


WILD CATCH

North Pacific salmon are an Alaska treasure

BY ERIC LUCAS



Almost everything about this summer morning in Alaska's Copper River Delta is silver. A metallic sheen ripples atop the rolling curves of the Eyak River. Mist lifting from the wetlands filters early light through riparian willows whose leaves and branches are pewter-hued. The gravel bar I'm on is a long comma of platinum pebbles. And the fish I've just landed is silver, in name and color and meaning.

As I heft the 6-pound beauty in the time-honored way of fishermen everywhere, its lower jaw slung along my fingers, a shaft of sunlight picks out a faint iridescent rainbow along its side. Before I rest the coho salmon on the sand, I pause to appreciate the simple majesty of this gift of the ocean, its graceful shape and strong spine, and its never-ending story. Four years ago this fish was born here, hatched from one of millions of eggs laid in cool waters along a nearby gravel bar. Since then it has traveled thousands of miles, grown a hundredfold and accomplished a complex ocean navigation that returned the fish to this very river to spawn, continuing a cycle as ancient as

the towering mountains just a couple of miles away.

This salmon and its countless compatriots represent one of the economic, cultural and culinary foundations of the North Pacific—billions of dollars and millions of dinners. It's a symbol of many of the things we hold precious on the West Coast. It is revered for the recreation it provides, and for the heritage it represents, reaching back to the first arrival of humankind in the Western Hemisphere.

IT'S THE FIRST SALMON I've caught this year. Were I a fisherman centuries ago, this would be a sacred moment. I'd lay the salmon carefully on the ground and thank it for confirming the annual arrival of its kind. At home, I'd add a traditional prayer, such as:

*Now I will go and lay you down on this mat,
which is spread on the floor for you, Swimmer.
This is your own saying when you came
And gave a dream to my grandfathers.*

That prayer, adapted from a book by Native-culture popularizer Hilary Stewart, is part of a ceremony with which Alaska commercial fisherwoman Claire Lukaitis and her family greet the first salmon they catch each summer at their home near False Pass, in the Aleutian Islands. Lukaitis is not just a second-generation fisher; she and her sister, Teal, operate a thriving website, Salmon Sisters, which purveys T-shirts, sweatshirts, food products, posters, towels and a hundred other items—some designed by the two sisters, most made by Alaska artisans, all of it salmon-centric.

"In my family, salmon is everything," says Claire. "And for we Alaskans, it's our major source of pride. It's our identity."

Claire and Teal, who fish all summer, began their business as something to do in the off-season, which they spend in Homer. They naturally chose an enterprise focused on the centerpiece of their lives. Claire says her earliest memories are of working with her mother to catch salmon on the beach in front of the family homestead in False Pass. That's where the Lukaitis family today performs their first salmon ceremony, catching, cleaning and cooking the fish right on the beach.

First or not, each single salmon represents a stupendous natural system. Every year, 5 billion salmon or more ply the North Pacific, born in streams around the Pacific Rim, and then feast on and fatten in the food-rich salt waters, such as the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea. Japan, Korea, Russia, Canada and the United States are the major homes for, and consumers of, Pacific salmon, and these countries are also members of fisheries management organizations that oversee their industries.

While Alaska's annual harvest is in the hundreds of millions of fish, the Alaska commercial industry is one of the few human resource-extraction enterprises that seems, in most respects, to be



Salmon Sisters Claire and Teal Lukaitis harvest sockeye salmon with a gill net.

sustainable. For one thing, unlike other places, wild salmon still dominate. In Alaska, hatchery-bred fish are just a third of

the harvest each year, and are mostly pink salmon headed for the canning industry. The rest—king, coho, chum and sockeye—are largely modern wild descendants of native fish that have spawned in North Pacific waters for millions of years.

The overall statistics for Alaska salmon are huge. Annual harvests can near (even exceed) 200 million fish and 1 billion pounds. The sales volume approaches \$1.5 billion. More than 30,000 individuals earn a living in commercial fishing, and several Alaska cities, such as Petersburg, Cordova and Kodiak, like to say they are the largest commercial fishing ports in the United States.

Even more interesting, from the point of view of cultural and geographical heritage, is the fact that Alaska salmon runs are, by and large, as strong as ever. For example, about 50 million sockeye return to the rivers, streams and lakes of the Bristol Bay drainage each year, supporting one of the world's largest single commercial fisheries. Each summer, the populations of remote towns such as Dillingham and King Salmon swell by thousands as fishermen and onshore workers labor long days to harvest, process, pack and ship the run.

