

# FISHERMEN SPOTLIGHT:

## MARTIN FISH CO



An interview with David, Lisa, and Erika Martin who share the history, experiences, challenges, and hopes for a family-run seafood market

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When David Martin took over the family business in 1975, he wasn't just leading a business; he was carrying on a family legacy that would continue for generations to come. Martin Fish Company was established in 1956 as Martin Brothers Inc., but the family's history of fishing began long before that.

Now 80 years old, David has many experiences to look back on to help him guide the younger generations of his growing family. His first memories of fishing were of catching endless amounts of fish with his dad when he was just ten years old. He began surf clamming with his dad at 14, and it was around this time that his dad and uncle had the idea to start Martin Brothers, Inc., which would later turn into Martin Fish Company. David's grandfather, who was also a fisherman, moved to the United States from Sweden and passed this livelihood down to his children. When his children grew older, they eventually got their own boats and passed on the family traditions to David's generation. The Martin family is a foundational part of Ocean City's commercial fishing industry, as they have been in the area since the early 1900s and were the first in Ocean City to own a steel boat, which were revolutionary at the time for being much easier to maintain than wooden boats. "It [fishing] was all we knew", said David as he reflected on his family's past.

In his early years, David worked a variety of jobs, from enlisting in the Navy to building boats at Salisbury's Christ Craft factory. It didn't take long, however, for David to make his way back to the family fishing business, and in 1975 he began leading the operation. The 1970s were a time when the OC Commercial Harbor in West Ocean City was bustling with many companies and boats. At this time, fishing was simple and big catches were relatively easy to come by.

VOICES  
OF THE  
COASTAL BAYS



David and Erika pose together on the dock of Martin Fish Co

David fondly remembers fishing about fifty miles offshore in the winter when trips would last for about a week at a time. He explained that they would "work for most of the day to find a good tow of fish. When you finally got a good tow and iced them down in the hole, that was a good time."

Although David has since retired, Martin Fish Co. continues to be a family-run business today. David's daughter, Erika, started helping with the business at a very young age and is a huge contributor to Martin's success today. She aided David with deliveries when she was in kindergarten and then started helping her mom, Frances, in the market as the invoice keeper. She moved to work in office operations and retail management when she was 17 and has been there since. Despite working in the office, she still also loves to help with grading fish, shoveling, packing ice, and working on the water, as she likes being outside and moving around. If you have eaten some of Martin's products in recent years, there is a good chance Erika had her hands on it at some point in the process. Whether in the packing, record-keeping, retail, or shipping process, "she [Erika] is all over that fish from start to finish", says Lisa. The Martins believe that several people would need to be hired in Erika's place if she were to ever leave the operation. Her hard work is greatly appreciated by her family, who gave her the honor of having a company boat named after her - The Atlantic Girl.

While the Martin family has abundant experience with catching fish themselves, a large income generator and a huge draw to their business is their packing service. When fish are brought to the docks from boats returning from sea, it is important these fish are promptly and properly packed with ice to ensure their freshness. To the delight of many fishermen in the region, packing fish is Martin Fish Co.'s specialty. Before fish are packed, however, they must go through a grading process that sorts fish by size. Grading takes place on a long table on the deck of Martin's that acts as a conveyor belt and takes the fish through a washer. People along the table are responsible for picking out a specific size of fish to pack in boxes while the rest of the fish continue to the end of a table where they go into a separate box. If necessary, this box will then be further sorted. Several things affect this grading process, such as fish species, market demand, and product destination. For example, David explained that farther north, "jumbo size" is considered bigger than "jumbo size" in Maryland. And, if the market for that particular time is saturated with a certain size of fish, graders can adjust numbers to avoid further market saturation and ensure more profit. Depending on the fish, Martin Fish Co. can pack around 10,000 pounds of fish in one hour, and other fish, like flounder, take a little longer to sort at around 5,000 pounds an hour because there are three sizes. Once all fish are sorted, they are packed with ice and either taken to the market or shipped elsewhere to be sold. To an outsider looking in, the grading table may look like a confusing puzzle, but Erika and the other staff members at Martin's have mastered the process.



The ice house serves as storage for the ice used during the packing process.

As their packing process draws in many fishermen, there are many moving parts that Erika must coordinate every week to keep the operation running smoothly, and factors like prices, services, and time of the year affect the planning process. Surprisingly, coordination is very busy for Martin's towards the end of the year, as fishermen are out trying to catch the rest of their allotted quota for the year. Last December, Erika coordinated eight boats coming in the last week, with five coming in on December 31st alone. While eight boats may not sound like a significant number, a single boat can bring in 25,000 pounds of fish or more, and they are each trying to beat the others to be the first boat packed. Winter also brings the challenge of packing fish in cold, snowy, and icy conditions.

