

The Conch Sz2Ep1JulieQuiCOMPLETE.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:03] Hello, my name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast, The Conch. We are trekking along on our journey with this podcast, talking about seafood and the ocean. And most importantly, we're showcasing some incredible women working in the seafood sector, sharing their journeys, examining the challenges they faced and the triumphs they've achieved. Today, we are excited, extremely excited I must say, to have an amazing guest and friend joining us, Julie Qiu! Julie is an international oyster expert, educator, and founder of In a Half Shell, an oyster appreciation website. She is also the marketing director of Australis Aquaculture, a leading producer of ocean farmed barramundi that is marketed as the Better Fish brand. Welcome and thank you, Julie, for joining me today on the Conch. Let's begin.

Julie Qiu [00:00:50] Thank you, Julie. I'm so excited to be here.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:53] I am so happy you are here too. And I just have to say we met each other a long time ago at an event in Atlanta, Georgia, during Hurricane Irma. And I remember we were at the same restaurant and you were being served these giant platters of oysters and taking photos, and there was kind of flurry of activity around you. And I was like, Who is that? I need to meet her. So tell me a little bit about your life as an oyster expert and what drew you to this niche?

Julie Qiu [00:01:20] Yeah, totally. I mean, I think I remember that moment was at Kimball House, which I have to give a shout out for. It's one of my favorite oyster bars in the country. And it was like an oyster paparazzi moment. So you caught me at my best

Julie Kuchepatov [00:01:33] Red carpet oyster paparazzi moment.

Julie Qiu [00:01:36] Yeah, totally. I guess that is part of the nice, glamorous life of being an oyster expert, but there's really a lot more to it. And I guess, you know what drew me to oysters to begin with? Well, there's really, in my perspective, really nothing to dislike about oysters. They are always intriguing to me. They taste amazing. They are very nuanced, just like wine. And I guess I would get into wine, but I haven't too little of a tolerance to really pursue that. And they're so sustainable and nutritious for you. So in a short gist, like that's really what captured my attention at first, but later down the road, I started to dive deeper into the industry. The people who produce the oysters, the places where they come from and actually just meeting the oyster farmers and scientists, chefs along the way. That's kind of what built this calling for me. A lot of people know me definitely as an oyster expert and I describe myself as an oyster sommelier. It's truly self-taught just by eating a lot of oysters and asking a lot of annoying questions to a bunch of people. But I think it's, you know, In a Half Shell has really been the culmination of my professional work experience, really deep passion for great food, and just like kind of a sense of curiosity where it just sparked this interest in me to create this platform where I will post content and now teach a lot of classes. And I also do consulting too for a variety of businesses about oyster appreciation, specifically for consumers and industry stakeholders.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:15] So that's a really great back story and lead in to your life as an oyster expert, and I'm just so fascinated by this whole thing and you've really, really taught me so much on your blog and on your Instagram, which is amazing, by the way. And so, you know, you've been recognized for this for your expertise really far and wide and for your work in advancing oyster appreciation. So you've been featured in Vogue, which is incredible and actually really amazing. And Somebody Feed Phil on Netflix, which

actually, you can tell me a little bit about that because I'm not sure what that is, but it sounds like your drive to become the oyster expert was really completely self-driven. So can you talk a little bit about the big breaks or hurdles that you faced along the way in creating your oyster empire?

