

The Water That Feeds Us Is Speaking. Are We Listening?

By Christopher Connolly

On the Great Lakes, water is never just water.
It's memory.

It remembers steel mills and paper plants, quiet coves and Friday fish fries. It remembers what we took from it — and what we asked it to carry when we weren't paying attention. Long after smokestacks went silent, the lakes kept the receipts. For decades, public health tried to warn us with numbers. Parts per million. Monthly serving limits. Decimal points that were technically precise and culturally useless. People nodded, then went home and cooked the same fish the same way they always had. Not because they didn't care — but because math isn't how culture learns. Michigan understood that earlier than most. Instead of amplifying fear, it translated risk. Choose smaller fish. Clean away the fat. Cook so the oil drips off. Use your hand as a serving guide. The science didn't change — the language did. And trust followed. That lesson matters now more than ever.

Today, Americans don't just ask what's safe to eat. They ask who to believe. Mercury never left. PFAS arrived quietly and stayed loudly. Advisories multiplied. PDFs stacked up. Confusion became its own public-health risk. When people feel overwhelmed, they don't become cautious — they disengage.

Here's the truth we keep circling without saying plainly:
There isn't a single "safe fish."
There are safer patterns.

Smaller, younger fish carry less history. Bigger, older predators tend to accumulate more of it. That logic holds whether you're standing on a pier in Michigan or scanning a seafood counter in Arizona. This isn't fear-based guidance. It's pattern recognition — and patterns are how cooks think.

Which is exactly why chefs belong in this conversation.

Every day, cooks translate science into action — three meals at a time. In hospitals, schools, and community kitchens, they balance nutrition, safety, cost, and dignity under real-world

constraints. They don't need more warning labels. They need clarity they can pass on. That's where *Water to Table* comes in.

Water to Table rests on a simple premise: if we can teach people how to read a menu, we can teach them how to read the water behind it. Not through charts and caveats, but through stories, visuals, and lived practice. Check the water. Choose wisely. Clean with intention. Create with care.

This isn't about turning everyone into a toxicologist. It's about restoring confidence without pretending risk doesn't exist. When people understand *why* guidance shifts — why one lake reads green this year and yellow the next — they stay engaged instead of tuning out.

And engagement is what actually protects public health.

The lakes are cleaner than they were fifty years ago. That didn't happen by chance. It happened because science learned to speak plainly, and communities were treated as partners, not problems. PFAS is the next test of that relationship — not just whether we can measure it, but whether we can explain it without panic or paralysis.

Water has a long memory. So do communities. If we want the next generation to believe clean water is normal, we have to show our work — clearly, honestly, and in ways people can live with. Not from a distance, but from the kitchen table outward.

The future of fish safety won't be decided by better warnings alone. It will be decided by whether we're willing to translate data into daily life — one meal, one map, one shared language at a time.

Because the water is still talking. And this time, it's asking us to listen with intention.