Martin Fish Company has not been immune to the many challenges that Ocean City fishermen have faced over the years. In the 1970s, right around the time he took lead at the company, David remembers helping the fight to save the commercial harbor from condominium development. In 1976, the 200-Mile-Limit, or the Magnuson-Stevens Act, went into effect, which established a 200-mile fishery conservation zone in all waters surrounding the United States. This fishery conservation zone was established to preserve fish stocks in waters that were not previously regulated, and this made way for the creation of policies that fishermen had not previously encountered. According to David, certain policies that came from this regulation devastated a mass of fishermen, as the policy was not matching up with the needs of the fishermen. Many were forced to fish at times that did not economically make sense for them, such as when fish were not as abundant or the weather was unsafe. At this point, the harbor was, as David describes it "almost dead", and Martin's was packing very small amounts compared to years past. Although Erika was a small girl at the time, she also remembers this lull in Ocean City's commercial fishing industry. Eventually, an Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) system was put in place for some fisheries, which allowed fishermen to apply for and trade shares of the Total Allowable Catch, which is the catch limit set for a specific fishery for a fishing season; this gave fishermen more flexibility and success.

David believes one of the most important fishing policies put in place was the regulation of mesh size, which ensures that the mesh size of the net fit the size of a specific fish being regulated. This ensures small and immature fish are able to pass through the nets used by fishermen and allows the continued capture of larger, more desirable fish.

Being conscious of the mesh size in his nets was something David did long before regulations were put in place. He wanted to “ensure the small fish were able to grow up, reproduce, and keep fish populations stable for the coming years.” Today, mesh regulations around Ocean City exist for fish like flounder, seabass, squid, butterfish, and porgys. Mesh regulations and other policies ensure the conservation and longevity of healthy fish populations. While regulations certainly brought challenges to the fishermen, David understands their need for them and recognizes the importance of conserving fish populations. “That’s your livelihood ahead of you; you better protect it.”

Now, after the industry has had some years to adapt, activity in the harbor has increased slightly. However, David is unsure about the future of Ocean City’s commercial fishing industry. As the original harbor fishermen are growing older, David sees fewer and fewer young people stepping up to take over. He recognizes that rising equipment and maintenance prices make it very difficult for young people to get their start in the industry if they do not inherit any resources or skills from mentors. David was able to save a great amount of money on building and repair costs by doing it all himself - something that was passed down to him by his father and uncles. He is very grateful for the experiences he had at a young age and attributes being able to make a good living on fishing to “some good people helping him on the dock and a family who knew what they were doing”.

Despite the challenges commercial fishing brings, David thinks that Martin’s will be “just fine” as long as they have some seasoned fishermen with good boats coming into the harbor. However, new challenges constantly arise, and for that reason, the Martin family wants to do what they can to highlight all of the unique history and great seafood found right in the commercial harbor. While it is a wonderful and exciting industry that is full of very hard workers, David says to some degree, it is a dying profession, and we need to do what we can to support it.

Martin Fish Company has a market located right in the OC Fisherman’s Marina at 12929 Harbor Road in West Ocean City. There, you can find a wide array of fresh and local seafood that was brought in right to their dock. You can also order online right from their website!

However, they want consumers to be aware that buying seafood from their market is a unique and local experience, unlike that of buying from a grocery store. Ocean City offers a great diversity of local seafood, and Martin’s encourages consumers to broaden their horizons with seafood that isn’t as well known to seafood lovers, such as the unique Jonah Crab and Red Crab. Martin’s also encourages consumers to visit their market early, as they only keep the freshest product out, which can cause the shelves to empty quickly. Martin’s also carries seafood that is not local to our area, but Erika’s decades-long relationships with fishermen from all over ensure that they are providing the freshest and best quality seafood regardless of where it comes from. At the market at Martin Fish Company, you will be able to find where everything was caught, and Erika is happy to answer any questions a customer has.



**A sign hangs outside the Martin Fish Co market to commemorate the company's start.**

Commercial fishing is undeniably a very challenging profession, but David always found himself drawn to the lifestyle and “never really wanted to do anything else”. David retired when he was 70 years old, but ten years later, he still has amazing stories to tell and reminisces on the days he could go out on the water. “If I could go out on the water right now, I would”. Fortunately, David was instrumental in building a wonderful business with his family and has many people eager to continue the tradition. Even today, David is building a boat that he will use to help teach his ten-year-old great-grandson the craft.

The Martin family was a key part in shaping the history of Ocean City’s commercial fishing industry. David would like to emphasize that “There have been many other hard working fishermen over the years who have invested in boats and fishing to make the O.C. Commercial Harbor a success. It’s not all about our family.” As Erika said, “the local fishing community is a real extended family.”

After decades of providing the community with fresh seafood, Martin’s continues to build and protect the heritage found in the OC Fisherman’s Marina. Buying local seafood gives back to local fishermen, like the Martins, and ensures that Ocean City’s commercial fishing industry can persist for many years to come. Whether online or in the shop, when you buy from Martins, you are sure to be #WhereTheBoatsUnload and buying a fresh #TrawlerToTable product.



A large fishing line spool reads the Martin Fish Co motto "Trawler to Table".

**You can find Martin Fish Co., LLC at...**

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This interview is part of the *Voices of the Coastal Bays* interview series. Voices of the Coastal Bays is a project by the Maryland Coastal Bays Program that aims to promote local commercial fishing companies, highlight the local fishing history, and educate on the seafood found in our waters. For questions regarding this project, please reach out to Liz Wist at [lwist@mdcoastalbays.org](mailto:lwist@mdcoastalbays.org). You can find more on this project at [mdcoastalbays.org](http://mdcoastalbays.org) or on our social media pages.

