

# Offshore Net and Line Fishery

*Biagio and Nina Spinella*

When you think of the Northern Territory's most iconic fish, people automatically think of the big Barramundi. But for Nina and Biagio Spinella from Austop Fisheries, their signature Territory fish is the petite Sardine.



Coming from a long line of fishermen, Biagio's father was born in the Sicilian fishing village of Oliveri. He remembers the stories his father told of his time in the village before migrating to Australia in 1962.

"They would fish off the coast with mesh netting and lines, everything was done by hand and the whole village survived off it," Biagio said. "A lot of the early fishermen in Darwin came from that village – my uncle was first and then my Dad."

***Born in Darwin, fishing is in Biagio's blood – even his first word was 'fish'.***

So, it seemed natural to continue the family tradition and start his own company with his wife Nina. Austop Fisheries primarily harvests Grey Mackerel but after discovering masses of small pelagic fish, they diversified and explored the possibility of harvesting and distributing Sardines.

"It takes us about one year to catch 100 tonnes of Grey Mackerel per boat, whereas we can harvest 40-50 tonnes of small pelagic fish in a week," Biagio said. "We only do one or two trips a year because there are difficulties with the value of the product and the viability of the operation."

"We are the only ones in Darwin who harvest Sardines. The Northern Territory is our main market and locals can find our sardines right here at Fisherman's Wharf, but a lot of people don't know we have them. They are mostly fished down south so people don't recognise them as a Territory fish."

Austop supply their products to fish markets around Australia and local restaurants like PM Eat & Drink, Rachael's Seafood Shack, Frying Nemo and Spice Garden, to name a few, but the trade is limited by international imports.

"Imports really impact our business – Australians do want to eat local seafood but sometimes the price difference of imported seafood gets in the way," Nina said. "We could be harvesting a lot more Sardines than we currently do, but we also want to be sustainable."

***"Fishing is our life, we need to have a tomorrow and so do future generations."***

Despite the concerns and issues faced by the local fishing industry, the Spinellas are passionate about what they do and would not change anything.

"We are proud of what we do, we are local, our product is local, and the product is organic," Nina said. "At the end of the day, it's real food, there are no chemicals, preservatives or additives."

***Nina and Biagio passed these passions and the family tradition onto their three daughters from a young age.***

"The first time I went out on the boats with Biagio, I had a 12-month-old daughter and it was amazing!" Nina said. "It's an experience you cannot imagine until you have had the opportunity to do it. Whenever we got the chance during school holidays or Christmas, we would all go out to sea together. The girls got to see things other kids couldn't. They got to appreciate the hard work that goes into harvesting the food we all eat."

***Biagio had his own fond memories of having the girls out on the boat when they were young.***

"Because we fish at night, during the day I would anchor the boat and teach the girls to fish and they loved it," he said. "At night, they would watch me cast the first nets before going to bed. Then I would work all night and they got to see me harvesting the fish when they woke up."

"Commercial fishing is hard work but I would never do anything else. I am a qualified refrigeration mechanic too but I love fishing and love that we not only supply the Territory, but we also get to send our products down south and showcase the range of amazing seafood the Territory has to offer."