Julie Qiu [00:04:00] Yes, absolutely. So I think specializing oysters was something that I didn't really set out to do from the get go. I don't know if I quote unquote fell into it, but it just seemed to be a natural culmination of a lot of things. So rewinding I was born in Shanghai, and so my whole family is from Shanghai and a big component of Shanghai cuisine is around seafood. So I grew up at a very young age eating all sorts of types of shellfish, fish. But when we immigrated to the U.S. when I was five, I spent most of my time growing up in the Midwest, in Indiana, where, you know, not a ton of fresh seafood in the 90s. So but that interest and sort of the innate love for seafood has always been there. It wasn't until kind of when I went after graduating from college and I moved to New York City and started having a little more discretionary income, I started becoming more curious about food and then cooking food and attending food events because there's just so many out here. And oysters, for one reason or another, just really caught my attention. And maybe it was because I remember an outing as a teenager going to visit my uncle in San Diego and ordering like a platter of two dozen oysters trying to be fancy AF and we ended up eating. That was the first time I had them, and I was just enamored by how amazing some of them tasted and then others tasted like kind of funky. And that just stuck with me. And in New York, there were so many oyster happy hours around. It was like every bar had them. And also, there was a new group, like a meetup group called New York Oyster Lovers. So those things just happen at the same time that I was just exploring food and it just made a lot of sense. Fortunately, there was that small community in New York that I was able to latch on to and learn from. But when I was trying to get more information about the oysters that I was eating on these big menus like Grand Central Oyster Bar, there would be like 20 different types of oysters. I'm just thinking to myself, like, what is exactly the difference between all these other than they're the names of places I never been. And there were few books that I found on the subject, which is great. But at the time, there was really no online community or website that you could really go to to get that information. So I guess, like in 2009, I started to just document my own oyster adventures on my website. At the time, it was actually a food blog covering everything and anything related to food. But more and more I started to realize, like a lot of my posts are just around oysters because of this meetup group and because they were so prevalent in New York. And so later that year, I made the decision to just focus in on oysters. And that was sort of the start of me just becoming known for it's that girl who eats oysters and writes about them in her blog and so I would have the name of the oyster, my flavor tasting notes. If Rowan Jacobsen in a Geography of Oysters wrote about them, I would actually comment like this was very similar to how he described it. This is like, this is totally not at all how he described it. And that seemed to be fascinating to enough people that I ended up getting a following for that. And then it turned into me visiting the oyster farms first around New York and Long Island and then it expanded to Martha's Vineyard and the Cape. And then Maine was a huge summer destination like vacation spot for myself and my husband, then boyfriend, now husband. And it just sort of naturally occurred with my life. And the media features like the article with Vogue and work that I've done with other publications, by the way, Somebody Feeds Phil is a really fun show that's hosted by Phil Rosenthal. I believe he was, don't quote me on this, but I believe he was a producer on Modern Family or one of these really popular shows and he loves to eat. He's such a great guy, so he goes around the world kind of like Anthony Bourdain, but much less attitude and edge. And he goes around and talks about people eating different things, exploring different cultures. And for the New York City episode, through a series of random events, I was asked to lead

him and Al Roker on an oyster journey on Islet, which is this beautiful oyster bar on a boat parked just a few blocks from me in Brooklyn. And so that was really cool, because that was one of the first times when I was recognized as an oyster expert nationally to a really big audience beyond just my oyster community. And since then, I've just been loving teaching other people who are just as curious about oysters as I was from beginning. Like, how do you enjoy them? What is there to know? And practical things like, how do you shuck them? How do you store them? What to look for when you buy them? And it really gives me joy in seeing that light bulb moment happen in people's eyes, because once I know that they had that first good experience, they're much more likely to keep consuming it and also telling their friends about it. And at the end of the day, this is really to help support an industry that needs quite a bit of support and, you know, to celebrate this really healthy, delicious and sustainable food.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:34] So it sounds like the experience you had with Phil and Al Roker, which is so random. I think maybe it's really New York-ish. I don't know. It sounds kind of very New Yorky. Eating oysters on a barge or docked boat..

Julie Qiu [00:09:46] It's actually a fancy schooner. Oh, OK. Very fancy.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:52] Fancy schooner. But sounds like that was a big break on the way, on your journey, building your oyster empire. Were there any hurdles that you experienced? Like you mentioned, the industry is challenged. What are some of the challenges? And I would actually venture to say climate change is probably a big one, right? But how does that affect you and your oyster documentation in the travel that you do around oysters?

Julie Qiu [00:10:13] Yeah, that's a really good question. And I guess I think about hurdles in a couple different ways. Internally, one of the hurdles that I found to be true, and I guess this is a strength and a weakness, is actually investing my time to create my own platform versus pitching these stories to established media outlets. So I never thought of myself as a writer like my livelihood doesn't depend on my writing, but I really like doing this and I want to kind of create this for myself. And so when In a Half Shell started, it was really a passion project, a hobby, and I really love digital photography. I had the skills to build my own blog fairly easily. I started web designing when I was 15, so this came very naturally to me to create my own website, my own blog, putting my own images on there and going out and just doing what I wanted to do versus kind of having the idea of like, this is what I would love to get paid for down the line. So when I started that blog, though, it was really great, but I found a point where I felt like had I gone and pitched these stories to other media, my level of credibility could have jumped very quickly versus me being an oyster blogger. It was taken not as seriously in my mind as it could have been, but ultimately after years and years of consistently creating great content and telling these stories that people find really fascinating and really trying to be a huge subject matter expert, but in an approachable way, I think later down it just took a lot longer to establish the level of credibility and trust that I have today. So I think that was less of a hurdle, but just more like a let's just stretch this race for you, right? Just a little bit longer. And that's fine because I enjoy the entire process, but I think I probably would have done more with less time if I went a different route. And I actually just thought of another big break with all this, because when people ask me, like, how did you even become an oyster sommelier? I'm like, listen, I worked in advertising before the seafood industry, which I can get into a little bit later. And that salary, like on an entry level advertising gig in New York, was so low. Like, I couldn't have even broached oysters had there not been oyster happy hours, thankfully. And when I was in my advertising job, I was also placed on a really unique, very special market

