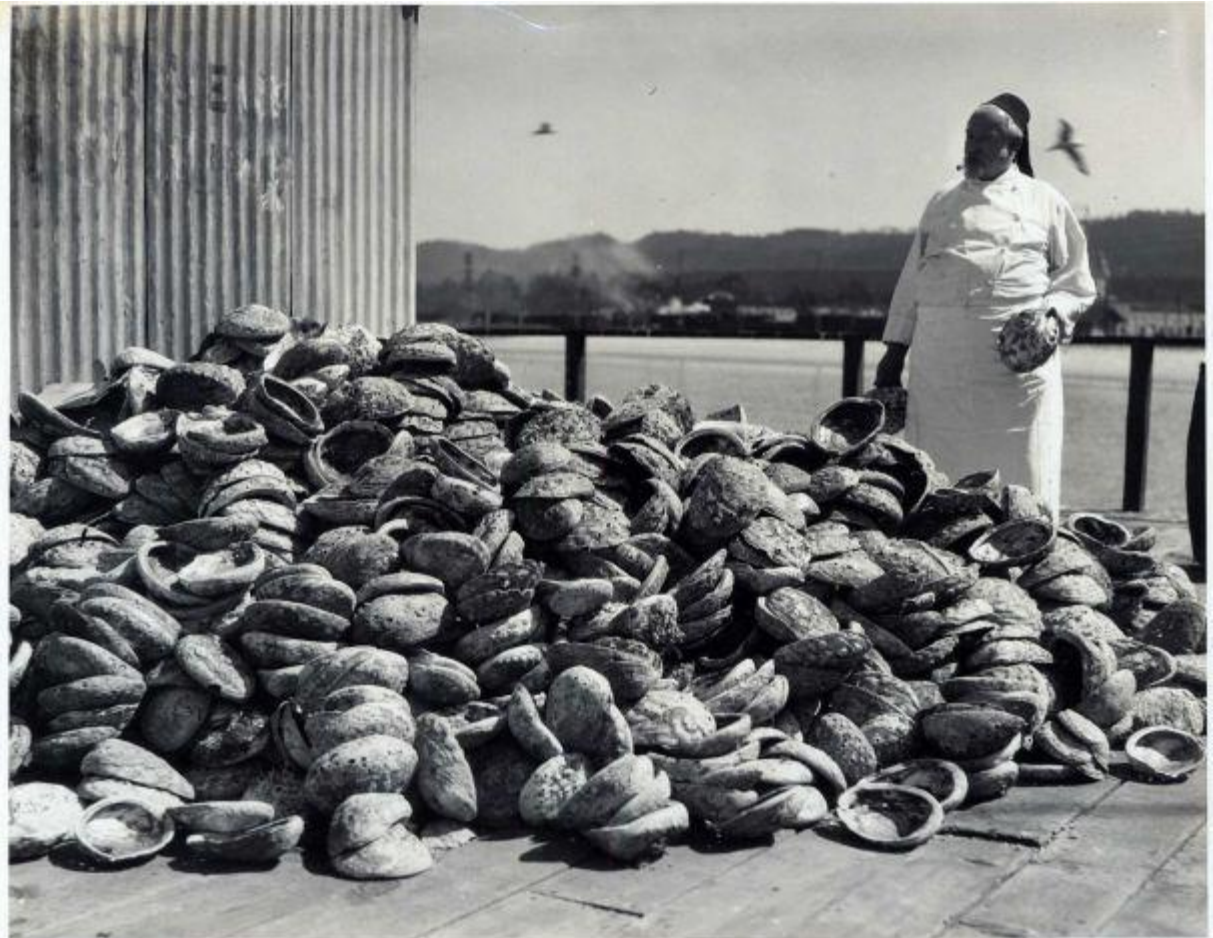


SFGate

Japanese American Heritage festival celebrates history, abalone

Jeanne Cooper, Special to SFGate

Updated 4:35 pm, Thursday, May 1, 2014



Ernest "Pop" Doelter, a German restaurateur nicknamed "the Abalone King," surveys his kingdom on the Monterey Wharf ca 1930. He was the first to develop a recipe for abalone and place it on a commercial menu, in 1908, at a time when Japanese Americans, including abalone divers, were a significant presence on the wharf. Photo: Courtesy Fisheries Historian Tim Fields



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If you love dining on Monterey abalone, you have an early 20th century German restaurateur and Japanese immigrants to thank.

Their legacy will be celebrated this weekend in all kinds of ways at the first Japanese American Heritage Days festival at Monterey's Old Fisherman's Wharf, but you can also learn about their delectable contributions in the accompanying vintage photo gallery, and in the popular weekly "Wharf Walks" led by fisheries historian Tim Thomas.

Thomas is curator of the Heritage Center of the Monterey Peninsula's Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), which is co-sponsoring the free weekend celebration with the wharf association. He also has a brand-new book, "The Abalone King of Monterey: 'Pop' Ernest Doelter, Pioneering Japanese Fishermen and the Culinary Classic That Saved an Industry," due May 6 from History Press (\$15.99).

"Pop" Ernest, as the German entrepreneur and chef was widely known, earned his nickname "the Abalone King" by developing a recipe for the rubbery red mollusk at his restaurant on Alvarado Street around 1908. Its fame spread at the 1915 World's Fair in San Francisco, and Doelter started shipping abalone steaks on ice to restaurants throughout California.

His restaurant flourished till 1952, but he couldn't have met the overwhelming demand for abalone (which ultimately led to today's ban on commercial diving for it) without the expertise of Japanese immigrants. They introduced diving in wool suits and bulky helmets, thus greatly reducing the risk in Monterey's chilly waters, and specialized in separating the gastropod's flesh from its shell.

The Issei (first-generation Japanese Americans) and Nisei (second-generation) also aided salmon and sardine fishing in the bay and worked in—or ran—canneries on Cannery Row, before being forced to abandon their homes and businesses in 1942. Some 3,800 Central Coast residents were among the more than 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry sent to internment camps by federal order during World War II.

Thomas made local headlines in November when he discovered a petition signed by John Steinbeck, Robinson Jeffers, and other prominent Monterey figures supporting the return of Monterey's Japanese American citizens in 1944, when many people in the area were still expressing deep distrust of their former neighbors and coworkers.

Not long after the war ended, the sardine fishery in Monterey Bay collapsed, and Cannery Row fell into neglect. But the contributions of Japanese Americans to its early success have not been forgotten, nor has Doelter's recipe—demand is still high for the abalone now farmed one wharf over from Old Fisherman's Wharf.

Fittingly, you can sample both abalone and Japanese dishes during the May 3-4 Japanese American Heritage Days, which also includes talks by Thomas, a photo exhibit, and demonstrations of abalone helmet diving, origami, ikebana and bonsai, gyotaku (stencil fish printing) and kendo (martial arts). Chef Bruce Brown of CSU Monterey Bay will demonstrate cooking abalone, while Ozeki Sake will provide a sake cask for a traditional ceremonial opening.

*Details: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, May 3-4, Old Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey,
Free*