

**FEDEPESCA** is helping small fishmongers make the most of technology and social media

# Giving traditional fish retailers a voice

Luisa Álvarez Blanco is the managing director of FEDEPESCA the Spanish National Federation of Independent Fish Retailers. Fishmongers form a very important link in the distribution and sale of fish and seafood to consumers, accounting for 40% of the fresh fish market. However, the sector faces a number of challenges, not least the decline in the number of retail establishments and a corresponding loss of jobs. Ms Álvarez Blanco discusses here the reasons for this development and how it can be arrested.

**In much of Europe small shops such as butchers, fishmongers, greengrocers etc. are being replaced by the big retail chains, a trend that has also affected the small fish retailers that are FEDEPESCA's members. How can this development be countered? What added value can small fish shops retailers bring that will persuade customers to continue shopping there?**

We have a big generational replacement problem in the sector. We need professional training, so we can count on young workers qualified in digital marketing, new technologies and skills in business and product management. And small business management needs to be digitalised as much as possible.

Small fish shops offer a great variety of products, but they should also introduce new products such as ready-to-eat preparations and new purchase experiences, such as tastings, workshops or even pairing lessons. We should offer the best possible service without losing our identity. Services like online sales, order taking by WhatsApp, and home delivery will save customers time and allow them to make their purchases from the small retailer in complete confidence.

**Per capita consumption of fish in Spain is among the highest in Europe, but the trend over the last few years has been one of**

**decline. What explains the falling interest in fish and seafood among Spanish consumers and what role can FEDEPESCA and its members play in reversing this development?**

Fresh products consumption is on the decrease in every category of foodstuffs. Consumers think that fish products are difficult to buy, store, and cook, which is why these products in particular are suffering this decline. People's priorities have changed since more time is spent on the internet and social media. We eat out more often, and we also eat more processed food. We are distancing ourselves from our traditional way of buying, cooking and living, in other words, we are moving away from the traditional Spanish cultural and gastronomic heritage. A lack of time, and a lack of confidence when faced with a counter full of fishery products are among the reasons why fish consumption is decreasing amongst young people.

Traditional fish retailers should be able to adapt to the needs of this customer, who is always in a hurry and buys without planning. They need to be offered ready-to-eat products and attractive purchasing experiences. Retailer should also improve their online positioning and join collective initiatives, such as the one in "La Paz Market" in Madrid. This market was the first in the world to work with Amazon.



**Ms Luisa Álvarez Blanco, Managing Director, FEDEPESCA**

Another example could be Mercado 47 (Market 47) carried out by the city council of Madrid. FEDEPESCA is also working to reduce the tax rate for fishery products. Currently this rate is 10%, the same as for other products such as soft drinks. Taking into account the importance of fishery products in a healthy diet FEDEPESCA is calling for a reduction to 4% (super-reduced tax rate). The association has also joined an initiative headed by ship-owners from Vigo, called "Eduksano", which canvasses for mandatory nutritional education

for children with the aim of keeping a healthy lifestyle.

**In some countries different ways are being tried to sell fish to consumers. Among them is the use of subscription models, where the customer pays a monthly fee and receives a package of fresh fish every week or every fortnight. Is this or other novel sales models also being tried in Spain?**

Many approaches in relation to this exist, but for now, none has been successful on a large scale.

Weekly subscriptions, “mama shoppers”, boxes with ingredients and recipes ..... creativity is sharpened to engage the new customer, who is lost and scattered in the overwhelming online and street store offer. One of the problems is also that the profitability of businesses supplying food is very low, so how to strengthen the balance sheet with new business models also needs to be studied. Customers often do not even know about the services of traditional fishmongers. They are unaware that an order can be placed with a call, with a text message, or even by WhatsApp, and the order of fresh fish or even of handmade ready-to-eat products, can be delivered to a workplace, home or anywhere else. Some fishmongers are even offering products made with high quality ingredients and really natural recipes cooked at low temperature and packed in individual portions, ready to warm up.

