

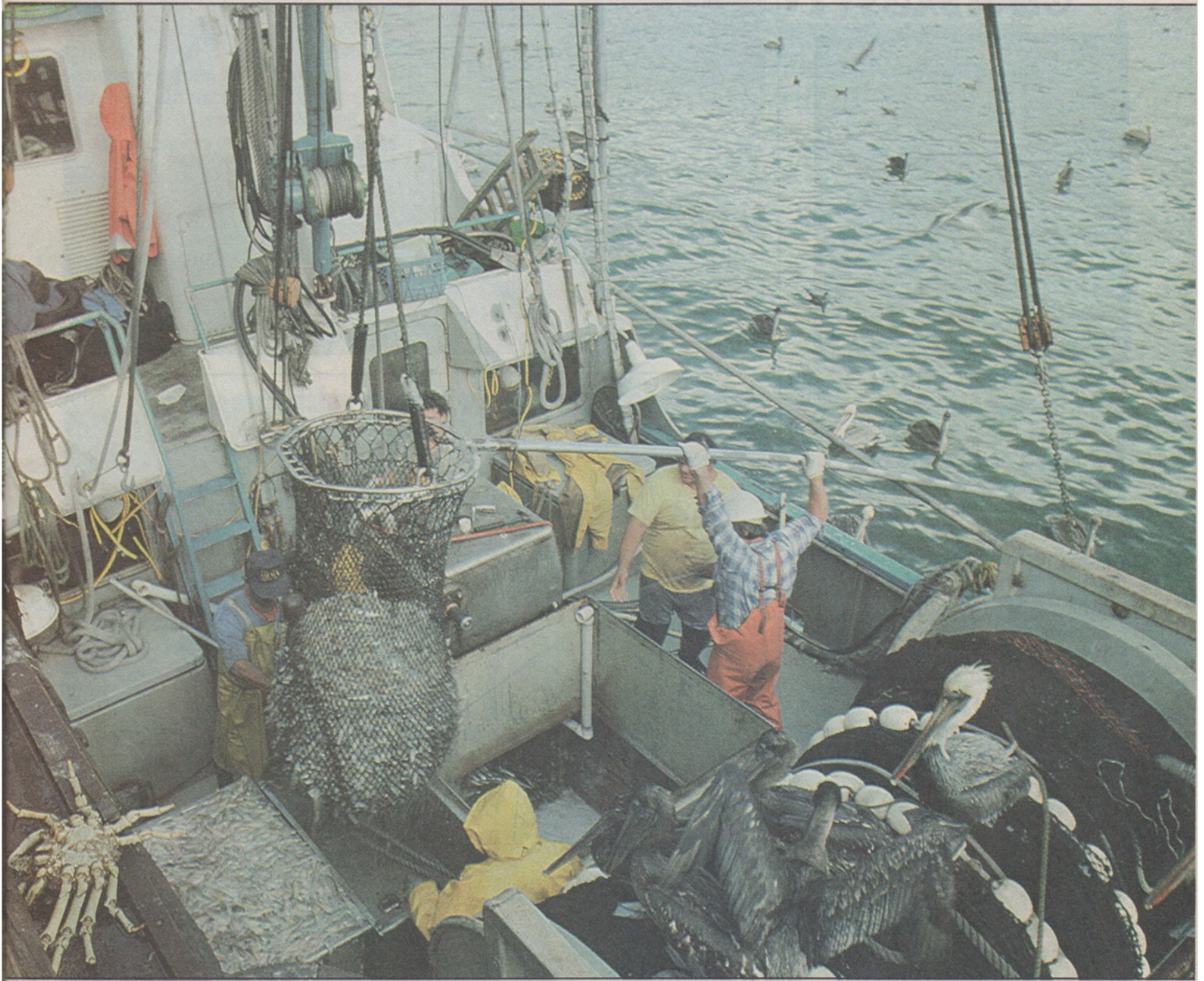


In the Footsteps of Tradition

VANESSA DeLUCA
AND STATE FISH

Raised in San Pedro, with a name synonymous with wetfish in Southern California, what else would a typical American kid do but push fish?

by D.B. Pleschner



Photos by D.B. Pleschner

“**T**his morning we’ve got fresh squid and mixed blue mackerel, medium and large—same as yesterday.” It’s 5:00 a.m. and the telephones are ringing at State Fish, occupying three stalls in the long Spanish-style building at the harbor end of 22nd Street in San Pedro, California. The building was built in the early 1950s to house the conglomerate dozen markets that, for over half a century, fishermen affec-

tionately (and not so affectionately) have nicknamed “Forty Thieves.” Notwithstanding their location, the markets have been central to the history, the color, of the Southern California wetfish industry. And at the hub of center, since 1935, is the name DeLuca—and State Fish.

