

market medley

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Salmon and the Art of Marine Engine Maintenance

Local native heads up Misty Fjord Seafoods and earns an adventurous living on Bristol Bay

Fran Kaul grew up in Minneapolis and began visiting her brother in Ketchikan, Alaska during summers starting in 1977 (at age 14). "That first summer I went out on a commercial troll fishing boat with a family friend. I was completely enamored with the ocean, fishing and boats. I had never seen the ocean or big mountains before. I knew this was something I wanted to do again". A few weeks ago I caught up with Fran to ask her more about her 28 years working in the Alaskan salmon fishery.

Q: Your bio sounds like a Jack London story, a young adventurer with a dream...

A: Well, that first year I went back to high school in the fall with a plan to return to fish each summer until I could move to Alaska to work full-time. I soon realized that to get a job on a fishing boat (especially as a woman) I needed a skill—the easiest to learn was cooking. I took a train to Seattle and "pounded the docks" at Fisherman's Terminal. I got my first full season job on a gill-netter when I was 18 (1981). I knew right away that I wanted my own boat someday, so I kept fishing journals, learned how to do gear work (mending the nets), and basic engine maintenance. Eventually I got jobs on larger boats and fished longer into the season to save enough money to buy a boat and permit. In 1986 I bought into a gillnet fishery in Bristol Bay, Alaska because it was the "hottest" fishery at the time. I paid a fortune and took out a huge loan for a boat (sight unseen), and permit one week before the season opened in a fishery I knew nothing about. I was 23 years old and crazy."

Q: Has Bristol Bay Fishery changed much since then?

A: When I became a boat and permit holder, salmon permits were selling at a record high. Fishermen were getting paid \$2.50 a pound for sockeye and many boats were

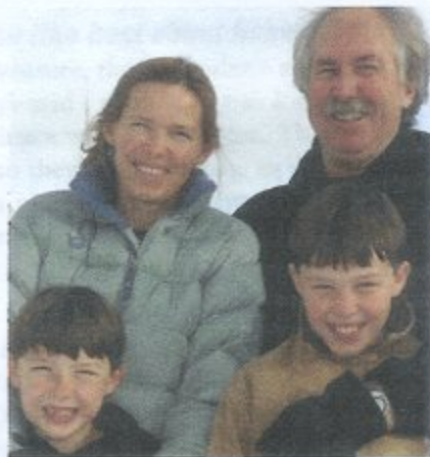
catching well over 100,000 pounds of salmon a season. This year fishermen are getting \$.60 cents a pound and an average catch is less than 100,000 pounds. Keep in mind, the sockeye run lasts roughly 6

weeks. The "peak", the time in which you catch 75% of your catch, happens in about 7 days. Twenty years ago, overseas markets were willing to buy the salmon at a premium price and fishing in illegal waters, boat ramming and even guns drawn were not uncommon events. Unfortunately, salmon quality was not a part of the equation.

Q: So, it's become a buyer's market in recent years. What caused it and what did you do?

A: When cheaper farmed salmon glutted the market, the price of salmon plummeted and everything started to change in Bristol Bay. In a ten-year period fishing permits went from hard to find at \$250,000 to not being able to give them away at \$18,000. There are around 1,500 permits allowed to fish in Bristol Bay. This freefall happened when I took five years off to have my two boys. I had just built a refrigerated boat so I could earn an additional .08 cents a pound for delivering refrigerated fish. However, there weren't many refrigerated boats, so our beautiful fish simply got mixed in with all the non-refrigerated fish. I knew then that the Bristol Bay fishery, home to the strongest wild salmon run in the world, needed to re-evaluate itself. I was disillusioned and I nearly sold out. Instead, I leased out my boat and took the season off, not knowing if I'd ever return.

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Fran and family



Misty Fjord, continued from page 1

Q: Sounds pretty dire, what happened to turn things around for you?