research project for a very big energy company. And that afforded me this insane opportunity to travel the world doing basically focus groups in, I think, 17 different cities in 11 different countries in a span of six weeks. But when I wasn't working, I would go out and try and find oysters because I had my oyster blog at the time. And because of that trip, I established a very unique perspective on global oyster appreciation and just culture. Oyster culture everywhere, and what I came to realize very quickly was every single country had this love for oysters and seafood in general, in some places, especially around oysters, but nobody seemed to be connected to each other in the same way as other food groups or even in the alcohol industry. So I just sort of took it upon myself there to also make that connection in a place where there was none but I'm like this seems so obvious to start documenting and creating these connections and making this community happen.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:13:48] I love that. So it's really like your website and your efforts, which, you know, you mentioned have taken longer, you know, because you actually chose that route, right? And you chose not to really try to pitch every media outlet on the planet. But, you know, just to really build your website in a way that does create that community almost organically. And you mentioned that you'd started doing websites at like 15, which is amazing and you know, your website *In a Half Shell* and your Instagram, by the way, also is a treasure trove. I mean, literally a treasure trove of information about oysters and how to enjoy them. And I learn so much all the time, and it is beautiful. And you know, you mentioned about photography, you have such a great eye and you know how to photograph food and champagne and you know, everything that you're photographing. It's just all so wonderful and delicious looking. So I'm curious, what are the three key things that we should know about oysters when we are ordering them or looking to try them? Because, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think that's probably a hesitation for a lot of people around even trying them is that they just simply don't know what to expect or they're scared, or they just have no idea. So what are some key things that we should know about them?

Julie Qiu [00:14:57] Yeah, totally. So it's all about context. So you're either approached with Can I buy these oysters and enjoy them at home? In which case the biggest question that comes up is, how do I open these things and shucking oysters is, I guess, it's kind of like skiing, so I've been told, I'm not a skier, but I know it's easy to learn but difficult to master. So you can pick up shucking and you will be perfectly safe as long as you have hand protection and a correct oyster knife. And, you know, having that oyster purchased from a reliable source, so there would be no qualms about getting food poisoning. That is just a very, very, very rare occurrence. And just practicing how to shuck is a huge thing of around how you continuously enjoy oysters at a pretty reasonable cost as well. Because when we go out for oysters, aside from oyster happy hours, these things are not cheap per se, but they're coming in at like three dollars now, maybe four dollars apiece. There's a really good reason for that, but you know, it's a little daunting when they're so expensive. You don't really want to invest a lot of money in something that you're not sure if you're going to like, right? So the best advice for trying to enjoy oysters at home for me is where you're buying the oysters. I would say if you don't know exactly what you like, maybe first go into a raw bar where they do offer a lot of different types of oysters and trying each one. For me, I always encourage people to eat oysters with nothing at all, because that is the best way to taste the essence of an oyster. That said, sometimes the salinity and the flavor is a little overwhelming for people, so I guess you can use a little lemon mignonette. No cocktail sauce, though, that is a huge rule. But also when you're going out for oysters, another thing that people don't seem to necessarily realize is how much power that oyster shucker has on your level of happiness. And I mean that by when you have a really good shucker, they know whether or not this oyster is worth serving and also to present it in a

way that is pristine. There's no like pieces of shell or grit in the oyster. It's perfectly cut, so the texture isn't off because there's sometimes when you can get served oysters and they literally look like scrambled eggs in a shell. They're not supposed to look like that. And when they come out perfectly shucked, it gives you such a better experience which will help you go out and seek future experiences. I've had so many people tell me that, Oh, I don't like oysters. They taste like snot. It's like, actually, they don't, it's just you didn't get a well shucked oyster. Like, oh yes. So when they do, it's a completely different situation. So I think the final thing is, well, I guess to that point, it's like value your oyster shuckers and your oyster service professionals. It is also the reason why they are costing so much because it's already labor intensive to produce oysters out on the farm. And then it's also labor intensive to serve them in a restaurant, to hold them, and to know how to open them, know how to kind of take care of them takes a lot of skill. So that's the other thing. So I guess recognize and appreciate the value of the oysters that you're paying a lot for.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:18:18] Yeah, that's a really good point, and I think that extends to any real food or seafood is that, you know, let's think about the people behind these oysters. Let's think about the people that grow them and nurture them and harvest them, but also the people that process them. And I mean, honestly, an oyster shucker at a restaurant is also a fish processor, right? They are literally processing that oyster for you right in front of your face, usually. So. Yeah, I mean, that's a huge message from me and from SAGE, it's like, let's recognize the people behind our seafood, and that's a really good point. You know, and we should be paying for labor. So that's why these things might be a little bit more expensive, but it's worth it in the end because you're going to get a better product and have a better experience.