“It’s a typical immigrant story,” Vanessa DeLuca says, taking a break from the obligatory morning phone routine. “Both sides of my fam-

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ily were born on a Mediterranean island. Fishermen came from Italy, settled in San Pedro, and fished." Vanessa's father, Sam DeLuca, was born here. He started working at State in 1935, when he was 10. Wetfish was a young business in those days, and as it grew, the town of San Pedro filled with fishing families; Italians and "Slavs" rivaled each other like the Hatfields and McCoys. The volume of fish in Southern California really started in the 1940s, Vanessa remarks. Born roughly a decade later, she grew up around the market, her summer playground.

“What I recall about this dock is boatload after boatload of fish, and lots of variety—seabass, barracuda, mullet, sculpin, kingfish . . . and on and on. When did I start in the fishing industry?” She chortles at the question. “Young! Genetically, I’m tuned in to fishing. On my mother’s side, my grandfather is now 89 and still mending net for an uncle who fishes.” All of the DeLuca family work in the fish industry. “And the grandchildren are here,” Vanessa says, waving a hand at the little pile of toys in one corner of an office otherwise sedately paneled and filled with executive furniture, the walls accented with French fish prints. “The kids use this office as a playroom. And at seven years old, they know blue from Spanish mackerel. They like to come here.” Candid, she adds, “That’s what keeps us going. We work well together. One of our family goals is, ‘Pass it on.’”

Standing not much over five feet tall, her hair fashionably kinked and her twinkling brown eyes wide set in a round, unmistakably DeLuca face,

The Spanish-styled stucco building at the end of 22nd Street in San Pedro was built in the early 1950s to house the conglomerate dozen wholesale fish markets.

In its heyday, the San Pedro wetfish fleet numbered 80-85 boats, often found side-tied four boats across. Today the fleet numbers 20-25 boats, about one third its former size.



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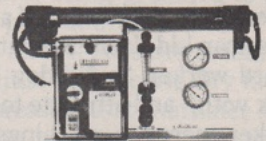
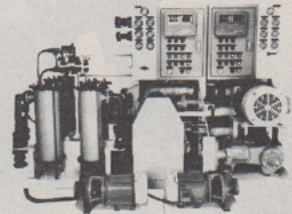
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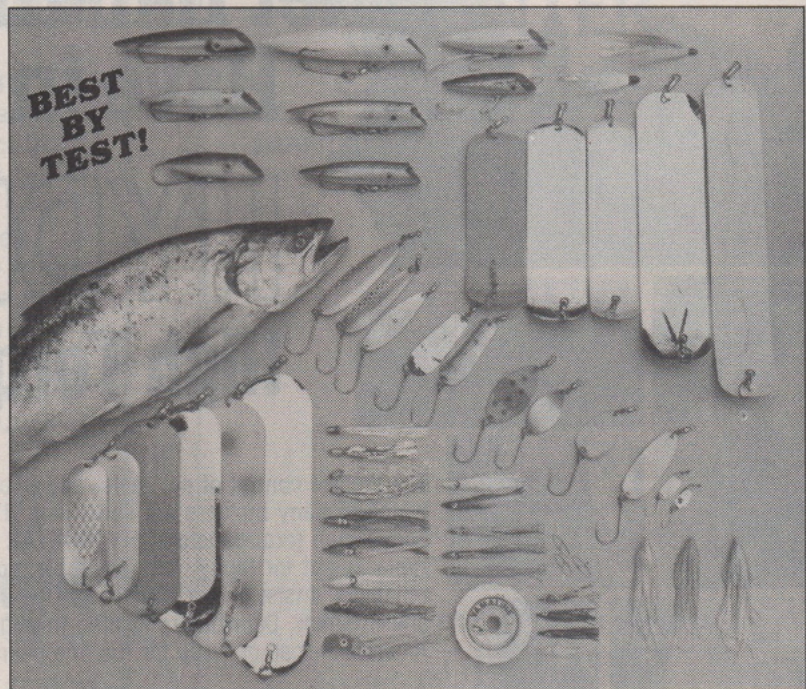
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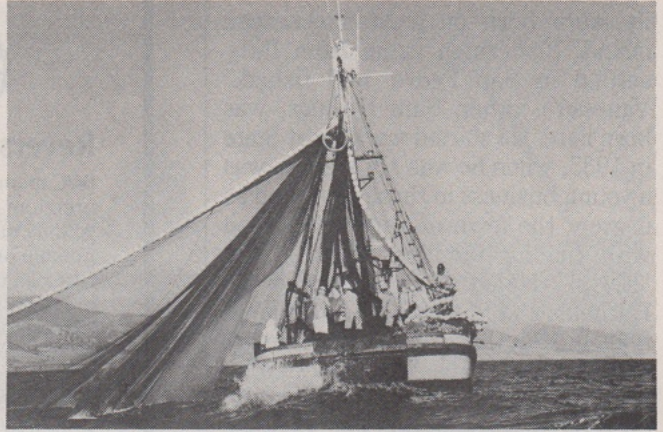
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A squid boat unloads at State Fish, one of the conglomerate dozen markets at the end of 22nd Street that fishermen have nicknamed "The Forty Thieves."

