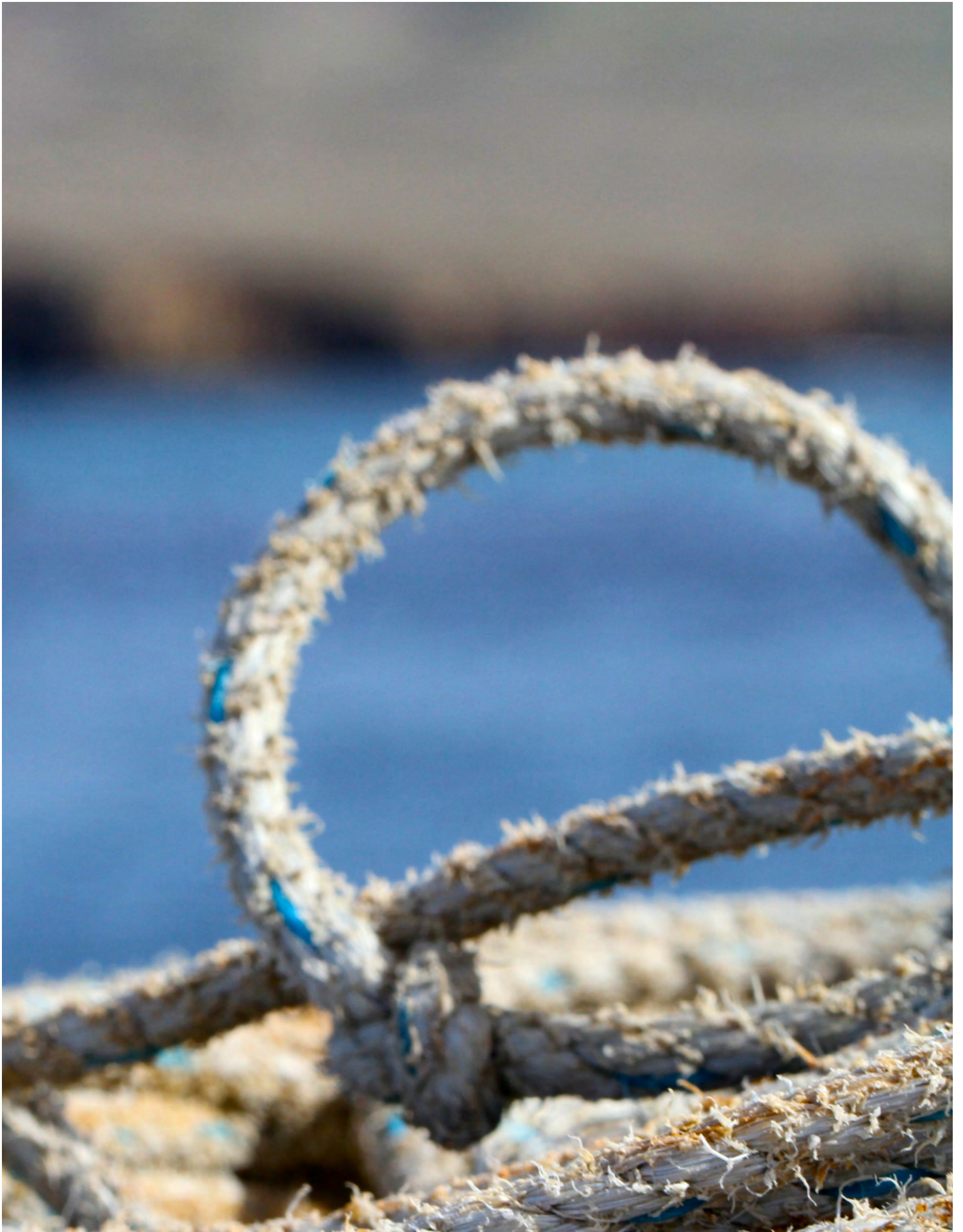


CHANNEL SURFING

**DIVING FOR SEA URCHINS
OFF THE CALIFORNIA COAST**

by Mike Dundas • photography by Meredith Paige





After a week of harsh storms, gusting winds and rolling swells, veteran divers Harry Liquornik and Bill Hooten are ready to get back in the water. On this morning, it will take a little more than an hour in Hooten's 32' Windsor hull dive boat, the *F/V Airoso*, to go the 24 miles south from Santa Barbara Harbor to the western edge of Santa Cruz Island. They push off from the dock just as the sun peeks above the horizon, heading for one of the world's best urchin grounds.

