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Top Chinese eatery shuns shark fin for Christmas

By Meg Mittelstedt

An owner with one of Vancouver's premier seafood restaurants, [Sun Sui Wah](#), says it is time to stop selling shark fin soup.

"I'd like to have the whole of Canada [ban shark fin], not just a province or Toronto or Vancouver," said Simon Chan.

Chan made the comments following the Oct. 13 "[Sans Fin Soup](#)" contest in which nine local chefs competed to create alternatives to the Chinese delicacy.

Chan's restaurant did not participate in the event. He said until there is a blanket ban he will continue to provide it. He said shark fin soup is something "100 percent of wedding customers want. That's the tradition."

"If we don't serve them, other restaurants in other cities will serve them. We lose our customers and we have to close," he explained.

But Sun Sui Wah is taking shark fin off its Christmas menu, due to be released at the end of October.

A legacy of prestige

Shark fin soup is one of the "big four" traditional delicacies served at banquets, along with fish maw, abalone and sea cucumber, said Claudia Li. Li is the founder of Shark Truth, the foundation that organized the event.

Traditionally, Chinese emperors served shark fin to display wealth. "It was the emperor's way of saying, 'Look at me, I can afford to risk the lives of my workers to serve you this expensive dish,'" said Li.

Today, shark fin remains a prestigious dish at Chinese banquets. The soup expresses honour and generosity towards guests. A Chinese proverb maintains that "a bride marrying into a family without shark fin is marrying into a poor family," said Li.

A single bowl of shark fin soup can cost between five to \$2000, depending on the grade of fin, Li notes. Chan said that high grade dried shark fin costs \$400 per pound.

A high cost to oceans

The practice of "finning" sharks involves cutting the fins off sharks and dumping their bodies back into the ocean.

Scientists estimate 75 to 100 million sharks are killed worldwide every year. The *Sharkwater* documentary's [website](#) states that 100 million sharks are killed for their fins annually.

Sharks sit at the top of the ocean ecosystem. They are considered apex predators. The activist group Global Animal argues that the destruction of sharks means the demise of oceans worldwide.

The issue is "extremely urgent," Li said.

A shark's fins comprise less than five per cent of its body weight. Shark meat does not bring enough money for most fishermen to want to sell it, so the shark is left in the ocean. Li called this a wasteful practice that is antithetical to the Chinese value of using every part of an animal.

"I can see from the pictures, shark finning is not that good," said Chan. The latest push to stop serving shark fin has him reconsidering how he uses shark products.



Chef Edmund Yee of P2B Bistro & Bar (right) serves up his Abalone and Crab Soup.

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Sun Sui Wah's Main Street location in Mount Pleasant.

“Personally, I can see right now that we shouldn’t have the shark fin. Even my kids blame me: ‘We don’t want that!’ But it’s an old tradition, I can’t say anything.”

A competitive niche

Sun Sui Wah is experimenting with a Christmas menu to be released next week. They have created a new set menu without shark fin ingredients.

“We will see what the people will say,” said Chan. “Maybe okay, maybe not. It’s still up to the customer. If they want to change, we have to change back.”

“For Sun Sui Wah to push forward a Christmas menu that doesn’t include shark fin is a really positive step,” said Li. “It shows that restaurants are beginning to recognize that they have a role in this issue.”

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Li says restaurants have a niche market opportunity: customers seeking a shark-fin free alternative. “If they can see momentum building against shark fin products, they know that sooner or later, a ban will happen,” she said.

“A really smart restaurant would come out and say ‘We’re going to be the first restaurant to not serve shark fin.’ I mean, get ahead of the curve, right? Businesses that can anticipate how the market is shifting have the competitive edge and make money,” said Li.

A finless future

The global fight against shark finning has seen several victories this month. On Oct 7, California Governor Jerry Brown signed legislation banning the possession and sale of shark fins in California, the [fourth US state](#) to do so. On Oct 12, [Mississauga](#) passed a similar law. Toronto is currently working on legislation to ban shark fins.

At the federal level, this November NDP Oceans and Fisheries critic Fin Donnelly will introduce a [private member’s bill](#) to ban the import of shark fins into Canada.

Donnelly, MP for New Westminster-Coquitlam and Port Moody, attended the Sans Fin Soup contest to congratulate the winners.



Sans Fin Soup judges Donald Gyurkovits and Edgar Rahal.

The group Shark Truth is continuing its campaign. It will hold a contest again next year in hopes that even more chefs will join in.

So far, 65 Vancouver couples have pledged not to serve shark fin soup at their weddings, a number Li hopes will double next year.

“I think within the next five years, we’ll have some good national legislation to protect sharks through shark fin bans,” Li said. “That’s my hope.”

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October 25, 2011 - 3:48 pm
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October 26, 2011 - 5:03 pm
For how far Vancouver might be behind Toronto, see today’s article on the CBC website:

Sounds like Vancouver might be waiting for a national ban.



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