Vanessa describes herself as a typical American kid. Her associates call her a hard worker, "a bulldog but fun to work with," and attribute to her a fire-cracker energy to get things done and a keen interest in anything related to fish, including cooking.

Vanessa studied marine ecology at the University of California at Santa Barbara, graduating in 1978. "I loved Santa Barbara and really didn't want to live in San Pedro then," she states, explaining the move north. Fresh out of college, she went to work for the



A seiner works the Santa Barbara Channel, fishing for bonito and mackerel. San Pedro's wetfish fleet, now 20-25 boats, is a third its former size.

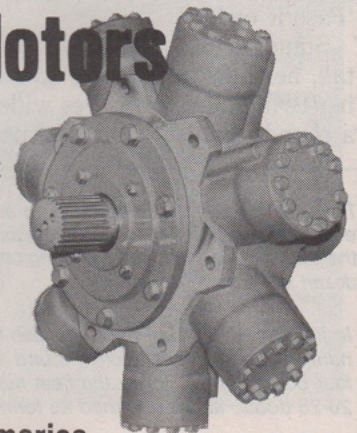
fishermen's co-op market at the harbor in Santa Barbara. She became manager and stayed for six years.

Vanessa also fished a little and mended net. "Fishing gave me a lot of respect for fishermen," she declares. "You realize how much work

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it is to catch fish." She was happy in Santa Barbara, selling retail. "It's a different perspective, selling retail, than where I am now," she says, shaking her head emphatically. She came to work at State Fish in 1984.

"The reason I came here, my father bought State Fish after a 50-year partnership, and my brother and I joined him. We've made it a family business. Santa Barbara was low key," she chuckles. "Now, fish keep coming and you keep pushing. It's a lot more challenging. It forces me to go beyond what I know. In volume alone," she explains, smiling at the understatement, "there's a big difference between one pound and 40,000 pounds." Although the idea is basically the same, the details are more important—a few cents a pound add up, dealing in volume. And you

don't want to make mistakes.

"A lot of knowledge goes into processing and handling 200 tons of fish a day," Vanessa continues with a reflective frown. Staying abreast of trends and producing fish consistently are both the measure and mark of State, which has grown to encompass three processing plants, cold storage facilities, and the capability to move fish worldwide. "State Fish is closely related to the fish industry and fishermen," Vanessa says by way of definition. "We're processor, importer, exporter—it's a very simple company, not sophisticated." Grinning again, she adds, "You just do what it takes to make it work. We're self-starters. We make it happen."

And of her responsibilities, her future at State? "I'm in sales," she begins, attempting to describe a job that defies description. Her brother runs one of the processing plants, with a special line of vacuum-packed sea-

food. Her sister is in another plant in the State family. And Vanessa works in the head office. When she arrived, she knew of her contacts, but she didn't know them. "It helps a lot when the company you work for is your family's company," she says appreciatively.