A: I heard about a new company, Leader Creek Fisheries, that was structured as a cooperative with a small fleet of all refrigerated boats. Their mission was to bring high quality fish to the domestic market. The co-op encouraged fishermen to sell direct to retailers and provided us the infrastructure to do it. I was very excited by the prospect of selling my own catch, so in the fall of 2003 I started Misty Fjord Seafoods.

Q: How do you keep your wild-caught sockeye salmon so fresh?

A: After the salmon's caught, it's bled, put into a refrigerated hold and delivered to a tender within hours. The tender takes the fish directly to the plant for processing. The salmon is gutted, filleted, and the pin bones are removed. Then it's glazed in a fresh water brine and immediately flash frozen before being vacuum packed. The result is excellent. I prefer to eat flash frozen seafood. In fact, with "fresh" seafood you don't know how long it was in transport, or how long it's been on the shelf, so it often has a fishy smell.

Q: You must eat a lot of salmon—any tips on preparation?

A: Frozen Sockeye is easy to prepare. My favorite is to grill, and not overcooked! I sear the flesh side briefly, then flip it to the skin side and cover the grill. Then I cook it until the flesh just begins to flake with a knife, about 10 minutes. I prefer my salmon simply grilled or with a little lemon butter... but I eat a lot of salmon and enjoy trying new recipes. My current favorite is to spread wasabi mayonnaise on it with a little added wasabi powder and simply grill it. I also love salmon prepared with Claudia's Lime marinade. Salmon Pesto Soup is a favorite of my customers. (For recipes go to www.msmarket.coop.)

Q: It seems wild salmon keeps earning even higher marks for its health benefits....

A: Wild salmon is known to be a great source of Omega 3, which is believed to reduce the risk of heart disease, inflammatory processes and certain cancers, including breast cancer. Studies show that two servings a week support optimal health. (For more on health benefits go to www.msmarket.coop.)

Q: What about the sustainability of your fishery?

A: The Bristol Bay wild salmon fishery has a bright future because it is based on a sustainable resource and is a well-managed fishery. The Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch program lists wild salmon caught in Alaska in its "Best Choices" category. Also, our company recently received the highly-coveted seal of approval from the Marine Stewardship Council.

Q: What do you like best about fishing?

A: I like the adventure, the comraderie and I like working hard. I've always said I wanted to fish long enough to share the experience with my children. They've never been to Bristol Bay, so they don't view me as a fisherman. Being a fisherman is a passion and a big part of my identity, and I'd like to share this with them. This next season my oldest son, Alec, who is 11, will join me.

Q: How does a fishing season start and what's the schedule once it's under way?

A: We spend 5 days getting the boat ready. Then we pick one of five river systems; each river system is managed independently by Fish & Game. Once we launch into the river, we don't return until the season's done, unless we have a serious breakdown. If we pick the "right" river, we get lots of fishing time. Our season is dictated by the health of the river system and the tides. The openings come a few hours after the flood tide and generally last 8 hours. Once the escapement goals in each river system are reached we get more fishing time. Last year we were fishing two 8-hour periods each 24 hours: that left 8 hours to offload, eat, repair the nets, fuel up and sleep. It was exhausting. You catch your fish, offload, "tenderize" (get food, water, fuel, showers, mail from the tender) clean the boat and anchor up. If you're lucky, you catch a little shut-eye.

Q: So, with all this hard work and adventure, what's the outlook for Misty Fjord?

A: Thanks to Leader Creek Fisheries, our small fleet of boats is making big waves. Leader Creek Co-op has provided independent fishermen the support to bring high quality seafood to the domestic market; now we can catch it and sell it both. For us, it's easy to stand behind a product that's healthy, environmentally friendly and delicious. It's been great to see that more people all the time want to know where their food comes from!

Looking for a delicious and healthy alternative to all those rich holiday foods? Misty Fjord Frozen Sockeye Salmon will be on special for \$6.99/lb. throughout December! Look for sockeye samples and recipes in our Meat & Seafood department during the sale. Go to www.msmarket.coop for recipes, health benefits and comparison of farmed vs. wild salmon.