Santa Barbara red sea urchins are considered among the finest in the world, commanding some of the highest auction prices at Japan's famed Tsukiji fish market. But these prized urchins haven't always been in great demand. In the 1960s, the California Department of Fish and Game declared sea urchins to be a nuisance and a threat to the giant kelp beds that provide shelter and food for so many different marine species along the Southern California coast.

State fish and game officials recruited sport divers from local clubs, gave them hammers, and let them loose upon the urchin beds to smash as many as they could find. The department also approved a kelp-harvesting company's use of quicklime to poison the urchins in areas with "heavy infestations."



"In the early 1970s a couple old-timers actually went out and picked a few loads of urchin for a group of Japanese buyers and didn't even get paid," Hooten says. "It was sort of experimental to find out if they were worthwhile, if they were of good quality. The good word came back and the fishery really took off from there."

Anybody with a boat and a wetsuit could begin harvesting the spiny creatures and bringing them to market, so it didn't take long for folks from all walks of life – former abalone divers, engineers, fishermen, and laborers – to make their way to one of the state's growing urchin harbors, which ranged from Avila Beach near San Luis Obispo down to San Diego.

Despite looking like medieval torture devices – the shells are covered with dozens of sharp spines – sea urchins have been consumed at Japanese, Mediterranean and South American dinner tables for generations. Inside every urchin are five golden pieces of what most call the "roe" but are technically the invertebrate's gonads. Delicate and briny, the freshest urchin – known as *uni* in Japanese – melts in the mouth with a sweet custard-like flavor.

Having now crossed the channel, Hooten and Liquornik settle on a dive spot on top of a thick kelp bed near Santa Cruz Island's Fraser Point. Both men struggle into their thick neoprene wetsuits that will protect them from the cold Pacific waters. Liquornik favors a homemade concoction of kelp slime to help the suit slide on while Hooten uses a good dose of hand soap.



(From left, across both pages) The urchin bags are cinched with a slip knot, allowing for easy unloading; The sun starts to rise over the *Airosa* and the rest of Santa Barbara Harbor; The "searching for urchin" motto of the seafood processor, Catalina Offshore Products, is seen here on a sweatshirt.



For a brief moment, it seems as if everything pauses; a moment of serenity where the only sounds are the gentle waves lapping up against the boat and a family of sea lions barking on a distant rock formation. That silence is quickly broken when John Woodcock, Jr., the deckhand and diving assistant on the *Airosa*, snaps the boat's diesel air compressor to life. Rather than use dive tanks, both Hooten and Liquornik prefer a "hookah" setup with a compressor feeding air through 300 foot hoses connected to a regulator, allowing them to stay in the water for hours at a time.

After strapping on a weight belt and grabbing the rake-like tool used to measure and gather the urchins from the ocean substrate, Liquornik, without fanfare or notice, steps straight off the boat and into the water. Hooten follows shortly after. Both men pop to the surface to have Woodcock throw them the basket nets used to hold the gathered urchins. Once under water, neither will surface again for another hour.

In 1975, the year Hooten first started diving, processors were only paying 10 cents per pound for urchins in the shell at the dock, but the catch was bountiful. There is an old photograph of the *Airosa* from the early 1980s where Hooten is motoring back to harbor with 10,000 pounds on board; the overflowing baskets of urchin piled 10 feet high off the deck.

"Even though the price was low, we were bringing in 5000 pounds on an average day and gas was less than a dollar per gallon," says Hooten. "You look at prices today and the fact is that it's all relative."

The Santa Barbara urchin market peaked in 1990; the run up fueled by the white-hot Japanese economy. Fish and game records show that more than 27 million pounds of urchin were landed in Southern California that year alone. Liquornik describes the market as frenzied, with new buyers appearing at the dock on a regular basis and prices quickly rising to \$2.50 per pound.

"One year, a Japanese buyer shows up at the dock in a white Cadillac with briefcases full of cash looking to buy whatever he could get his hands on," says Liquornik. "It was like the wild west."

"I guess that made us underwater cowboys," Hooten quips.

Now fearful of the potential for overfishing, it was around this time the Department of Fish and Game implemented minimum shell size restrictions and a licensing requirement for all urchin divers. To better manage the annual urchin take, the department has slowly reduced the number of available licenses down from a peak of 938 in 1987 to just 300 today.

