lot of your advertisements or your Instagram photos where, you know, there's a picnic blanket out and then there's the bottle of wine. And I think there's something about that that's really, well, sexy, right? And then people want that.

Becca Millstein [00:32:17] People want it. It's aspirational, as they say.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:32:20] I do. I want that, too.

Becca Millstein [00:32:21] I want it. I love it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:32:24] I love it. Okay. So, we're going to change gears here a little bit to talk about gender equality in the seafood industry. And as a woman who's in the seafood industry, which is great because this is a great question for you, because you're very new to this industry and I know you were at the Boston Seafood Show last year and I ended up missing you somehow because I knew you were there. I know you were with Jen Bushman. Somehow, we didn't cross paths, which is unfortunate, but we'll change that in the next year. At the next year's event will be sure to run into each other. Here's a question I'm going to ask, which I think is interesting, and I'm really excited to hear your answer. So SAGE is about building gender equality and empowering women in the seafood industry. So, can you share one or two aspects of the seafood industry and its culture that may contribute to inequality in the sector, in your experience? What are some of the things that the industry itself can do to lessen these inequalities?

Becca Millstein [00:33:18] Okay. I hope this will be, I don't think it will be, a controversial take. The most glaring thing about the seafood industry as an outsider, in my opinion, is how horrible the brands are and the fact that there's really no brand affinity in the seafood space. I would say specifically, as it relates to consumer-packaged goods, brands like obviously there are amazing, you know, national seafood restaurants like Red Lobster, etc. But when you Google, "what are the best seafood brands," Nothing shows up. It's all it's

just a list of restaurants show up, which is hilarious because it's an enormous category. So there have been no brands that are compelling in the seafood industry, in my opinion, or very, very few. And this is like I'm talking about sort of heritage brands, like there are amazing new startups in the seafood or marine vegetable space, but I think it has not been a very appealing industry for more brand-focused marketing minds to join in, or it just hasn't been a very interesting industry to join I would say in a lot of ways, maybe from a sustainability perspective, I just don't think a lot of young blood was coming into the seafood industry. Like not a lot of people graduate from college being like, I really want to work in marketing in the seafood industry or in the seafood industry period. So anyway, I think it's a very family-run industry which has been amazing for me to witness. Almost every one of our partners is a multigenerational family business.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:01] Yeah.

Becca Millstein [00:35:02] Kvaroy. Two of the new canneries we're starting to work with overseas, like Acme Seafoods, Taylor Shellfish. A lot of these businesses are multigenerational. So first of all, I think that just one thing that people don't necessarily know about the seafood industry is how family-run they are and how it gets passed down generation to generation. I think that is a huge part of just like how the seafood industry is built. So like try to draw this all together. It's been extremely meandering. I think there's a self-fulfilling prophecy where there are no interesting brands in the seafood industry, so not a lot of young people, I would say young women especially, think, oh, I want to go work in seafood. And because there are not as many women leading at the seafood companies, the brands continue to not be compelling because I do think women generally tend to be better marketers. I think just better at listening and therefore better at listening to consumers. Then this self-fulfilling prophecy where I think because there are no interesting brands, not a lot of interesting young minds come to the space and then it perpetuates, so all that is to say. I'm very excited because I think there are so many new seafood brands, hopefully like Fishwife, like Scout, like Aqua, like Neptune Snacks, Atlantic Sea Farms, that are building these incredible new companies and really showing how exciting seafood or sea vegetable companies can really be. And I think that will bring more women to the space. And obviously, as you get more women in leadership roles, it self-perpetuates from there. So I'm very optimistic about the industry as I look around it. The new seafood and sea vegetable companies that are showing up, a lot of a lot of strong female forces in there.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:36:49] Yeah, I think that's a great answer. And I think that's a really good observation around the family history of the seafood industry as really family based. And, you know, a lot of these companies, a lot of the major companies even, are still run by families and they have these legacies where they're passing down, I call it the baton of knowledge, down to usually, generally the sons. And really not, grooming is such a horrible word, but, you know, grooming the daughters or anyone else in the family to take over the family business. And I think that's changing. And I do also have the hope for the future that you do, because that's really what SAGE is about, is to create this more welcoming industry for women and gender minorities because we need that if we want to survive, honestly, and evolve because the people that are running the industry now and I'm not dissing anyone, but it's this old traditional thought that is again clinging to these shelf stable tuna cans that really, you know, could use some innovation. And with diversity comes innovation. I also, again, share your enthusiasm and your hope. And just by watching all of you guys and the ones that you just mentioned, like coming up into the industry and really thriving. So, I'm super stoked. You started your career in the music industry and I'm curious. I ask this of everybody who might have come from a different

industry and entered seafood for whatever reason. Are there any similarities that you would point to? Clearly, I think the music industry is probably also run by a lot of older white dudes. That would be a similarity. But any other similarities between the music industry and seafood that you can think of?

Becca Millstein [00:38:31] Yeah. I mean, I would say my skillset from the music industry very much carried over into this industry. So, brand community building. Brand partnerships. These things have the same relevance in the seafood industry as they do in the music industry. It's really about business building. There are a ton of similarities between building an artist brand and identity and those experiences I had there and what it's been like to build the Fishwife brand and community, like, it's basically a parallel experience, except Fishwife is way more fun

Julie Kuchepatov [00:39:06] Right! That's awesome.

