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BARRY ESTABROOK THE WILD AND THE FARMED

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On a coast-to-coast quest, Barry Estabrook discovers—in addition to amazing wild sockeye gravlaks—that all is not well below the surface of the aquaculture industry.

Doug Adams has snagged his gill net on a submerged log, putting us at a distinct disadvantage in this game of chicken between 1,000 or so boats jammed into the mouth of the Naknek River, each trying for its share of the annual run of sockeye salmon. The result is a snarl of 32-foot aluminum vessels, one of which is headed straight for us. A good number of the guys out here are capable of ramming us out of sheer spite. Doug hollers, pointing to the taut net line off our stern.

As I brace myself for an icy plunge, I find it hard to believe that I am participating in one of the world's most strictly controlled fisheries, the only American fishery to have earned the Marine Stewardship Council's seal of approval for being well managed and sustainable, the one fishery in the country that has finally gotten it right. The Naknek, like all of Alaska's salmon fisheries, is governed by stringent environmental controls that determine when the fleet can fish to assure that a daily quota of salmon make it upstream to spawn. Biologists monitoring the salmon run open and close the "season"—often on short notice—one, two, even three times in a 24-hour period, creating a land-rush mentality in which a certain amount of testosterone is a prerequisite for a good catch.

The guy coming at us is showing that he has plenty of that, but, luckily, he finally realizes that our problem isn't bullheadedness and spins his wheel just far enough for his bow to pass a few feet in front of ours, saying, as he passes, "Not a good day."

That's putting it mildly. Doug's snagged net is ruined, and the fish aren't running. Even if they were, farmed salmon has driven prices so low that Doug says he might just as well quit fishing. Today, though, there's hope for a consolation prize. Doug has landed a few fish, so he can fulfill his promise to deliver a dozen sockeye to his friend Heidi Wolf, who runs a cottage business selling smoked salmon, mainly to visiting sportfishermen.

I know we're near her place when the playful spiciness of wood smoke tickles my nostrils. After the transfer of fish, Heidi, a no-nonsense German, scolds Doug for not having visited her recently and insists we make amends by coming and sampling her wares. "Gravlaks like we made in Europe," she says. "I cold-smoke it with wood from around here and some plants I find on the tundra." She offers me a slice on the point of her knife and waits for my reaction with a sly smile.

I suspect Heidi knows exactly how people will react to their first taste of wild sockeye gravlaks. All I can do is moan and let the smoke and salmon romance each other. Notes of herb, wood, and wild berries toy with, but never dominate, the briny pungency of the fish. Heidi has the good sense to let the salmon, with its striking blood-red flesh, speak for itself—earth, forest, river, estuary, and ocean—the legacy of a magnificent creature born in the gravel beds of a glacial mountain river. The sockeye is a sleek, silver-sided predator at the top of the Pacific food chain, driven by a primal homing instinct to cross thousands of miles of open ocean to mate and then die in the river of its birth. And this is far and away the best piece of fish I've ever tasted.

After a winter of eating the farm-raised Atlantic salmon that is always in the seafood case at my local supermarket, I had started to think that my mind was playing Proustian tricks, that what I remembered as the essential salmon taste was a nostalgic construct. Had salmon always been those pale, pinkish-orange fillets so shapely and uniform that the species might as well have evolved to look nice against a



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background of shaved ice and plastic watercress? Fresh, always available, full of omega-3 fatty acids, at \$3.99 a pound often the cheapest fish in the display case.

I bought a piece of farmed Atlantic salmon as soon as I got back from Alaska. The flesh was mushy and bland, bearing as much resemblance to the wild salmon I'd eaten in Naknek as a hard January tomato does to a homegrown beefsteak still warm from an August garden. What forces could transform a special treat into tasteless "chicken of the sea"? I wanted to find out.

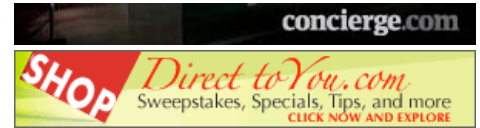
That's how I ended up swatting blackflies one June morning at the Atlantic Salmon of Maine hatchery an hour or so west of Bangor. Hatchery manager David Miller and I were leaning over a tank a little smaller than a hot tub. It held 4,000 pinkie-size fingerlings schooled in a dark green mass, snouts pointed into a gentle, artificial current. Every minute or so, a few grains of food trickled automatically from a stainless-steel dispenser.

