

## Cooking with an attitude on the high seas

Catherine Cafiti, executive chef on Pacific Yellowfin, matches food with guests

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Prone to the odd bout of sea sickness, Catherine Cafiti admits her job as a chef on board a boat might at first seem a little incongruous.

Life at sea evokes images of cramped galley kitchens and cooks wrestling with ingredients swaying from side to side. Truth is that life at Cafiti's place of work, while still limited compared with those on land, is far more luxurious.

She is executive chef on the uber glamorous, 114-foot-long Pacific Yellowfin, which features a generous open kitchen, interior design by Robert Ledingham and a hiring fee of \$55,000 a week for tours around the Gulf Islands. Last month, Seattle rock band Pearl Jam chartered it.

"I am very active and like being outside, so I had always wanted to work on a boat and I love it," the 26-year-old enthuses. Luckily, Cafiti's also a people person, clearly a prerequisite to working on a boat: "It's all about the attitude. You need to be able to contain yourself -- I share my bedroom and the only time that I am alone is when I am in the shower. You need to be unattached to your things. When I walk on the boat I leave my land life on the quay."

Her culinary expertise -- honed in her native Quebec, as well as Italy and France -- is put to the test out on the oceans. "This is our big backyard," she



CREDIT: Stuart Davis, Vancouver Sun  
 Executive Chef Catherine Cafiti on board the Pacific Yellowfin.



CREDIT: Stuart Davis, Vancouver Sun  
 Catherine Cafiti displays tomato and eggplant salad with mozzarella di buffala.

says pointing to the water. "It's not like we can always pick up the phone and place a delivery order for the morning like in a restaurant. We put our crab traps in the water around Saltspring Island, get spot prawns, clams and oysters up at Desolation Sound..."

When they are near Saltspring, the ex-Montrealer likes to visit the market (she adores the fresh lamb and produce) and sometimes she will give Yellowfin guests money to buy "whatever they want from there."

"They will come back with things and I have to be creative," she explains. "Once they brought me a sea cucumber -- and I did not have a clue what to do with it because this is not something you get taught at school. I had to make a few phone calls to find out and ended up making sashimi with onions and jalapenos, which was very simple but tasty. I love playing around with food and it really doesn't feel like I am working."

Cafiti, who has been on the crew for three years, also likes to prepare only as far as the first lunchtime menu on a week-long trip. "I wait for the guests to arrive because I want to see them, see their personalities, the way they act, where they are from," she says. "It's more about creating food than a rigid menu." Because of that, she has "a soup in mind that I would like to do but I have not yet found the perfect guest to do it for."

So which foods did Pearl Jam inspire? "I was thinking beforehand, famous rock stars -- so will they want fine dining or not?" she says. "But they arrived in their Prius [Toyota's hybrid car] quite unexpectedly right on the quay at Steveston and they were super laid-back people -- so polite and so green. They just wanted to be surrounded by woods. They were in their sports pants and I know famous people are always hanging out at big dinners and stuff, so I knew that's not what they wanted. I just cooked them simple food -- they loved their lamb shank, for example."

To be that flexible, Cafiti knows she has to keep a strict inventory. She encourages anyone cooking on a boat to be disciplined: Label your bags in the freezer, make sure that everything is easily accessible, that all the meat is in one place and the fish in another. "Know that you can find it easily," she insists. "I have a little bit of everything. Also, keep your cooking simple and fresh, let the ingredients speak for themselves -- keep it to three flavours."

Before a trip, she sources organic produce close to the dock. She heads for OriginO's farm in Delta ("I like B.C.-grown food not brought in from California") and buys Ocean Wise fish (sablefish, halibut and sockeye salmon).

The former student of l'Institut de tourisme et d'hôtellerie du Québec (Quebec Tourism and Hotel Institute) adds that the key to a shipshape kitchen is to use as few pots and pans as possible. Today she is turning on the wow factor even with "a quick simple lunch:" her hallmark rosewater crème brûlée; an artichoke served with a vinaigrette using herbs she grows on the deck in a little greenhouse and ice wine; couscous and sea asparagus with lobster and lemon; and grilled eggplant with mozzarella and tomatoes.

Creating as little garbage as possible is also essential on a boat due to space. "You have to discipline yourself not to waste anything. You can't afford to have

loads of bins on-board a boat for lots of garbage. I keep my organic waste separately."

Even the skins of tomatoes morph into tomato sugar (she dries the skins on a low heat in the stove and processes them with sugar), which is used on tarts or sprinkled around the rim of a drink.

Certain foods such as bread, however, are difficult to make on-board. Countertops are lipped, slightly sunken -- which will keep hold of things in case the boat is rocky -- and wooden, which means it takes a little more effort to clean off the food than say stainless steel that can rust in the salty sea air. Rare choppy waters might throw the odd curveball. "This boat is very stable," she says, "but I do factor in how many hours we might be sailing, because I won't be cooking if it's too rocky."

Has she always been such a foodie? "I've worked in the business since I was 14," she explains. "I got my taste for cooking from my grandmother when I was a child; I was a very troubled child -- super active -- so cooking would calm me down and keep me focused."

Wintertime offers her a life, however, outside of the kitchen. When Cafiti is not slicing up her latest creations on-board the Yellowfin during the sailing season from May to September, she's carving up the backcountry in Whistler where she has her home on land. "I don't work up there," she says, "I just go there to recharge my batteries."

#### AT A GLANCE

Exposure runs a three-day Gulf Island Gourmet expedition aboard the Pacific Yellowfin. Log on to Exposure, at [www.exposure.travel](http://www.exposure.travel)

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