Julie Qiu [00:18:58] Absolutely. I can totally make similarities to a really nice sushi restaurant. You know, you really want to know a good sushi chef or even a mixologist. They add value to every single cocktail. You can have a terrible cocktail or you have an amazing cocktail. So the parallels are there definitely in other aspects of our food experiences. So I'm a huge advocate for raising the awareness of how important that oyster service professional is.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:26] Yeah, that's such a great point. I love it. And you know, I love oysters, but I really want to talk about some other stuff now and specifically, we mentioned at the beginning of this podcast that we met and you were having your oyster paparazzi moment, but you're also marketing director of Australis Aquaculture, which is the leading producer of ocean farmed barramundi that's marketed under the Better Fish brand. And so, by the way, you know, in my previous job, we did work together on a project with Australis, but also we run in the same circles because we're in the seafood business and seeing each other at conferences and stuff has just been really great and we've developed a really great friendship. I think so. I'm interested in hearing more about Australis and how you ended up there. And you mentioned, you know, starting out your career in advertising. And so how did you actually end up at a farm, essentially, right?

Julie Qiu [00:20:14] Yeah, totally. So let me think about this because I think I couldn't have gotten my job with Australis had I not done my oyster blog. When I graduated, so I went to Carnegie Mellon University, and did a degree in business administration and communication design. So at the very beginning, I really wanted to do something where I could be creative and also make money doing it. I really like commercial creativity. Advertising felt it was a natural fit. It was a really exciting industry. I did two really amazing internships through the multicultural advertising internship program where I got placed in top tier New York ad agencies. I ultimately ended up getting a full time job there and spent

10 years in advertising, working first in account management and then transitioned into strategy, which I really, really love. I love strategy and working with exceptionally large and iconic brands was truly a great opportunity. However, I think at the time in that role, I love doing the work, but there was something missing about doing that work for companies that I didn't personally have a lot of heart for. And I think one thing that I learned about myself through that period time is like, I really want to feel passionate about the businesses that I work for. I wanted I guess, it's like a very millennial thing to want purpose in your job and feel like you are contributing value to a company that is doing good in the world. So because of that, and when I started In a Half Shell, I guess, as a side hobby, I was introduced to the idea of sustainable seafood through that and the fact that when I was doing this blog in my advertising job, one day, I think it was like 2013, I got an email from a gentleman named Richard Donnelly, and he worked at the Irish Sea Fisheries Board. I will not try to pronounce the official name, but the acronym is BIM. If you want to google that and what he wanted to do, he said. he found my blog randomly and I loved what I did and wanted to invite me out to Ireland to speak to their country's top oyster producers at the Galway Shellfish Festival, which is the home of the world's oyster shucking championship competition. So of course, when I got this email, I was a little surprised. It sort of read like one of those spam emails and I wasn't sure what to make of it, but it turned out that his offer was genuine and it was true. And I actually flew out there with my husband and spent a whole week touring these wonderful oyster farms around Ireland and then culminating at the festival where I did get to speak to a roomful of oyster growers looking to connect with consumers. So I think that experience made me realize that this side hustle of mine or this hobby can actually be something where I could do what I am really passionate about doing, which is marketing, branding, telling stories that connect to consumers in an industry that I was just growing a lot of interest and fascination for. So shortly after that, I left the agency world and decided to pursue my own thing, doing my own consulting work, choosing companies that I could do marketing and branding and web design for, as well as spending more time building up the content around In a Half Shell. So at that time, it was pre-Australis, but I worked on a farm, Fishers Island Oyster Farm, which is one of my favorites. They were so supportive of what I did, and they had a really great opportunity where they needed to redesign, or I guess, re-elevate their own brand, and it was the perfect project for us to collaborate on. And I think in 2015 is when I got invited to speak at a sustainable seafood blog conference and it was the first and only of its kind, but it was a really interesting conference launched by Jessie Johnson, who is another great friend of mine. And it was a room, maybe like a small conference, where Josh Goldman, the CEO of Australis, was also attending, and I believe Australis was sponsoring it in some way at the time. So we were all down there in New Orleans, and Josh, I think, heard me speak on this panel, which I think it was about pivoting from my advertising career into sustainable seafood and then he also talked about what he was doing at Australis, trying to change the world with a new farmed fish. And because of that meeting, we just started talking during the conference, and that is how I think he literally offered me the job over drinks. As crazy as that sounds like, I think that was the beginning of the conversation to work for them. And frankly, I had only had experience in my oyster blogging. I had zero seafood industry experience at the time, and I was very, very naive about thinking, Oh, fish farming, oyster farming, how different can they be?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:38] Famous last words.