"Isn't it amazing that here is a natural resource which we can harvest half of, or more, and it simply replenishes itself year after year?" observes University of Washington Professor David Montgomery, author of a highly regarded book about salmon, *King of Fish* (a phrase he borrowed from 17th century author Izaak Walton). Montgomery is a geomorphologist who studies river systems. When asked to explain how a geologist came to study and write a book on salmon ("Not exactly an obvious progression," he concedes), he describes the complex, ancient relationship between salmon and the landscape.

"As the western edge of North America was crumpled, the mountains evolved and the fish evolved along with them,"

Montgomery says. “That’s why we have six different species, and in the North Atlantic there is only one. As the landscape changed, it opened up new habitat for new kinds of salmon.”

Landscape changes also opened up new habitat for humans, and Montgomery is just as impressed by how Western Hemisphere peoples have incorporated salmon into their cultures.

“I’d say salmon helped humans colonize Alaska, especially along the coastal route, and spread down North America,” Montgomery says, adding that this remains true whether you believe that humans came to our continent across the Bering Land Bridge (near Nome), voyaged across the North Pacific in canoes, or both.

Notice that Montgomery refers to six species of “salmon,” while most biologists and officials recognize five ... for now. The outlier is steelhead, which is similar in almost every respect to other salmon, and has been reclassified several times from a type of salmon to a type of trout, and back again.

Steelhead are highly revered by recreational fishermen, as are chinook and coho, but these are lesser elements in the commercial salmon fishery. Pink salmon are the backbone of the canning industry; sockeyes (“reds,” as they are sometimes labeled) are also a significant element. Both make up most of the salmon you find in cans or the freezer case in grocery stores.

For fresh catch and preparation, chinook (king), sockeye and coho are the most sought-after species. All three have their advocates, and as most Alaska fisheries include all three, most commercial fishers catch all three. Thus you can ask about favorites as a ready conversation starter with any Alaska fisherman—or any Alaskan, for that matter.

But when you detour into a related question—“Where is the best salmon from?”—a vast and entertaining debate erupts. In Alaska, salmon are caught from the Bering Sea near Kotzebue down to the Canadian border south of Ketchikan. There are thousands of runs—and many thousands of advocates. Luckily it is a good-natured dispute. If you are in Cordova, the main question is

Above: A fishing crew from Copper River Seafoods off-loads their catch of salmon.

Below: Recreational fishermen dipnet along the mouth of the Kenai River in a short personal-use opening in July.

COPPER RIVER SEAFOODS



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BY THE NUMBERS

97 pounds: Largest salmon ever caught, according to official records kept by the International Game Fish Association. Rumors persist about catches of kings over 102 pounds.

6: Species of salmon worldwide. Five inhabit the North Pacific (see p. 82) and are grouped in the *Onchorynchus* genus; Atlantic salmon are found in both North America and Europe, and are classed as *Salmo*.

500–700 million: Approximate annual commercial catch of salmon in the North Pacific. Numbers vary widely from year to year; 2014 was one of the biggest years ever, with close to 1 billion fish caught in Canada, Japan, Korea, Russia and the United States.

\$5.9 billion: Annual economic activity associated with Alaska seafood industry.

60,000: Number of Alaska seafood-industry jobs, the largest private-sector industry by direct employment. —E.L.

THE KINGS OF FISH: NORTH PACIFIC SALMON

There are five generally recognized species of salmon native to the North Pacific. All of them have at least two commonly used names, and all generally follow a four-year life cycle in which they are born in freshwater streams and rivers; migrate to the ocean in their first year; spend two or three years at sea; then return to the stream where they were born to spawn and die. All are included in the *Onchorynchus* genus biologically.

King: aka chinook, blackmouth, spring. The biggest salmon of all, these fish, when mature, range from 15 to 97 pounds or more. Their “spring” nickname derives from the fact they generally are the first salmon

to return to spawning streams. Seafood connoisseurs often rate chinook the best-tasting salmon.

Silver: aka coho. Usually the second-biggest salmon, their nickname derives from the polished glint of their bodies. Anglers prize their tendency to fight, with flashing leaps out of the water, when hooked. The record silver in the North Pacific hemisphere is 27 pounds. Coho are often found in seafood restaurants and on restaurant menus.