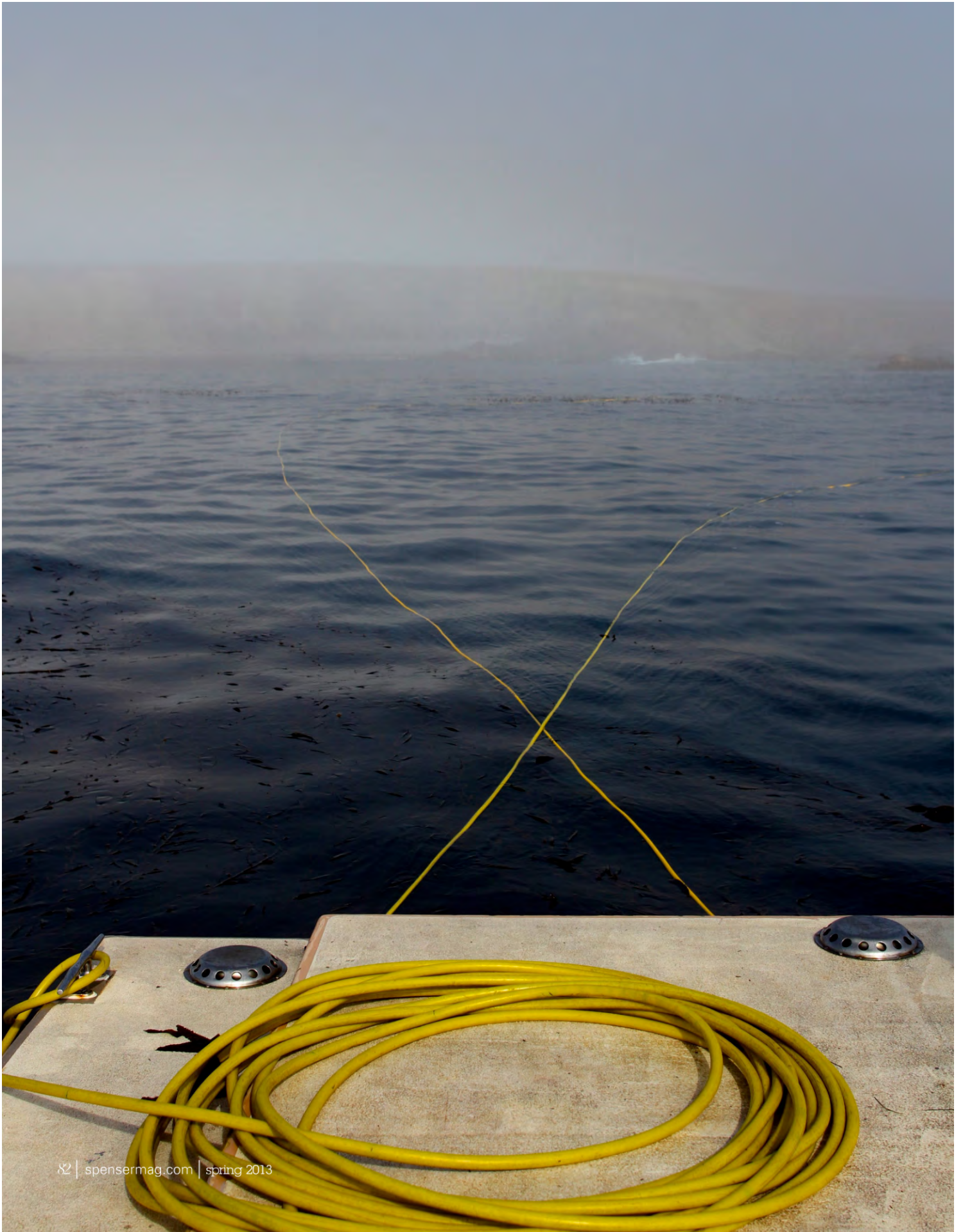
New licenses are only given out via a lottery system in years when one or more existing divers retire and, even then, the state only allows those who have worked as urchin deckhands to participate in the lottery.

Of the existing 300, a core group of 80 or so divers – "slingers" as Hooten likes to call them - pull in the vast majority of the state's catch, about 11 million pounds annually. Another 100 to 120 divers – the "dabblers" says Hooten – work only a few weeks out of the year when the weather and prices are right.