"Now I try to relieve my father of some of the minutia, try to streamline," she continues, growing thoughtful, her eyes following the progress of a squid boat being unloaded on the dock outside the window. "I don't think of being groomed to take over," she puts in after a while. "My father has an art. He's the coach; I'm not him. I just try to learn. My father has an expression that translates from Italian, 'You have to pass through to know.' I believe in that.

"I don't think about being a 'Woman

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in Industry," she goes on quickly, broaching a popular, much publicized topic. "I just do it. It is. By and large, I feel as though there's no problem in industry. You more or less know what you're doing or you don't, male or female." Judging from peer comment, Vanessa knows. "It's not easy working in an office full of men," says Greg Pendleton from the desk adjoining

Vanessa's. "But she gets the fire going—somebody has to." Mike Wagner of Seafood Specialties in Santa Barbara agrees, "God knows, it's tough enough for new guys. Very few women have made a success of it. Personally, my hat's off to her as a woman in the fish business. Welcome aboard."

"She's got a lot more common sense than a lot of men," Sam DeLuca puts

in, taking "three seconds" away from a busy schedule to talk about the changes he has seen in the San Pedro fish industry. For indeed, there have been changes.

"The biggest change is obvious," Sam states matter-of-factly, referring to the decline in production of all kinds of seafood in Southern California. Right after World War II, the wetfish fleet in San Pedro numbered 70-80 boats, "... three times the size it is now," Sam says, figuring the current fleet numbers 20-25. Boats were smaller then; the cotton gear then in use was too bulky and heavy to suit a big boat. Fishing in those days was a true family operation, right down to grandmother mending net. Fish were plentiful—and cheap. Vanessa recalls stories of her father catching sardines and mackerel with a hoop net off the dock. "We used to buy barracuda by the box," Sam remarks. "A box weighed about 400 pounds and cost 75 cents. Now barracuda in the round sell for a dollar a pound."

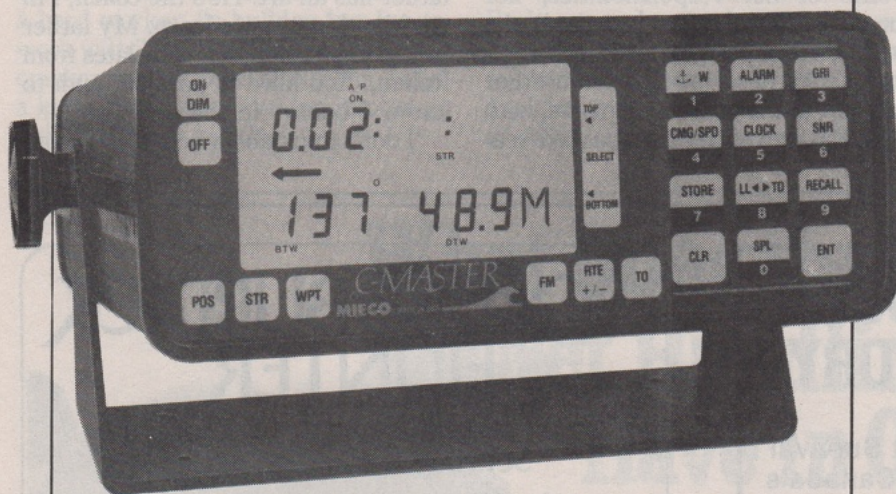
The change from cotton to nylon gear occurred in the 1950s. "Nylon net and the power block are two of the greatest things that happened to the purse seine fleet," Sam says. Boats got more efficient, markets expanded along with fishing grounds, the fish industry grew up.

In between telephoned orders to buy, sell, ship (directing operations as though seemingly playing a giant game of chess, his everpresent cigar wafting smoke tendrils overhead), Sam muses, "One of the major changes is we don't have consistency any more. Less variety, less volume." "You have to be able to produce fish consistently to maintain markets," Vanessa puts in. "When white seabass went into decline, dealers started bringing in New Zealand grouper. There are real trends you have to stay on top of," she notes. "You can't rely on the past." The problem is steady distribution. When a certain species is lacking, the public tends to forget.