Julie Qiu [00:25:42] Truly, it was a really big plunge in the deep end, but I ultimately accepted the job because I was fascinated by what they were doing in this industry that I wanted to learn more about and actually getting into just understanding the business of it all was really fascinating to me. So that was in fall of 2015 and I have been working as

their full time marketing director ever since. So, whew, that was a long winded way to tell you how I ended up working at a fish farm, starting in a Manhattan office, working on ad pitches for an insurance company.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:17] Yeah, no. That's a great that's a great story, because first of all, I'd never even heard of the Sustainable Seafood Blog Conference, which I mean, how many sustainable seafood blogs are there out there even today? Like what? Yeah. So the fact that there was the whole conference, I mean, granted, you said it was the first and probably only, right? Yes. How many are there? Not very many, which is a shame because there should certainly be more. And this leads me to kind of my next question. Well, back up just a second. So I think, you know, you're still at Australis and so clearly you were thrown off into the deep end, but you've managed to kind of thrive and survive because, you know, Australis is a very, very well known and respected brand. And you see the Better Fish brand in all supermarkets. I mean, everywhere, right? It's everywhere in the U.S., for sure.

Julie Qiu [00:27:03] Yeah, I mean, I certainly can't take credit for all of it, but I will take credit.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:07] You can take credit for some of it. Not all of it. Yeah. Yeah. And speaking of communications and marketing around seafood, you know, I've asked this question before I had another guest on who's a real amazing communicator and marketer about seafood, but her episode hasn't aired yet as of this recording. But I did ask her the same question, and in my experience, in my past career or my past job, you know, there was an overwhelming amount of the seafood companies that I worked with that really don't know how to market themselves. And I mean, honestly, a couple didn't even have a website and I was like, You know, if you guys want to compete and really sell your product and tell a story about your product, you absolutely have to know how to do that and you have to have a platform to do that as well, right? And so in your role as the marketing director at Australis and, like I said, you do an amazing job of promoting this barramundi as like the next big fish and how your farm is doing the right thing for people and the planet. So what's some advice that you can share from your experience as again being thrown in the deep end, but then coming out pretty successfully as the marketer of this great fish? And what advice would you have for companies or marketers that are working in seafood to really get their message out and tell the story in a way that's compelling.

Julie Qiu [00:28:16] Yeah, for sure. So I guess before I answer the advice part, I guess it might make sense to provide a little more context around what Australis' marketing challenges were and how I help them. So when I entered the company, it was already a 10 year old company at the time, and they were just peeking through their growth phase of the business. They had successfully proven, I guess, the proof of concept. They demonstrated that there is a demand for this type of fish produced in this way, but they were looking for more consumer momentum and more support from chefs to help popularize barramundi in a category that is just teeming with different types of species. We all know there's so many different types of species. How do you even stand out as a white fish where the entire white fish category is seen as a commodity? So they were really looking for someone to come in to help kind of carve out that space for the story and connect with consumers and chefs in a meaningful way. And not just that, but to create a brand and to kind of speak like a trade association to be promoting barramundi and their brand at the same time. So this challenge was pretty large and I guess a lot to handle for a one woman show, but I was very happy to take it on also because very curious and also very naive to go in with zero seafood experience to try and tackle this challenge. And also,

I actually think, by the way, the sidebar and emphasis point is I find that my lack of experience in seafood was a huge strength in me doing this job because I didn't have all of the preconceptions of what we could and could not do. I was coming at it from the mindset of consumer marketing. Things that we were trying to emulate were from successful consumer packaged good companies and from luxury companies, from other companies that I work through in my career, I brought that into seafood, and so that diversity in thinking about how to approach these challenges was an advantage and I fully leveraged it. So when I came in and this was when their identity was also a little bit unclear because is it Australis? Is it coming from Australia? Is this the fish that is land based farms? Long story short, the company started to invest more resources in raising barramundi in central Vietnam in the marine tropics, more so than at their original farm, which is a land based operation in western Massachusetts. That was also a complicated narrative to tease out and kind of make clear, but ultimately it was about building a brand that is clear and easy to remember, and it was true to what the company stood for and could ultimately deliver to the market. And then was the marketing and the messaging and how do you get the right message to the right person at the right time? So there was a lot to unravel there, but my approach to this and being traditionally from a brand strategy background, which I will have to say is little different than a marketing director or a marketing executive. Brand strategy is kind of foundational to doing good marketing. If you don't have a strong brand and you're trying to differentiate yourself in the market, you're going to just get lost and you're going to waste a lot of time and money. So when I came in, it was very clear, I needed to help the company establish and clearly articulate who we are, what we believed in, what problems are we trying to solve, how we were going to do this? And then taking that foundation and looking at who the actual target consumer was or the target audience and why that even matters to them. So a lot of times I see, especially in seafood, the seafood communications has been very product-centric and company-centric. And that's only just one piece of the puzzle because most consumers like you and me, we're really busy. We don't really care what else is going on unless it's relevant to us, right, on an everyday level. We tune a lot of things out. So in order to get through to people, we had to find a way to connect with our consumers. So I think the best thing that you could do in a marketing sense is really understanding what the needs of your customer is and consumer is. So fortunately, Australis, you know, instead of just being a purely wholesale brand, we sold a lot of it to wholesalers and distributors, but we also had consumer-facing retail brands, and we had the package that stood in the frozen seafood aisle in grocery stores. So that gave us an opportunity to tell a comprehensive story, maybe like a little piece of it on the package. But then I ended up building out this really robust website that had the full story that had an extensive FAQ that had every single recipe you can imagine and would love. And then doing video content and blog posts, all the resources that we hope would make consumers feel comfortable and confident in trying us and hopefully revisiting us and getting more ideas.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:33:49] That was great. So, you know, when you're talking about the challenges, especially, I really appreciate what you said about, you know, coming into this having, you know, kind of little idea about seafood, right? And that meant that you didn't have a lot of these preconceptions about how things were done in the past. And I think to me and when I think about SAGE and think about promoting new voices in the sector because they bring innovation and they don't have those preconceived notions around what we've done in the past, because what we've done in the past, a lot of times isn't working right? So, so yeah. So let's bring in some new ideas and people from other sectors, potentially, to freshen up the whole industry and the whole sector. And one of those things that's happening now is that aquaculture in general is really gaining traction in the global scheme of things in terms of it being a food system that will feed, you know, the

