

AN ALASKAN FISHERMAN IN GREENPOINT

One man's double life.

BY CHRISTOPHER NICOLSON

Some miserable June nights when the rain pounds the tin roof of my tiny cabin in Graveyard Point, Alaska, the radio coughs a warning: “Seas to 10 feet, winds to 40 mph.” I pull on my foul weather jacket in the flickering light of a lantern and think back to Brooklyn. I wonder how quickly the Park Slope cocktail party smiles would fade and the “Oh, I’m so jealous of your connection to the water” conversation would falter if the whole group, iPhones and all, were invited to trudge out to my skiff.

Alternately, some sunny September afternoons, sitting on the iron benches that line the waterfront near DUMBO, savoring the final crumbs of a croissant from Almondine, I realize how lucky I am to lead this double life.

I live in Greenpoint most of the year. But since childhood I’ve spent every summer in “Graveyard Point,” a tiny, eroding spit of land in Bristol Bay, Alaska. The bright green, tundra-laden terrain is flanked by deadly sandbars and battered by colossal tides. (Our bay is home to the third highest tides in the world.) Before I was old enough to fish, I dug for shells and rocks on the sandy beach while my parents fished in our old wooden skiffs.

Our family got into the fishing business the old-fashioned way: we had no choice. My mother’s native Alaskan family has been fishing on the coast at the base of the Alaskan Peninsula for several hundred years. My parents taught my brothers and me how to run

a boat, set out nets and anchors, manage nets and be patient.

The kind of commercial fishing my family does is set netting, so-called since, by law, my net must be anchored or “set” at both ends. We fish two species of salmon: sockeye and chinook. It’s about as unindustrialized as commercial fishing gets—except for a little outboard motor I use to navigate my open-deck, 20-foot skiff and let the net out, I operate all gear by hand: coiling the lines, clearing the nets, picking the fish from the mesh, and pulling the net back into the boat. My brothers and I also sew (or “hang,” as fishermen say) and mend our nets by hand.

Even in terms of the Alaskan bush, Graveyard Point is desolate. It’s also a wonderful retreat, no roads (airplane and boat travel only), no running water (we drink rain water), no electricity and no standard telephone service (CBs and VHF’s are still in standard use), though we do pick up a single radio station. It makes announcements like, “This message goes out to Charlie in Ekok: Maggie says to come pick up your dogsled anytime. The dogs, too.”

A few years ago, after seven straight seasons of declining wild salmon prices, we wondered if we could afford to keep fishing. Neighbors were selling their boats and permits and talking about becoming sportfishing guides. Mushy, tasteless, farmed salmon from South America and British Columbia, combined with canneries that paid us 50 cents a pound (in 2001! For beautiful, wild



Photographs: Christopher Nicolson

sockeye salmon!) were chasing us out of business.

We saw good prices in fish markets outside of Alaska and my cousin Reid proposed that we find a way to skip the middlemen. But how could small-time fishers like us get our catch from the middle of an Alaskan nowhere to paying customers?

Over the next two years we assembled the permits, gear and systems to chill (or flash-freeze and vacuum-seal) our salmon, get

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them aboard a boat to the airport and fly them to Anchorage and, from there, across the country. We received generous grants from the state of Alaska, support from Slow Food, Ecotrust, and Salmon Nation, and, most importantly, interest from chefs in my other hometown, Brooklyn.



Caroline Fidanza, chef of Diner and Marlow & Sons in Williamsburg, enthusiastically found a metro-area fishmonger to pick up my fish from a New York airport, and became our first customer. Next, David Shea, chef/owner of Applewood in Park Slope became a regular customer and even hosted a “meet the fisherman” dinner. Spurred by support from these and other area chefs, our little company, Iliamna Fish Company, is slowly growing, which means my family can keep fishing.

My brother once told me, at the end of a particularly lean season, that he couldn't stop returning to Alaska to fish every summer even if he tried. He wasn't coming for money, and he'd probably be safer working on a farm, but, like the salmon, he's compelled to return to where he was made. He had no choice.

I told him that sounded right to me. 🍷

Christopher Nicolson lives in Greenpoint with his wife and son, who fish with him Alaska. Read more about his fish and the Iliamna Fish Company at www.redsalmon.com.



Previous: Looks idyllic, doesn't it? From left: Where the wild things are; mending nets by hand; drawn to the scene of spawn.