Chum: aka dog, keta, calico. Though they may rival silvers in size—up to 15 pounds—the gamy flavor of these late summer and autumn-running

salmon makes them favorites for smoking; their vast numbers make them attractive for commercial canning. Keta is a modern name aimed at broadening its appeal as a fresh fish.

Pink: aka humpy. The smallest salmon’s nickname is due to the large hump spawning pinks grow as they return to their home streams. Though rarely seen on restaurant menus, it is a fine fish for cooking. It’s the most numerous salmon in the North Pacific.

Sockeye: aka red. Distinguished by their brilliant crimson and green spawning colors. Ranging 5 to 8 pounds (the record is 16 pounds), the sockeye is prized

for its great abundance in Alaska waters. Many gourmets consider its flavor superior to king salmon.

Numerous other anadromous fish populate the streams and salt waters of the North Pacific. Most famously, steelhead, which is closely related to rainbow trout, is avidly sought by anglers. For one thing, it is found in coastal rivers in mid-winter, providing food and sport when other salmon are long gone.

Cutthroat trout also have anadromous races, as do Dolly Vardens, which are closely related to brook trout and Arctic char. —E.L.



WE TURN SECLUDED INTO INCLUDED



North Pacific salmon species: 1) king; 2) silver; 3) chum; 4) pink; 5) sockeye.

which species of salmon you like best, caught when and cooked how. In Bristol Bay, Valdez, Homer, Juneau, Sitka, Fairbanks and across the state, similar divisions pertain.

IN CORDOVA'S PIONEER HALL, just a 15-minute drive from the river where I caught that marvelous silver, a hundred local residents have gathered for a fundraising dinner to benefit the Copper River Watershed Project, which represents stakeholders throughout the

river's Southcentral Alaska domain and works to keep the Copper River fishery healthy through habitat preservation and improvement, watershed education and advocacy, and community stewardship.

The Copper River system not only is big—larger than any of 10 other states, including Maryland, Massachusetts and Hawai'i—but also holds one of the most celebrated salmon populations. Copper River king and sockeye salmon represent what may be the most successful wild food “brand,” a designation that brings annual celebration, colorful publicity, high prices and market favor across the United States.

When the season started this May, the first catch was flown on an Alaska Airlines plane to Seattle, occasioning a first-salmon ceremony vastly different in style—but not meaning—from traditional indigenous events such as the one the Lukaitis family adopted. A

red carpet was laid out on the Sea-Tac tarmac near a plane that touched down on May 17 with 20,000 pounds of salmon. The captain descended with a 40-pound Copper River king and formally delivered it to Seattle chefs Ethan Stowell, John Howie and Sam Burkhart for the seventh-annual Copper Chef Cook-off.

Similar fanfare greets the first Copper River fish in major dining markets across the country, and it's hard to remember that, once upon a time, the Copper River fishery was no more distinguished

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than any other among Alaska's major runs. Then 20 years ago, several Cordova commercial fishermen, led by Bill Bailey, decided to improve their harvest and processing techniques to provide a better quality fresh salmon. They installed cleaning and chilled fish storage onboard; spiffed up the handling systems on shore; and arranged to fly the fish as quickly as possible to the nearest major market, which was Seattle.

Bailey and his partners founded Copper River Seafoods, and the handling techniques CRS pioneered have spread across the industry. Bailey and his group are now considered visionaries, and many other areas have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to achieve similar visibility.

So far, none has been as successful as the Cordovans, whose Copper River/Prince William Sound Marketing Association is akin to the Blue Diamond almond growers and Ocean Spray cranberry producers who have achieved such wide recognition.

Bailey disclaims guru status, though. "I'm just a commercial fisherman who wanted to get a slightly better price for his fish," he demurs.

And he is certain the secret to Copper River's success is simple:

"It's the best fish. No doubt."

He grins, knowing full well the implications of his assertion.

"Well, anybody can say anything," Heather Hardcastle, a Juneau fisherman, replies good-naturedly about Copper River's supposed superiority. She and her husband, Kirk, operate Taku River Reds, a company that provides a branding platform for fish caught near the mouth of the Taku River. Each fish sold under the TRR label is not only cleaned onboard the vessel minutes after it is caught, it is processed, immediately placed in chilled storage, and handled with keen care all the way to markets such as Midwest grocery chains. TRR has been in business 10 years, and buys from a dozen other Southeast Alaska fishing families.