(Clockwise from left, across both pages) John Woodcock Jr., the diving assistant on the the *Airosa*, hoists the urchins out of the water; Freshly picked sea urchins, along with a few strands of seagrass; On calm days, Hooten ties his boat to the giant kelp rather than drop an anchor.









(From top) Santa Barbara sea urchins; Hooten prepares to dive, with the metal urchin rake rake and urchin bag just to his side;

Opposite Page: Liquornik and Hooten's 300 foot air hoses trail off into the distance.

Following Page: Liquornik (right), in his thick neoprene cold water dive suit, looks out in Hooten's direction on the water.



The remaining licensees have moved on to other careers, but continue to pay the annual fee to maintain their status, hoping someday the state will forgo the lottery and, instead, allow them to sell their license on an open market.

After about an hour under water, Liquornik pops up to the surface about 150 feet from the boat. Beside him is a floater he filled with air from the compressor that pulled the 300-pound bag of urchins up to the surface. Hooten surfaces shortly thereafter and they both begin to make their way back to the boat. Woodcock skillfully coils the air hoses and readies the hoist that will lift the urchin bags onto the deck. This dive-harvest-hoist process will repeat itself six times on this day, with Liquornik, Hooten, and Woodcock stopping only briefly for a quick lunch.

After seven hours in the water, Hooten and Liquornik will climb back onboard to change out of their wetsuits while Woodcock stows the gear and pulls up the anchor. The twin 220-horsepower Yanmar engines are throttled up and the *Airosa*, with Hooten at the helm, begins the trek back to the harbor. The processor, Catalina Offshore Products, and another licensed diver, Stephanie Mutz, who just returned from her own trip across the channel, are there waiting for the day's haul.

Most of Hooten and Liquornik's urchins are offloaded to Catalina Offshore's trucks to be processed and, eventually, shipped around the world. And while Hooten prefers the ease and reliability of working solely with a trusted processor, Liquornik and Mutz work together to directly market some of their live urchins to local customers at the Saturday Fisherman's Market, which takes place right there on the dock, as well as to restaurants in both Santa Barbara and Los Angeles, including all three Hungry Cat outposts as well as Craft, Animal, Salt's Cure, Eveleigh and The Lobster.





(Clockwise from right, across both pages) Stephanie Mutz selling urchins at the Saturday Fishermen's Market in Santa Barbara; Liquornik (left) and Hooten (right) relax as their urchins are unloaded; Woodcock takes great pains to ensure that every inch of the Airoso's hold is utilized; Liquornik (pictured here) and Hooten must fill out fish & game paperwork after each dive.



There is nothing formal between the two divers, “just a handshake and a tequila,” Mutz says as she laughs. But they both work to educate consumers about the unique product that is fresh, local red sea urchin.