The previous fall, technicians had extracted eggs and sperm from the parents of these fingerlings, stirred the gametes together in plastic trays, and thereby conceived a new generation of Maine Strain salmon. Don't bother looking up Maine Strain in your field guide. Nature would never have cobbled together such a creature. For 10,000 years, evolution has shaped salmon into distinct populations, each genetically unique to a specific river. Maine Strain was formulated by mingling species from the St. John and Penobscot rivers in Maine with a European variety called Landcatch. The result is a salmon that fattens nicely while circling a 100-foot pen fin to fin with thousands of identical fish.

Fish farmers haven't been able to breed out every wild trait. Maine Strain still live part of their lives in freshwater and part in salt water. For a young Alaska salmon, the journey to the sea can be treacherous, shooting through rapids and tumbling down waterfalls. Farmed salmon make the trip in specially designed tanks on the back of tractor-trailers. I caught up with Miller's smolts after they had settled into their saltwater net pens at Atlantic Salmon of Maine's Swans Island farms.

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For the rest of their lives, the fish would be in the care of Sonny Sprague, a man who could be the Colonel Sanders of aquaculture, the public face of a multinational industry struggling to maintain its hometown image. Except for a stint in the military, Sprague has spent his entire life on Swans Island (year-round population 340). He is a man of well-developed midriff, and he doles out the vowels of his few words in the broadest of Down East accents.

Sprague's aquaculture career exemplifies the vast transformation undergone by the industry. When he entered the business in 1993, he was just the sort of independent local operator that salmon farming was supposed to benefit. But big fish eat little fish, and by 2000, Sprague had sold out to Atlantic Salmon of Maine, which subsequently got taken over by Fjord Seafood ASA, a Norwegian conglomerate that has since merged with two of its competitors. Today, one third of the aquaculture industry is controlled by two huge multinational corporations, Fjord Cermaq and Nutreco.

We rode out on the Jamie Lynn, a converted lobster boat, for a closer look at the dozen net pens clustered in Toothacher Bay, home to 60,000 captive salmon. In some of the pens, schools of little salmon darted about, a few sporadically leaping clear of the water as if to show off how sleek and silvery they had become since losing the large spots that are the mark of hatchlings. In other pens, torpedo-like shadows—gigantic things—drifted through the blue-green depths.

In the back of the boat, I noticed a sack of Corey Marine Feeds Salmon Grower labeled “pigmented.” One of Sprague's associates explained that salmon fed a nonpigmented diet have whitish-gray meat. Synthetic carotenoids must be added to the food so their flesh turns the requisite shade of orange. Wild salmon get their color from krill and other small organisms in their natural diet. I scooped out a handful of Salmon Grower. It looked and smelled like the premium kibble I feed my cats.

Once a salmon has been in Sprague's care for a year and a half, it is a portly specimen weighing about 11 pounds. The end comes quickly and cleanly. It is scooped aboard a barge, killed, bled, iced, and trucked to a processing plant where it is gutted and entombed in a salmon-size Styrofoam cooler for shipment to a distributor. This assembly-line system can get a farmed salmon from net pen to dinner plate in 24 hours.

Streamlined and cost-efficient, aquaculture is booming, having tripled its output in the past two decades. A third of the seafood we eat is now farmed, and by 2025 that proportion is predicted to hit 50 percent. When modern aquaculture came on the scene, it was hailed as a “Blue Revolution.” Commercial fishermen would be replaced by fish farmers, assuring a steady supply of high-quality seafood and taking pressure off wild populations that were (and are) being fished almost to extinction. There are now more than 200 aquatic species being farmed, and many have lived up to the early promise. Filter-feeding shellfish such as clams, oysters, and mussels siphon food particles found naturally in the oceans and actually cleanse the water in which they are reared. Catfish, tilapia, and carp (popular in China) are vegetarian—and an extremely efficient way to convert plant matter into meat.

But over the years, a growing body of research has begun to cast doubt on the soundness of farming carnivorous species such as salmon. Today, the salmon-farming industry finds itself awash in criticisms from environmentalists, biologists, and restaurateurs, all of whom contend that the price of farmed salmon goes far beyond flavorless salmon steaks. “If the consumer knew the true cost of \$3.99-a-pound salmon steak, and what's in it that she can't see or taste, there is no way she would buy it,” says University of Alberta biology professor John Volpe, who has studied farmed salmon for eight years.



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An article that appeared two years ago in the respected scientific journal *Nature*, incorporating the results of nearly 100 scientific studies, brought widespread attention to the environmental shortcomings of aquaculture. "A net pen is a factory farm in the water," says Rebecca Goldberg, Environmental Defense's resident expert on aquaculture and a coauthor of the *Nature* article. But while it's illegal for land-based factory farmers to dump dung and dead animals directly into the nearest public waterway, salmon farmers can and do. Currents disperse much of the pollution, but some settles below the pens, creating a "dead zone," an anoxic (oxygen-deprived) area where rotten manure, uneaten food, and decomposing salmon corpses form a layer on the bottom that has the color and texture of blanchmange. A month after my visit to Atlantic Salmon of Maine's farms, the state's Department of Marine Resources (DMR) issued letters of concern to three aquaculture companies. One was Atlantic Salmon of Maine, for "bacterial mats, excessive feed, and anoxic conditions" under its pens in Toothacher Bay, conditions cited by the DMR as evidence of potential environmental problems.