growing population on our planet. And it's also there's kind of this baggage attached to it a little bit. It can be very controversial. And yet because, you know, a lot of people have this misinformed and or negative view on some forms of aquaculture specifically like salmon farming, potentially, you know, in ocean ranching. So what are some of the challenges you've experienced in talking about aquaculture? And how can we make sure that people don't shy away from supporting efforts that are doing aquaculture right?

Julie Qiu [00:35:07] Yeah, really great and big question. As a company, as Australis, we focus on giving people who are willing to be open to the idea, the tools and the great product they need to feel confident. We don't spend our energy on trying to convince people who feel like aquaculture is negative. Because we're a small company, we don't have the resources to convince those minds very easily. Right? So that really isn't our goal. And I find that, you know, it's really like human nature gets in the way of our own progress because people want to do the right thing, but they are held back by their psychology. And what you see that like are really visceral images, then sensationalized headlines, they seem to resonate as more true and like actual facts. And that happens in this topic, outside of this topic, in all aspects of life, like it seems like social media is just kind of creating these crazy situations where my facts aren't the same as your facts any more. So it's really come down to just a pure emotional place. On that end, I think for us, we found it to be so much more effective to inspire positive feelings again and again with people who want to do right by their family and want to do right for themselves by eating sustainable seafood. We try to be very transparent about our practices as much as we can without getting really to in the weeds and like, it gets to a very technical level that, you know, most consumers will just sort of gloss over and start to stop reading. But we try to have this very comprehensive ethic use and get a lot of questions through our website, which I personally will answer like every single one and explain, this is how we do things. This is the reason why. And for the most part, people, once they get an explanation like that, they're very happy and supportive, and it's partly because they just want to be heard. And I think one easy thing for seafood companies to do is to actually just open up that line of communication, especially about aquaculture, where it's really trying to connect with consumers on an emotional level and on like a very real level versus this really high lofty - we're going to feed the world's narrative that I think aquaculture companies really like established because that feels like, you know, the north star of everything. But on a practical level, it doesn't hit home with a lot of families who just want to have something delicious for dinner and not have to spend a lot of time thinking about it. And I think that is one of the things where the aquaculture sector in general could do a much better job with. I feel like I admire a lot of the marketing that Alaska Seafood has done because they tap into this feeling, this emotion that is spurring more action and more persuasion than any amount of facts can do for the average consumer, right? So bringing that emotional aspect into fish farming, which means showing more of the people behind it and also listening to consumers and having that two way conversation is going to be really important to start shifting more of that mindset.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:40] Yeah, that's really good advice, and I completely agree with you. I think it's really complicated. And when you talk about emotions like people get really emotional about things that they don't even know why they're getting emotional about. So how do you balance that kind of emotional response that you hope to see, but with just enough facts that they don't gloss over them?

Julie Qiu [00:38:58] Yeah. You know, you could use peer pressure in that instance. I think that tends to work really well. That's doing really well. Yeah, if you see your friends and

family around you kind of giving you a weird look or is like, what do you mean you don't do this? That's pretty powerful as well.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:39:15] Now that's a great point. So, you know, you mentioned you've been in the seafood industry starting with your blog and your website, but then now you're actually working at, you know, for some time now, at the seafood company. So I'm going to transition a little bit to asking about you as your experience in the industry as a woman. And you know, I've asked this question before, and I'm interested in hearing this from you as well. In the episode of the Conch featuring Adriana Sanchez, she mentioned that she had a hard time finding women mentors in the seafood industry and to clarify, you know, she found plenty of men mentors and plenty of women mentors on the nonprofit side, but she couldn't really find a woman with tenure in the industry to support her as a mentor. So have you found this to be the case, or are you even looking for someone like to play a mentorship role with you? And how has your experience been with this?