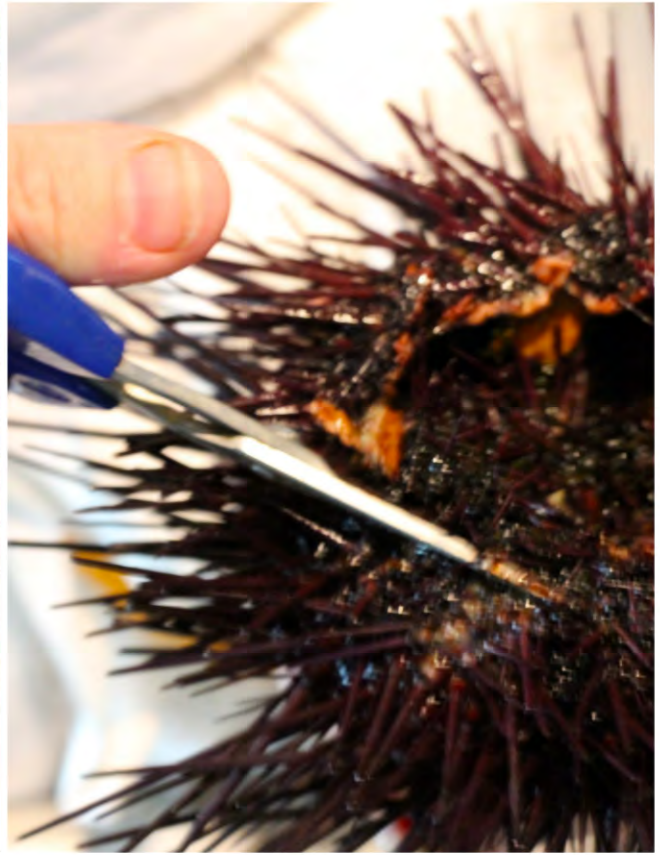
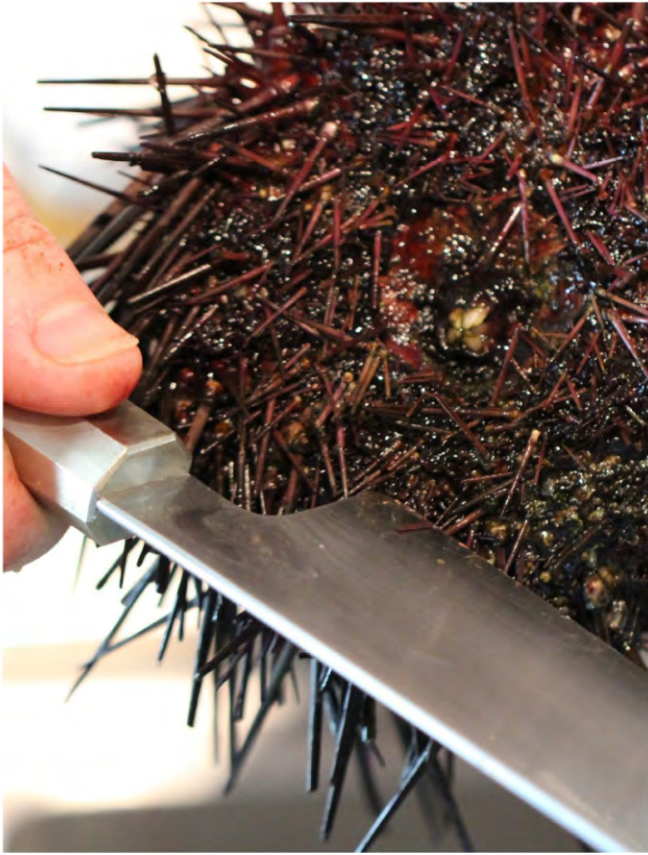
In addition to leading the charge on education and marketing, Mutz is an accomplished fisherman in her own right and the only female licensed urchin diver in the state. Some have even likened her to the celebrated female urchin and abalone divers of Onjuku, Japan. While she was working on her graduate degree in marine biology, she began deck handing on local fishing boats and began engaging in fisheries policy on the state level. Eventually, she turned to fishing full time.

“I liked wearing heels one day and fins the next, but now I just like wearing the fins,” says Mutz. “So I just started fishing more. I get whelks, rockfish, sardines and mackerel. I also trap lobster and crab on the Ocean Pearl in addition to urchin diving on my own 20 foot panga boat.”

Back on the dock, Hooten chats with the processor as the first of the day’s catch is weighed. While Woodcock hooks the next giant net of urchins to the dock’s hoist, Mutz and Liquornik laugh as they go over restaurant deliveries and her plans to staff the fisherman’s market the next day. Tourists and other curious onlookers take photos of the giant crates of still moving urchins sitting on the dock, no doubt to be posted on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. There is a jovial air amongst all involved. They know that they have a good day’s earnings coming their way.

With the urchins offloaded, Hooten, Liquornik and Woodcock are back on the *Airosa*. They pull away from the loading dock to make way for another urchin boat that has come into harbor just as the sun begins to set. After a quick refueling stop, Hooten maneuvers the boat back to his slip to tie up for the night. The weather is looking good for tomorrow and the three make plans to meet back on the dock at sun up for another day out on the water. 📍







Fresh Sea Urchin

Everybody we spoke with in researching this story told us his or her first choice for urchin preparation was simply to eat it straight from the shell. It's our favorite way too.

So we asked David Lentz, owner and chef of the Hungry Cat seafood restaurants in Hollywood, Santa Monica, and Santa Barbara, for a few tips and tricks for cleaning urchins. Located here in Southern California, Lentz gets urchins hand delivered each week fresh from the boat by either Harry Liquornik or Stephanie Mutz. "The Santa Barbara sea urchin from our divers is the best," says Lentz. "I know where the product is coming from, which is essential when you are dealing with something as perishable as fresh shellfish." To keep them the star of the show, Lentz serves the fresh cracked and cleaned urchins at his restaurants with just a little sea salt and lemon juice.

