

VANCOUVER

Shark fin soup divided this Vancouver man's family for decades. How Canada's ban could bring everyone back to the table



By Jenny Peng Star Vancouver
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VANCOUVER—Nathan Cheng hates shark fin soup. He hates the way it's produced and he especially hates the rift it's caused in his family.

For 10 years leading up to his fin-free wedding in 2014, he and his wife argued over whether to serve the dish.

“It reminded her of her childhood. Her family, her mom, her uncle used to eat it,” explained Cheng, an industrial designer in Vancouver. “They do it because they want to give the best to you. It's usually a way of showing affection.”

Then, when he refused a bowl at his father-in-law's birthday several years ago, guests looked away in discomfort and disapproval.

Cheng said his extended family always chastised him, asking, “Why, why don’t you eat it; what’s wrong with you?” Others argued, “If it was really bad, it would be illegal.”

Now it is.

In June, Fisheries Minister Jonathan Wilkinson [called the practice of finning](#) — cutting the fin off while the animal is still alive then discarding its body — “inhumane” and “not sustainable.” It’s the typical way to harvest shark fins worldwide and it’s been illegal in Canada since 1994.

With a final vote in the Senate on June 18, Canada has also banned the import and export of shark fins, slamming the door on a cultural tradition that remains meaningful for some. Restaurants across the country are making the most of their dwindling supplies and planning for a future without shark fin soup, but there are signs that modern tastes — culinary, ecological and humanitarian — were already turning against the dish in Canada.

As the “odd kid in the family,” Cheng has been staunchly opposed to the dish since he was in elementary school, when he saw a protester on TV speak against the sale of shark fins at herbal medicine shops.

He later joined up with Shark Truth, a Vancouver based non-profit founded in 2009 that sought to educate communities about how to protect sharks in a culturally informed way. There he learned to accept the cultural and sentimental value it has to those who consume it.

Cheng, who followed the progress of the Canadian legislation closely, sees the ban as vindication for his years of protest. He hopes the move will save others from going through the same family ordeal he did.

Enjoyed by nobility in ancient times, shark fin soup has long been regarded as a symbol of prestige in Chinese culture. The fins contain cartilage that, when dried and cooked, has a chewy, noodlelike texture.

Having studied the effects of overfishing on the shark population, Daniel Pauly, principal investigator of the Sea Around Us initiative at the University of British Columbia, said Canada's ban should encourage other countries "to do their part" in abolishing the import and export of shark fins.

In his research, Pauly found that some shark species like the hammerhead and oceanic whitetip have declined by 90 per cent over the past two decades. Pauly's paper, published in the journal *Marine Policy*, pointed the finger squarely at the growing appetite for shark fin soup.

Shark fin imports had increased substantially in recent years. According to Statistics Canada, the volume of imported shark fins steadily climbed between 2012 and 2017 from 106,000 kg to 182,000 kg. The cash value of those imports almost doubled from \$2.3 million to \$4 million.

Many long-established restaurants in Metro Vancouver are now serving their last bowls before their stock runs out.

Red Star Seafood Restaurant in Vancouver and Richmond includes shark fin soup in its luxury 12-course set menus, which feed 10 people for between \$700 to \$1,500. Buying a bowl individually would cost between \$20 and \$60, depending on the portion and quality.

Jeffrey Fung, manager of Red Star, told *Star Vancouver* in Mandarin that he doesn't expect a significant impact to sales because most of the

demand for shark fin soup comes from the odd wedding banquet. It's not a staple among their dinner patrons.

While it hasn't intentionally taken a side in the debate, the restaurant has always wanted to give its customers the choice of enjoying shark fin soup, Fung said.

"Some customers from Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, like to have a more luxurious option," he added.

Red Star plans to hold a company meeting to choose a replacement for the dish once supplies run dry. It declined to say how much shark fin it has stocked up.

At Chef Tony Seafood Restaurant in Richmond, general manager Wallace Chan said they typically serve the dish once or twice a month at banquets. He said he's not sure about the company's full inventory but said the restaurant currently has enough frozen fins on hand to feed at least four tables.

He said shark fin soup has been a menu option for the last five years out of "respect" for customers. It's usually requested by older patrons or parents who might be paying for a banquet or wedding for their children. But up to 90 per cent of guests will choose to replace the item on their set menus, said Chan.

The company doesn't encourage the consumption of shark fins, he said. The demand is small, and most guests are satisfied with their alternative soup simmered with chicken or shiitake mushrooms, he added.

"That's why we don't put a lot of resources to promote this," Chan said.

As younger generations find new ways to celebrate in a post-ban Canada, Cheng predicts that restaurants such as Chef Tony and Red Star that adapt will do well.

“There are a couple of restaurants that focus their whole business just on shark fin. Those places will not survive,” he said.

“Those afraid of change usually are the companies that (will) disappear.”

With files from Wanyee Li and the Canadian Press

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