Julie Qiu [00:40:02] Yeah, I would love to have a mentor, but honestly, I have not done any work to seek one out because I did look around, you know, the seafood show and at these lists of top influential seafood executives, and I didn't really see anybody who I felt like I could relate to very much. So I'm thinking, like, when I was thinking about this question, I was like, I really would love one, but I have no idea how to go about trying to find one. And I really admire Josh Goldman, who is the founder of Australis and I report directly to him. So having really a good relationship with him and kind of guiding me to understand and navigate this industry has been immensely helpful. But you know, of course, having a woman professional in seafood would be enormously valuable. I would love to continue to work and rise in this industry.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:41:01] Yeah, and your answer is very typical. I've been finding so you know, and I mentioned when Adriana and I talked about this, that that was one of the kind of activities that we were exploring when we were developing SAGE is to create some sort of mentorship program. And, you know, I think you mentioned you don't even know how to go about like finding one. While I think a lot of the women that could be mentors don't even actually know how to be a mentor, right? And so I think that's a really great role that SAGE could play in the future, and I look forward to doing that. Is there anything else that you think SAGE could do to support women in seafood other than potentially, you know, a mentorship program?

Julie Qiu [00:41:37] I guess related to mentorship is helping women navigate the career opportunities and pathways inside the industry. So I think that would come with the nature of networking around women who are committed in supporting other women in the industry. And I also personally would love to see a list, maybe of companies who are actually doing something in increasing their efforts in diversity and inclusion because I really don't know, like most of the companies are not public, so they don't really publish this information anywhere. It would just be nice to know if anybody was doing anything and highlighting the people who are actually doing a good job. I think that also inspires others to change.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:42:22] Yeah, that's a super good point. And again, a networking piece is also in SAGE's future. And another thing that we're planning is kind of creating a dialogue around gender equality at the industry level. And so that would be like, OK, and you're right, most of these companies are private, so they don't have any obligation to share any information about how they're supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion, you know, internally within their companies. But this dialogue that we hope to create would

include some sort of commitment and then public commitment, but then also an accountability piece where we would, you know, monitor and evaluate how they're doing on increasing the diversity and the equality pieces that they committed to. So that's something that I certainly want to do in the future for SAGE. Again, there's a little bit of a timing issue. There's a capacity issue, but I think that stuff is all coming down the line, and I think it's really great that you mentioned that you recognize this. So SAGE, again, stands for Seafood and Gender Equality, which is the nonprofit that I founded in 2020. We're about building gender equality and empowering women in the seafood industry, as you know. And so I was hoping that you could share one or two aspects of the seafood industry and its culture that may contribute to inequality in the sector. And what are some of the things that the industry can do to lessen these inequalities?

Julie Qiu [00:43:37] Great question. I think you just said something that made me think about how I wanted to answer this, and which is to establish public commitments and to keep monitoring them. And that is something that the seafood industry already does so much of, right, through the lens of sustainability. So I feel like it's a little ironic for an industry so focused on sustainability to have failed to prioritize the sustainability of our own workforce, to future proof what's coming next and make sure that leadership recognizes that diversity goes hand in hand with profitability and to outperform the market. Because a few years ago, McKinsey, the consulting company, did this really robust report and analyzed like over a thousand companies of their financial performance, so in profit margin and value contribution. And they found a striking correlation between diversity in their leadership of large companies and financial outperformance. And so kind of the results are there. I'm really surprised that an industry as big as seafood hasn't picked up on of that memo. A lot, it's not just equality for the sake of equality, it's to promote and continue to grow your businesses. It's about business survival at the end of the day. And I think if we can get the industry to flip their perspective on that and think of how diversity, equality and inclusion can help them achieve the business goals that they're looking to go after, that might be sort of a different way to look at the situation and to hopefully create systems and processes that would lessen the inequalities because the data is out there and other industries, if you look around like tech and even CPG and other sectors in food, have already embraced this quite a lot, and they're doing awesome. And so when you think about seafood not getting this memo and not participating, I think there's a huge opportunity cost that goes with that. And that's something that I don't think a lot of companies realize, or even if they do know what to do about it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:46:02] Right. And that's hopefully what SAGE can provide support to these companies because you're absolutely right. I mean, they're not thinking about this. And to me, that's especially interesting considering, you know, we're still dealing with the ongoing repercussions of the global pandemic, which severely altered and affected supply chains globally, right? And seafood is no exception. So how can we build solutions to those problems that have been, you know, basically ripped open because of the pandemic without this kind of a diversity of voices, because that's the innovation we need to solve these problems. And again, it's like you said, doing things, these preconceived notions of what we did in the past, that's not working. So we need to think about that. And again, it's just better for your business, right?