The environmental effects of a salmon farm can extend far beyond the patch of seabed directly beneath it. For every pound that a salmon in a net pen gains, it devours commercial feed processed from two to five pounds of small open-ocean fish like anchovetta, herring, and jack mackerel. Put another way, salmon farming takes far more fish protein from the wild than it produces. As incredible as it sounds, to satisfy the appetites of the salmon in a one-acre farm, processors vacuum nearly everything bigger than a guppy from 40,000 to 50,000 acres of ocean. It's no surprise that stocks of these oily little fish are now fully exploited worldwide, leaving the aquaculture industry scrambling to formulate substitutes for fish meal and oil. Slaughterhouse by-products like bonemeal and blood meal, and feather meal (made from waste at chicken-processing plants), have been introduced into fish chow. (Atlantic Salmon of Maine does not use such feed.)

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Crowded conditions in fish farms provide ideal environments for the incubation of disease. One of the most virulent is infectious salmon anemia (ISA); the usual treatment for an outbreak is the complete destruction of all salmon in an affected pen. ISA was first diagnosed in 1984 in Norway. By the late 1990s, it had appeared in Scottish waters. In 1999, cases appeared in New Brunswick only a few miles north of the U.S. border. Two years later, ISA was found in a single pen in Cobscook Bay. In January, the DMR and the USDA ordered that all salmon in Cobscook Bay—1.5 million of them—be eradicated.

It's not surprising that some fish farmers resort to using antibiotics and other drugs. The antibiotic-resistance task force of the American Society of Microbiologists singled out aquaculture as one of its biggest concerns after disease-resistant bacteria were found in the intestines of farmed fish. A team of British and Irish scientists has shown that these resistant bacteria can move from fish farms to humans. The meat of wild fish near treated ponds contained residues of potent—and widely prescribed—antibiotics such as Cipro. All of which raises the very real possibility that a dangerous bug immune to an important antibiotic could be growing in a fish pen.

But even healthy aquaculture salmon can harm resident populations of wild fish. Docile they may be, but farmed salmon are notorious escape artists. During a December 2000 gale, more than 100,000 salmon broke free to compete directly for food with Maine's wild fish and even to crossbreed with them. The resulting offspring have genetic traits such as stubby fins and stout bodies that are fine for a pampered fish in a net pen but are hardly desirable in an endangered wild species that has to run rapids, leap waterfalls, and pursue fast-swimming baitfish in the open ocean.

As the name implies, Atlantic salmon are not native to the Pacific. But West Coast fish farmers rely on Atlantic salmon because they fare better in confined spaces than Pacific species. The effects are potentially more devastating than what could happen on the East Coast. In 1997, some 350,000 Atlantic salmon broke out of pens in Washington. By 2000, escaped Atlantics had established breeding populations in three salmon-bearing rivers in British Columbia. In some cases, the escapees have monopolized prime nest sites normally used by native steelheads. Recently, an Atlantic salmon was caught in the Doame River in Alaska, a state that has banned fish farming to protect its native salmon.

It's no wonder that, back up in Naknek, aquaculture is viewed as public enemy number one. (A popular bumper sticker reads, "Say No to Drugs. Don't Eat Farmed Fish.") After our visit to Heidi, Doug and I return to the family fish camp for dinner. Lila, Doug's mother, rules the kitchen here as she has for the 31 years that the family has fished. She serves her husband, her three sons, the half-dozen men working for them, and anyone else who drops by. Tonight, the main course is sockeye. Broiled with a bit of salt

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and pepper, the fish is every bit as delicious as Heidi's gravlaks.

We stuff ourselves in silence, and when conversation does start, it's grousing about Chilean imports and cheap farmed fish. Doug Adams used to receive \$2.40 a pound for his fish. That was before farmed salmon flooded the market and forced down prices. Lacking the marketing campaign and specialty distribution infrastructure that have made salmon from Alaska's Copper River area popular with top chefs, the fishermen of Naknek send their catches directly to a processing ship anchored offshore. There, those spectacularly flavorful fish, freshly caught from icy subarctic waters in accordance with the most stringent of environmental regulations, are flash-frozen and shipped across the ocean. The fishermen are paid just 40 cents a pound.

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