**Consumers are attracted to retail chains because it is convenient to shop at a “one-stop-shop.” A big retailer will often also have its own fresh fish counter offering more or less the same service as any small independent fishmonger. How can small fish retail shops then compete? What could be their unique selling point?**

It is important to note that retail chains, which have increased their foodstuffs sales area by 4 million sq. m in Spain, are fostering fresh foodstuffs areas because these products guarantee that customers visit the establishment. Other large operators selling online, such as Amazon or Alibaba, represent a big threat, so retailers use fish counters to attract customers to the shop. In fact, they lose money with their fish shops but it is essential to attract the customer. Traditional fish retailers cannot compensate losses with gains in other products. For

these reasons, in order to compete, fishmongers should be associated with other characteristics such as skills, dedication, product variety, more personal, and better service and should also offer a different experience. In addition, retailer should focus on better fish shop management and automation of processes to reduce costs.

**The major social and economic changes that are affecting Spanish society including the rapid movement of women into the workforce, increase in single person households, the lack of time to spend in the kitchen, and the growing demand for convenience could be an opportunity for small fish retailers. How can FEDEPESCA help them to exploit it?**

Fish retailers should make themselves customers’ personal assistants, who take care of their clients’ diet. Home deliveries every day and handmade and ready-to-eat products can make it easy for customers to maintain a healthy diet. The fish retailers should recommend the number of seafood products consumers should eat and put these products in their homes, so they don’t have to think. Handmade ready-to-eat products done by traditional fishmongers are suitable for workers, for very busy people, and are very good also for senior citizens. Life expectancy in Spain is very high. Many elderly people live alone, and they are losing cooking skills, so this market segment is very important. The association also intends to initiate collective projects and investigate the possibility of exploiting the internet, big data, robotics, and artificial intelligence in ways that will be useful for small businesses.

**How do you see the future of the sector in five years? Do you expect the number of small fish retailers to continue declining**

**or will it reach a certain level and then stabilise and perhaps even increase again? What impact do you foresee this having on the Spanish consumer?**

With the rapid changes we are experiencing, five years has become a long timeframe and it’s difficult to foresee what is going to happen. Data from the National Statistical Institute shows the destruction of traditional fish retail shops and employment since 2013 has slowed down and is now stable, after falling nearly 22%. In 2018, the Ministry of Education published the first professional training qualification in the association’s history. And, FEDEPESCA has just presented the First Professional Expert Diploma in collaboration with the Spanish University for Distance Learning and the ministry.

The loss of traditional fish shops is really bad news for the health of Spanish citizens. Purchases at a traditional fish shop are 25% higher on average more than at large retailers.

**Women play a very important role in the Spanish fisheries industry in terms of their contribution to the economic and social development of the sector. Although things have improved significantly over the last years, there is still some way to go to achieving full and effective equality of opportunity for women in fisheries. In your eyes, what remains to be done to attain this objective?**

Great progress has been made in the latest years. The creation of the Spanish Network of Women in the fishery value chain and the momentum of the National Association of Women in the fishery value chain have helped to give visibility to women in the whole value chain. In our sector women represent 53% of more than 200.000 workers. In

Spain women still spend more time on the family than men bringing higher rates of professional stress for women. In FEDEPESCA we have implemented an equality plan and we encourage the presence of women in our management board and in our projects. In our training program we have introduced a new chapter focused on equality with a summary video, to build awareness. We are ahead of the first generation of Spanish women getting on to the labour market, and now this generation is reaching management positions. Progress is unstoppable.

**On a more personal level what aspects of the fisheries sector appeal to you most? What brought you to FEDEPESCA in the first place, and what is it about your job that makes working in fisheries different from, for example, working in the meat or cheese industry, where many of the issues faced by FEDEPESCA are likely to be similar?**

I first arrived to the world of associations by chance, after a degree in business science. Working in FEDEPESCA is really exciting. More than a job, you feel like you are fighting for a cause. Small fish shop owners have many difficulties ensuring their voice is heard, especially in a world full of multinational companies and with huge competitive pressure, so we help them. It’s a very emotionally demanding job. The fishery sector is really addictive. It is complex and one never stops learning how things work in the different parts of the value chain, which gives a wide perspective. Legal requirements in every area (financial, labour, sustainability, food safety...) change constantly and one is forced to stay abreast of these changes. I’m very lucky! I love my job. Perhaps as I was born in Galicia to an officer of the national navy I was fated to this!