An often-blamed culprit, overfishing

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is a simplistic answer that rankles. "There's no doubt in my mind that some of the scarcity of fish was not created by sport or commercial fishermen but by us—people," Sam maintains. "Pollutants in the ocean—people have created these problems."

Regulations also play a role in the availability of fish: Because of restrictions on one species, such as seabass, you don't catch another, yellowtail. And there are natural changes in biomass. "I've seen it change from a moratorium on Pacific mackerel and limits for a year to an open fishery in 12 months—and that wasn't too many years ago," Sam declares, puffing on his cigar. "And contrary to what Fish and Game says, there's a large stock of sardines in Southern California." (CDF&G surveys in 1986 found the Southern California spawning area 43% larger than that observed in 1985.) "Yet if we try to produce and sell that fish in quantity," he continues, "Southern California canneries would have to recapture old markets."

San Pedro would also have to recapture its old canneries. Only one remains. Although still a traditional Italian-Slav fishing community, tradition is, inexorably, changing. Fishing families are disappearing. Not many sons (or daughters) are coming in to take over for their fathers. Crews are increasingly hard to find.

"Before, you could work hard and make a good living," Vanessa sums up the fortunes of the wetfish fleet. "Now you work hard and get by." State Fish buys what's produced in San Pedro—tuna, bonito, squid, sardines, mackerel, anchovies, what few there are. "And we do handle a fair amount of frozen, we import some," Vanessa says, noting that imports are on the rise. "There's not enough variety in San Pedro fish to live on that alone, so we trade other fish."

"As far as fresh fish goes, the wetfish industry in San Pedro is more or less unique," she explains forthrightly, her hands describing the air. "It's cheap fish. It takes a lot of labor."

There's a lot more competition for the same fish and not as much fish to be had—fishermen need more money. It's tougher to make money on this fish." A pensive frown wrinkles her forehead. "As far as the Southern California industry now," she goes on, "I want to be positive about it, but to be practical, there are a lot of obstacles that fishermen and industry face. A

lot of factors are conspiring against fishermen."

Still, the industry has seen positive changes as well, not the least of which being the growth of State Fish. "Our business has changed from a couple of relatives together to a computer and comptroller," Vanessa says, smiling. And there's the modern airplane—the

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impact of air freight. "Without airplanes, it wouldn't be possible to supply the fresh market," Sam points out.

Generally, fish consumption has increased, and ethnic consumption has grown "... because of the increase in people from the Pacific

Rim who know what it is to eat mackerel and squid," Sam comments. "We're constantly developing more new markets for squid and mackerel," Vanessa interjects. Traditional markets were in the United States, in a lot of ethnic communities—Chinese, Japanese, Korean. "The East Coast is more tuned in to squid. Breadbasket states do not eat squid," she declares

with a chuckle. Notwithstanding that, consumption of squid is "... really up. More markets are developing for export. Europe has accepted California squid as a good product." Quietly, she adds, "Sam DeLuca helped to develop a lot of the California squid market," proudly recognizing his contribution.

Bait markets are also opening up in areas where fisheries are opening or expanding. "We're selling more bait," Vanessa says. "And a lot of our mackerel are IQF mackerel—food for people. I like that. We're slowly making inroads in food markets for mackerel—mainly ethnic markets, but that's what America is made up of."

"Definitely, the fish business is here to stay," Sam announces, rising to greet his wife, Rose, who has arrived at the plant for lunch. Joined by son John and close associates, the family retires to the private dining room tucked away on the second floor, down the hall from the business office and, again, overlooking the dock and harbor. Lunch is prepared on the premises by the family cook, the table laden with chicken, pasta, salad, which are passed around, family-style, everyone helping himself. Conversation runs, naturally, to fish.

For the DeLucas, times change but tradition remains a way of life. "My father's philosophy is simple: Buy fish, sell fish," Vanessa says, a characteristic grin lighting her face. The face of San Pedro's fish industry has changed and is changing, a history that Vanessa is heir to, caught between the pages of photograph albums saved by the family, and one that she wants to preserve and document. Meantime, she'll continue at State Fish, coming in early, working long hours, attending to myriad details, "... whatever it takes. My father has an expression, 'You can't sell from an empty wagon.'" She laughs merrily. "Our philosophy is simple: Just keep selling!" PF

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