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october 2008

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A Maiden's Voyage

A born seafarer brings wild salmon home to the mountains

In Alaska's Bristol Bay, brutish winds rule the summer salmon fishing season. The sun sets after midnight and rises around 5 a.m. Tides are legendary here—some of the highest in the world. And potentially deadly sandbars crop up as often as storm clouds. But in describing these violent conditions, Heidi Dunlap still registers a mild smile.

A lifelong fisher, she lives most of the year in Asheville, where she and her boyfriend, Steve Maher, run The Wild Salmon Company. But the couple spends every June through August in Alaska fishing for sockeye in the Nushagak River portion of the bay, a pristine



What's In a Name: Dunlap and Maher bought *The Ferking* from a Norwegian sailor. Though they don't love the moniker, changing a boat's name is considered bad luck.



but harrowing wedge of water adjacent to the Bering Sea. "I have so much experience on the water that I don't really think about the danger anymore," says Dunlap, who casually offers tales about fishermen losing fingers in anchor winches and other everyday hazards of her job.

But early this season, Dunlap's complacency hit rough waters. While craning 800 pounds of sockeye to a tender boat, which delivers the fish to land, a 15-pound hook, used to hoist the load, broke loose. "It fell 30 feet and landed right next to us," she says. "I had never seen that happen before."

PHOTOGRAPHS (3) COURTESY OF HEIDI DUNLAP



Eyeing the dent left in the deck of her boat, *The Ferking*, Dunlap says she suddenly viewed the journey through the eyes of her new deckhand, one of a three-member crew. "Having a greenhorn with us made me realize, 'Oh my God, this is really dangerous,'" she says with an abashed laugh.

Dunlap's joy surfaces when she dismisses the perils and delves into the soulful connection she has with her work. "What I love most about fishing is just how basic

and elemental it is," she says. Out of more than 2,500 who work the bay, she is one of only about 50 women. "My job goes back to the roots of human existence. We hunt and gather, something people have been doing since the beginning of time. I fish on the same river that people have been fishing for tens of thousands of years."

Learning to Swim

Dunlap's nautical ties began in infancy. A rubber dinghy, laid out on the back deck of her parents' boat, served as her bassinet. While schoolteachers in Alaska, the couple turned to fishing as a more lucrative profession and sailed around the world for six years, starting in Hawaii and stopping in Tahiti, Australia,



"When I was a kid, I would pull out the roe from the fish and sell it to the cannery. I used the money I earned to buy Cabbage Patch dolls."

—Heidi Dunlap

and New Zealand, among numerous other ports, along the way. "My mother finally gave me swimming lessons at age three because I kept jumping off the boat and my brother would have to rescue me," Dunlap recalls.

The family eventually settled on Whidbey Island in the Puget Sound north of Seattle just in time for Dunlap to start kindergarten. She was taught to fish at age six, and got her first job as a deckhand at 15. Her duties included cleaning the boat, cooking dinner, and retrieving fish from nets. During summer breaks from the University of Florida, she'd return to fish in Alaska, where she met Maher. A degree in cultural anthropology inspired the already well-traveled Dunlap to venture to more distant locales. After stints living in Mexico and Guatemala, the couple eventually decided to move to Asheville. The town satisfied their search for a place with a West-Coast vibe closer to Dunlap's parents now living in Florida.

A tanned, compact woman with strong hands, Dunlap spent the past two winters with Maher renovating their home in Asheville's



Wild Romance: Dunlap and Maher met while fishing in Alaska.

historic Montford district. Despite appearances, the off-months aren't slow for the 30-year-old. Between making fish deliveries, preparing supplies for the upcoming season, exploring her newly discovered green thumb (inherited from her mother), and mountain biking jaunts, she tells her mom, "I'm too busy to have a job."

