



REBECCA ROBINS

THROW BACK THE BONES

Searching for the Perfect Salmon

THE YOUNGEST OF SEVEN SONS, Mark Tupper grew up in a waterfront community in north Seattle, where over half of the families depended on the fishing industry. That was where he learned the basic lesson that there are no fishermen unless there are fish, and he never forgot it. He now spends his life finding perfect salmon and bringing them to market in the most sustainable way possible. It is not an easy path.

When he was 17, the recommendation of a gillnetter landed Mark a summer job at Port Chatham Smoked Seafood, a smokehouse and store owned by two Norwegian brothers who came to Washington from Alaska in 1959. They made cold-smoked lox of such quality that pilots from Scandinavian Airlines would pick up center cuts to take home. Julia Child visited and was equally enthralled. It was an auspicious beginning for a young man, and he was asked to stay.

But after three years, and with the hope of ownership fading, Mark moved on. This time his destination was Alaska, where he boarded Icicle Seafoods' "Bering Sea," a large processing barge towed from place to place as the season unfolded. Mark was 20 years old, but he'd paid attention during his time at Port Chatham, and within a year he was made production manager.

"I'll never forget my first week in Bristol, Alaska, and the salmon run—the 115,000 pounds of big, beautiful sockeye that first came in. Ninety-eight percent were number-one quality. I knew this was the place to be.

"But after 48 hours those perfect salmon, on ice in the hold, had degraded to cannery grade. Limp post rigor. It was painful to see that happen. Unbelievably, I was told they were all still number-one quality. The reason? Fish were graded according to the first fish brought aboard. They were graded by lot.

"I went to Alaska to learn about quality. Instead, for the eight years there, I learned about how it really works. Every year they go to Bristol Bay, they turn on the lights, and they run those fish through. It's a mad dash in the largest sockeye run in the world. They do the best they can with what they have."

Mark finally returned to Seattle to work in sales at a processing plant, but in the back of his mind he was certain there was a better way than what he'd seen: the frozen saltwater in the holds, the netted masses of fish, bruised and stressed before they were heaped on ice.

Time passed. Mark continued to work, but he never stopped looking for a smarter way. And then, the smarter way appeared. His name was Bruce Gore and his company, Triad, had been marketing hook-and-line caught wild salmon from southeast Alaska since 1978. What was remarkable about Gore was that he'd devel-



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oped a special way of catching and processing, all stemming from the realization that he was in the food business, not the fish-killing business.

One afternoon, Bruce Gore called Mark and asked if his company could use 10,000 pounds of king salmon he had in frozen storage. As Mark tells it: “We didn’t do king salmon, but Bruce asked me to come look at it. I did. And my life changed.

“Bruce kept the fish in closed totes and when he opened them, I was stunned. Every fish was perfect. Every fish, hook-and-line caught, had been immediately cleaned and stored in super freezers. It was the kind of quality I’d dreamed of. There it was.”

After fifteen years, Mark found someone whose sensibility mirrored his own, someone who found a way to respect the intrinsic quality of the catch while still working in the marketplace. Mark and Bruce became friends and when Bruce retired eight years later, he asked Mark to carry his business forward. And Mark did.

“I bought Triad, and I was in shock. I knew how difficult fishermen could be, and here I was the owner of 13 hook-and-line boats, each with a crew of three. But Bruce’s crews were different. They were family. Sometimes a father and two sons, sometimes a mother and father and a son or a daughter or a father and son and a good friend. Fishing together for years. Committed to excellence.”

Hook-and-line boats (called trollers) make up one to two percent of the fishing fleet—the rest are net fishers (trawlers). The majority of those one to two percent trollers are ice boats. But Gore’s boats—now Mark’s—had super freezers aboard and they were game changers. Instead of letting fish chill on ice in the hold, the super freezers plunged the catch’s core temperature to minus thirty degrees, holding it there while at sea. It’s how Gore had learned to, quite literally, freeze the quality of the fish at the level they had when they were first brought over the rail.

But it wasn’t as simple as putting a fish in the freezer. Gore’s boats followed a specific protocol

to maximize quality and all but eliminate aging of the catch. The trollers travel at the pace of a swimming salmon, usually trailing three to four lines on both sides, each line with 12 to 16 hooks. When a fish bites, a bell sounds and that line is brought in. The fish is stunned with a wooden dowel and carefully placed on the deck. The gill plate is cut to bleed the fish out; then, the head is removed and low-pressure water is flushed through the fish’s circulatory system. The back strap of blood down the back of the fish, the kidney, is scraped out, as are the last three bones of the back where the final blood is embedded in the bones. They now have a completely cleaned, blood-free salmon, all but devoid of bacteria, which has still not gone into rigor.

A second crewmember cleans the fish’s skin, arranges it on a tray in the freezer board and, lastly, delicately fans out the tail. Only then is the salmon placed in a tote in the super freezer. When the fish comes to shore to be stored for market, it is biologically two hours old.

Unless you have caught a salmon yourself, you do not know the taste of these fish. It’s a taste that would have been more than familiar to the original salmon fishermen of this coast.

Chief Seattle’s people, the Suquamish, had a legend that told of how the tribe learned to throw the bones of the salmon they ate back into the sea. “If you do this, I will send spring salmon to you first in the season. And then the sockeye, then coho, then dog-salmon, and last the humpback. Ever since that time, salmon in that order have come to the Suquamish waters, into the sea, into the straits and into the streams.” The legend’s unhidden meaning is that the bounty cannot be reaped unless the source is honored. But, less obvious, there is another meaning, that the key to sustainability lies not only in caring for the hunted, but in preserving the heart in the hunter.