"The best thing we can do to honor our land and our families is to treat the

fish as well as possible,” Hardcastle explains. “Our customers located elsewhere in the country are often amazed that, up here, families still make a good living—actually, a good life—fishing.”

CLAIRE AND TEAL LUKAITIS’ four-year-old Salmon Sisters enterprise has become successful, with North America customers and sales beyond anything they ever expected, but Claire says she remains cautious in her entrepreneurship.

“People are looking for a connection to the sea and the land, and Salmon Sisters seems to help provide a bit of that.” She smiles. “My mission is that I want more Americans eating Alaska seafood, but I’m not going to give up fishing for this business.”

That sentiment epitomizes the deep bond to their home that so many Alaskans hold, and salmon perfectly embodies both the meaning and the reality. State regulations allow every Alaska resident to catch, for personal use, 30 salmon a year. Thus a large proportion of Alaskans take a weekend in July or August to travel to areas such as the Chitina River, a Copper River

tributary that’s popular with both Fairbanks and Anchorage residents, and, using nets, take home bushels of fish. It’s a truism about Alaska that most every house has two freezers, one for salmon and one for game.

Anna Hoover, who is a Bristol Bay artist with Aleut and Norwegian heritage, is also a commercial fisher and has kept salmon at the center of her life. Among other things, she designed a popular T-shirt with a salmon drawing, used as a fulfillment for her Master of Arts in Art History degree at the University of Washington.

“Salmon is an essential source of protein and happiness to life in Alaska. Salted, pickled, smoked, poached, baked, boiled and fried, the plethora of ways we preserve it and prepare it for consumption and enjoyment is testament to our appreciation and reliance upon it,” Hoover says.

“All my life I have returned to spend summers in Bristol Bay. Many of my family members who live outside the area share in this physical, mental and spiritual need to return just as the salmon return to the same river, generation after generation. We yearn to rejoice in the awe-inspiring miracle that is literally millions of

SOUTHEAST FEAST

Although the array of Alaska seafood is broad, salmon will be the centerpiece of a July 23 event in Juneau, Southeast Feast. Organized by an advocacy group, Salmon Beyond Borders, and local James Beard–nominated chef Beau Schooler of The Rookery Café, the event offers an afternoon of tasting and learning about Southeast’s ocean bounty, along with local craft beers and spirits. Schooler, noted for his rich sockeye fillet poached in duck fat, is also hosting seafood dinners with guest chefs from the Lower 48 at his new restaurant, In Bocca Al Lupo, Thursday and Friday preceding the Saturday feast. For more information visit salmon-beyondborders.org. —E.L.

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TAKU RIVER REDS

Taku River sockeye salmon is known for its rich color and flavor.

creatures bottlenecking through a river mouth to reproduce as their parents and grandparents have. We humans somehow share in this response, returning to our home river year in and year out.”

All these wonders—the successful fishing families, the annual pilgrimages to fill household freezers with salmon, the wild, powerful beauty of the fish, not to mention the incredible, intense flavor—mark life in Alaska as in few other places in the world.

“Salmon and Alaska are synonymous,” says Melanie Brown, who fishes in Bristol Bay.

Though I am only a frequent visitor, that seems true to me. I recall one late-summer morning, kayaking in a remote bay south of Juneau, watching vast schools of pink salmon in the water beneath me, lining up in pointillist patterns as they aim for a nearby stream. The moment combines art and wonder, holding past, present and future.

Since they are in the water below me, headed for a wilderness stream just yards away, none of these salmon will be part of a ceremony for the first fish. And here in Alaska, both the land and its people are doing their best to make sure there is never a last fish. It's a never-ending story as wild and big as the state itself. ▲

Eric Lucas visits Alaska often from his home in Seattle. Sockeye is his favorite.

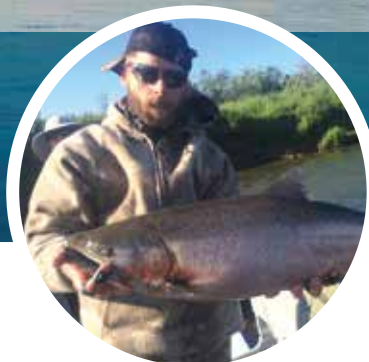
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