In addition to her titles as fisherwoman and home renovator, Dunlap considers herself a foodie (yes, salmon is a staple at her house). And as such, she's compelled to clear up a misconception that has long troubled her. "I'm always trying to educate people who won't eat wild salmon because they think it's endangered," Dunlap says. "That's true in Washington, Oregon, and California where there is logging, dams, and huge population centers. But it's different in Alaska."

ILLUSTRATION BY CATHERINE WILLIAMS

PHOTOGRAPHS (2) COURTESY OF HEIDI DUNLAP



Last Frontier: Of the rivers that feed into Bristol Bay, Dunlap and Maher most often fish the Nushagak. The crew caught 155,000 pounds of salmon this summer, selling some of the catch to an Alaskan cannery and bringing the rest home to Western North Carolina.

The state's Department of Fish and Game controls every salmon run, ensuring the fish's health and abundance. Where she and Maher fish, "there is no upstream habitat destruction—no dams, no logging, hardly any roads, and the people who live there have a very minimal impact on the land."

Wave Runner

When at sea, Dunlap says there's really no such thing as a typical day during the height

of salmon season. "The days run into each other," she explains. "During the peak time we fish literally around the clock, sleeping maybe one or two hours out of every 24."

That schedule can last for weeks. "You can get really tired working nonstop," concedes Dunlap, whose voice is unexpectedly girlish for an Alaskan fisher. "But it's amazing how revived you can feel with a short catnap. The problem is when you get too much sleep, your body rebels and begins to shut down."

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Shadows of Giants: The Aleutian Range, seen from the bay, is dotted with volcanos.

And the tight quarters don't make matters any better. *The Ferking's* cabin is about five-by-nine-feet and houses a galley, steering station, and diesel stove with just enough room for two at a time. "Cooking is always a challenging task, especially when the weather is rough and the boat is constantly pitching and rolling in the waves. I think of myself as more of a goalie than a cook, constantly trying to catch things as they roll around the cabin," Dunlap jokes. "I have lost quite a few meals to the cabin floor."

"The seas go from choppy to lumpy to big, nasty, and unforgiving in a flash."

—Heidi Dunlap

But the payoff for that grueling lifestyle can be handsome in flush seasons. "I can work my tail off for a relatively short amount of time and be rewarded with time to do other things," Dunlap says. But she is quick to point out that fishing is much like farming; there are good seasons and tough seasons. And the investment is steep. A boat can cost upwards of \$200,000, and a permit for fishing in the bay these days, close to \$100,000.

Approaching Storm

Despite the high demand for fresh Alaskan salmon, Dunlap's profession and the health

of the environment are under threat because of the Pebble Mine Project, a proposed copper and gold excavation—an issue she says is bigger than the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge controversy. "The mine would straddle two of the bay's major watersheds, imperiling both," explains Dunlap. The pollution released by the mine would be "catastrophic and irreversible" to the area's sockeye salmon—the largest and purest such population in the world.

Even major jewelers, including Tiffany & Co., have opposed the project. "I think it is absurd for us, in this country, to choose gold over salmon as a valuable resource," says Dunlap. "A mine could very well eliminate a way of life for generations of families."

She and others hope the success of *Red Gold*, a call-to-action exposé of the Pebble Mine Project, will help derail the proposal, still in its early stages. "Alaska," she stresses, "is the last frontier. People need to know this is happening."

Still there is little that choppy waters or developers can do to dampen Dunlap's enthusiasm. On the horizon, there's a plan to buy a bigger boat and bring home more fish. "My passion for fishing is an important part of who I am. I feel blessed that my father and family have given me this opportunity," she says. "I only hope we can someday pass this gift down to our own children." ▲

Shore Leave

Dunlap sells her salmon at downtown Asheville's City Market and by special order during the fall through early winter. The price for individual fillets is \$12.50 per pound, and 20-pound boxes are also available at a discount. For more information, e-mail Dunlap at thewildsalmoncompany@gmail.com or call (352) 871-8280.

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