Tools: sharp knife, kitchen scissors, spoon

1. Make sure that your sea urchin is fresh. Lentz says not to bother with anything that has been out of the water for more than 2 days. With the butt of your knife, tap the bottom of the urchin (beak side). You want to make a small hole so you can use your scissors to cut a good size circle in the bottom of the shell.
2. Once you have done this, carefully remove and discard as much of the black and brown insides as possible. There are 5 orange fillets attached to the shell, and that is what you want to remain. Try to get everything else out and once you have cleaned out as much as possible, take a little salted water and swish it around in the shell to rinse and clean. You can either serve the urchin right in the shell or remove the fillets and serve separately.





Sea Urchin Linguini

Adapted from a recipe by David Lentz

This is a perfect recipe to introduce those friends of yours who may not be certain about their love of urchin. The tomatoes and peppers combine with the olive oil and urchin to make a luxuriously orange-hued pasta sauce that is perfectly balanced between sweetness, brine, and acidity. We like to think of this delicious dish as Intro to Urchin 101.

Serves 5

30 sea urchin fillets
2 cups cherry tomatoes, sliced in half
2 cups roasted red bell peppers, thinly sliced
3 cloves garlic whole + 2 cloves garlic minced
1 ¼ cups + 2 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
Juice of ½ lemon (1 ½ tbsp.)
½ cup fresh bread crumbs
1 lb. linguini
Kosher salt
Fresh ground white pepper
¼ cup chopped chives
3 dried chiles de arbol, thinly sliced

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil over high heat. In a blender, purée 25 sea urchin fillets, 1 cup of the tomatoes, 1 cup of the peppers, 3 whole cloves garlic, 1 ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil and lemon juice until completely emulsified. Season to taste with salt and white pepper. Toast the bread crumbs in a non-stick pan set over medium heat with 1 tbsp. of extra virgin olive oil until warm and crunchy, then remove from the heat and set aside.

2. When the water is boiling, add 3 tbsp. kosher salt to the pot and then cook linguini to *al dente* according to the package instructions. While the pasta is cooking, preheat 1 tbsp. of extra virgin olive oil in a large hot sauté pan and then cook the remaining tomatoes and peppers and minced garlic along with the sliced chili, about three minutes. Drain the pasta and then add it to the sauté pan with the tomatoes, peppers and garlic. Turn on the blender for another 20 second to re-emulsify the urchin purée and then add the purée to pan with the other ingredients. Toss to cover the noodles with the sauce. To serve, divide the pasta among the plates and garnish with the toasted bread crumbs, chives and the remaining urchin fillets.

Uni Shooters

As veteran divers, Harry Liquornik and Bill Hooten have seen it all when it comes to eating urchin. Always looking for new ways to enjoy the briny treasure, they've recently become focused on the idea of urchin or *uni* shooters. Harry is a silver tequila kind of guy so his shooter lends itself to a Mexican preparation. On the other hand, Bill, who prefers his beverages a little more sessionable, tends toward an Asian presentation with nigori sake and a little soy sauce. Either way, if you've had your fill of fresh urchin right from the shell and are looking for a little something to wash it down, Harry and Bill would say, "try a shooter."

BILLY'S VERSION

Makes 2 shooters

4 tbsp. nigori sake
½ tsp. simple syrup (equal parts sugar and water)
½ tsp. shiro (white) soy sauce
½ tsp. yuzu juice (optional)
2 large pieces uni (sea urchin)
Minced chives

1. In a small glass, whisk together the first three ingredients until combined. Divide this mixture between two shot glasses. Place one piece of uni in each shot glass and garnish each with a few pieces of chive. **[Editor's note:** avoid using Kikusui's Perfect Snow Nigori sake for this recipe as the alcohol content is just too high and clashes with the other ingredients. We made ours with Hakutsuru's Sayuri Nigori.]



HARRY'S VERSION

Makes 2 shooters

3 tbsp. silver tequila
2 tsp. simple syrup (equal parts sugar and water)
2 tsp. fresh squeezed lime juice
1 tsp. finely minced shallot
2 large pieces uni (sea urchin)
Sea salt

1. In a small glass, whisk together the first four ingredients until combined. Divide this mixture between two shot glasses. Place one piece of uni in each shot glass and garnish each with a few flakes of sea salt.