Becca Millstein [00:39:06] But I would say in the industry is, yeah, I mean, I was thinking about the gender equality question and it's like, it's every industry. It really is. I mean, I think about my cousin who got her PhD in neuro pharmaceuticals and how much harder it is for her than it is for me being in the startup ecosystem. Every industry is rampant with sexism in various areas, you know, and I would say the music industry and the seafood industry are no exception. I will say I do feel very lucky and I feel like my gender has not been a deterrent or has not had any negative effect on our experience starting the business. I would probably say the opposite because I think people are so excited about women-run companies, especially in industries where there have not been many. So I do think I was like, as a very privileged white woman, it has not make any claim, no discrimination. I think that the forces of sexism are just there in every and they're pervasive.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:07] Yeah, I think you and Crystal are sound and audio engineer could compare notes later because Crystal also, coming from a fisheries background and then having a real love of music that really kind of shaped their path to get here today, too. So, there's a lot of things that are in common. And Crystal, I know you're on mute, but I'm just going to throw that out there. We're kind of winding down our time here, and I just want to be conscious of the time. So, I have a couple more questions if you don't mind. How can SAGE, Seafood and Gender Equality, help you as a woman in seafood?

Becca Millstein [00:40:45] I mean, just being connected to other women in seafood, that's definitely still does feel like a super small minority. I have a bunch of women friends who run food CPG companies, but I still, I think it's a very unique experience still meeting other women in the seafood industry. Like very, very, very unique. And, you know, every time I every time that I'm with a woman that works in the seafood industry, we could talk for days about what it's like. So, I think just continuing to build that network of women in this industry, which is not a huge group, women leaders in this industry, I just think the more that SAGE can do, what we all can do, bringing that group together is really, really beneficial.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:41:29] That's great. And well, you'll be excited to know that we are launching. This is still in the early development stages, but we are going to launch next year a, for lack of a better description of it, it's a women's and gender minorities networking group called The Bloom, and that is going to be kind of a cool monthly, virtual, sometimes in person, way for women to connect and share their problems, some solutions, learn about things. You know, I think a lot of people are yearning for first of all, some networking

like you just mentioned, and meeting other people, but also learning about other parts of the supply chain. I've heard from others that this is something that they would really like to know. Some people who are selling seafood might not know a lot of the other things that are happening on the ground, or they might not know about this or that or the other not have these opportunities. So, I'm really looking forward to launching that and developing that. So stay tuned for that, please. I hope you join it.

Becca Millstein [00:42:31] I love it. I love it. I mean, supply chain of the most opaque and complex and it's also the most fascinating.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:42:37] Yeah, I totally agree. And so, like I said, we're launching that next year, and everyone keep their ears peeled for that announcement. So SAGE, again, is about uplifting and amplifying diverse voices in the seafood industry. And so this podcast is one of the main ways that we do this. So, I'd like to give you the opportunity to uplift someone. So, who would you like to uplift and why?

Becca Millstein [00:43:00] I would love to uplift my friend Sachi Singh, who started Rootless, which is an amazing health company. She makes these delicious health bites that have seaweed in them as their dominant ingredient. And I just think it's such an innovative idea. I think she's genius and everyone should check out Rootless and Sachi, she and the company are so cool.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:43:23] That's great. I know Rootless. I'm aware of Sachi. We'll definitely put a link to Rootless in the show notes when this episode is released. So, I just want to ask two more things. Some of the offerings that Fishwife offers are smoked Atlantic salmon and smoked rainbow trout and wild caught smoked albacore tuna. Is there any other exciting fish that we can look forward to in the future that you could share with us? And if you can't share, that's fine. I need to ask.

Becca Millstein [00:43:53] Oh, my gosh. Of course. Well, we just released Rainbow Trout Jerky Gems. That was two weeks ago.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:43:58] Yes, I saw that.

Becca Millstein [00:43:59] I mean all our products are quite sustainable, but this one really takes it to the next level because we've taken a part of the rainbow trout that's usually not utilized because it's so tiny, the tenderloin of the rainbow trout. So that is a really exciting and interesting product. And then we are saying it's a very big deal, but it's a very small fish in January, so I won't say anything else.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:23] You're going to leave it at that. It's a very big deal, but a very small fish. Ok.

Becca Millstein [00:44:27] Yes. And I think it will be our most fun one.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:31] In January.

Becca Millstein [00:44:33] In January.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:33] We're going to also keep our ears open for that. So how can we find you online?

Becca Millstein [00:44:38] You can find us online on our website at eatfishwife.com or we're on all social platforms just @fishwife. So that is the best way. And were in like specialty stores all over the country.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:53] That's amazing.

Becca Millstein [00:44:54] Starting to launch in our first national grocery channels this quarter and onward. So keep an eye out for us on your shelf.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:45:02] Definitely. We'll keep an eye out. Wrapping this up, I want to say thank you, Becca, for coming on. It's so overdue. And I'm just thrilled that we finally got a chance to talk to each other and now we know each other. So I'm definitely looking forward to seeing you somewhere in real time. And definitely seeing Fishwife canned, tinned products on the shelves. I actually live really close to a fish market. They are there.

Becca Millstein [00:45:27] Amazing.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:45:27] Yeah. So, I'm super excited to have you on and I just wish you all the best.

Becca Millstein [00:45:32] Thank you so much, Julie. I am so grateful for the work that you do and for having us on the pod, really appreciate it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:45:38] Thank you for tuning in to The Conch podcast. It would be amazing if you could take just 2 seconds to leave a review and share this podcast with your ocean loving friends. Thank you.

Speaker 3 [00:45:52] The Conch podcast is a program of Seafood and Gender Equality or SAGE. Audio production, engineering, editing, mixing and sound design by Crystal Sanders-Alvarado for Seaworthy. The theme song "Dilation" is written and performed by Satan's Pilgrims. Funding for The Conch podcast is generously provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and Builders Initiative.