Julie Qiu [00:46:45] Absolutely. Actually, I, to think about it, many of my team members at Australis, and maybe this could be true for other aquaculture companies, it's like a lot of us did not come from seafood. I think we hired people who were from medical and food distribution, and retail was like our immediate sales and me coming from just outside

advertising. That's also one of the strengths is to find a team and recruit a team that just has a lot of diversity in thinking and experience.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:47:20] Yeah, I love that. That's really great advice. So this podcast is really meant to inspire women working in or thinking about starting a career in the seafood sector. And you really represent the woman that I envision as the listener of the Conch. So what advice would you give to women in the business that are in the business now or currently thinking about starting a career in this exciting sector?

Julie Qiu [00:47:40] Well, I think the most important piece of advice that I've gotten and embraced in my career is from my mom, and early on she taught me it never hurts to ask. And it's really a simple piece of advice, but I was so surprised by how correct she's been.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:47:59] Yeah. Moms are always right.

Julie Qiu [00:48:01] Moms are always right, indeed. And I think the idea behind that is, you just never know until you go for it or until you give it a try. You have no idea. And sometimes for me, I feel like sometimes we can be our biggest gatekeepers to opportunity. Right? It's not actually even an external force, but it's something that we tell ourselves, Can I do this? Is this right? Like that little voice for me always seems to pop up. So it's really about just going beyond that and just taking a chance like there's really literally nothing to lose at the end of the day. So I think that's one of the biggest things I could impart on anybody starting their career or even in their career, just to remind them just to get out there and ask that question or see if that opportunity is available. And if I found also from my experience, if you are looking for something that you want to do and want to contribute to and you keep getting the answer no or that it doesn't exist, there is no better sign that you should just invent it for yourself. Right?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:49:03] Exactly.

Julie Qiu [00:49:05] Just create it. This industry is so ripe for disruption. That's what you did. That's what I did for In a Half Shell. There's nothing wrong and it's actually I think it would be amazing to just create these jobs and roles and ways to contribute value when they don't exist already.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:49:23] Yeah, that's right. I mean, we're both innovators. I'll take that title. I'll take that title. That's really great advice, and I really appreciate you sharing that with us. And again, you've got to listen to your mom. That's definitely a good piece of advice. So again, you know, SAGE is about uplifting and amplifying diverse voices in the seafood industry, and this podcast is one of the main ways we're doing this, right, through discussions and chatting with people like you. And so here's your opportunity to uplift someone that you would like to. So who would you like to uplift and why?

Julie Qiu [00:49:53] Yeah. Well, thank you again, Julie, for this opportunity to share my story and one story that really I'm inspired by deeply because it's just so cool and awesome and everybody should know about it is Imani Black, who is the founder of Minorities in Aquaculture, and her nonprofit really seeks to create environments where women of color can be empowered and be provided with hands on aquaculture experiences, education and connections to get more diversity in the field. So her story is truly inspiring. She has done so many amazing things in her life, and to have started this nonprofit out of just quickly realizing that there weren't many women of color in aquaculture at all and there was no pathway to enter that field, necessarily. That is just

awesome, awesome work. And I just would love to support her in any way. And I think she has been really well received also by the oyster community, which I absolutely love. But I want to give my shout out to her and hopefully she can be a guest on your podcast if she isn't already.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:51:04] Yeah, we are actually talking about that right now with Imani, so there will be certainly an episode with her and I thank you so much for taking the time to mention Minorities in Aquaculture because you're right, it is such an important effort and I really look forward to having her on the show to talk about kind of more in detail about her career path and what led her to start MIA or Minorities in Aquaculture. So we're coming to the end of our time here, and I just wanted to give you a chance to let our listeners know how they can find you online.

Julie Qiu [00:51:34] Hmm, you can find me online on Inahalfshell.com, my website for a lot of oyster info or @Inahalfshellblog on Instagram.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:51:44] That's great. And so, Julie, I can't tell you enough thank you for coming on here and sharing your really great story. Your really in-depth and thorough information around oysters, which is amazing. Your journey to how you started at Australis and you and I are going to see each other in a couple of weeks. So I look forward to sitting down with you and having a couple of oysters, maybe only a couple for me. I mean, I like oysters, but I mean, I like a lot of other stuff, so I'm not going to just stick to oysters. Totally, but...

Julie Qiu [00:52:12] OK, I see how it is.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:52:14] We'll try a few other things too. But I really look forward to seeing you. And I can't tell you again, thank you enough for coming on the show, and I'm really excited to continue our friendship and see you soon.

Julie Qiu [00:52:25] It is my pleasure. Thank you so much.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:52:27] Thank you for tuning into the Conch podcast. It would be amazing if you could take just two seconds to leave a review and share this podcast with your ocean loving friends. Thank you.

Speaker 3 [00:52:41] 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.