
OUT TO SEA

BY BRIAN HALWEIL

PORGIES ON A PIN

A tenacious, delicious and underrated fish.





Above: Chopping bait (left) and filling the chum pot (right).

she wakes,” says Schaleman, referring to the girlfriend he left sleeping.

The faster the boat reaches its quota, the faster it heads back to shore. It’s an exercise in assembly-line efficiency. Bait hook, drop line, catch fish, put fish in bucket, bait hook. The deck and sides of the boat are already smeared with blood, and blood means dollars. Nick Matzkiw, another sometimes companion who fished commercially for years, but now bartends at Wolfie’s in East Hampton, predicts a short day: “Let’s get in and go bass fishing.”

“Don’t say that,” barks the superstitious captain, as he landed a couple of his own. The moon-shaped fish piled up in the baskets, imbricate like so many blushing, iridescent tiles. “They turn on us as soon as they’re here.” And just like that, the breeze died, the heat of the morning became apparent, and the fish stopped biting.

NICE FISH, GOOD PRICE

This bittersweet amusement might be part of the reason that some people have persisted as porgie fishers for so long.

“Nice fish,” said Richard Lester of Amagansett, who has been pinhooking porgies since he was 12 years old. (He’s nearly 70 now.) “They get a good price.” He was in the packing area of Stuart’s Seafood Market in Amagansett, where he was sorting through his catch, filling cardboard cartons with fish, topping them with ice and then sealing the boxes with tags noting his name, address, fishing license number, and weight of fish.

“I reel ‘em up,” he explained. “In about 15 or 20 feet of water. It bothers the muscle in your arms until you get used to it.” Mr. Lester bent his elbows and made fists, showing the accentuated muscle at the inside of his forearms. “Yeah. I’ve been doing this a long time. It’s so fun catching them, especially when you get the big ones. I have been doing it so long, I enjoy it. It does you good to be out in the salt air.”

In a good day, he might land 200 or so porgies. That yields about four cartons. In past years, before the technique was banned, fisher-

men like Mr. Lester used to “power seine,” hauling in schools of porgies with a net on a mechanized winch. “We used to catch 150 to 200 cartons at a time,” Mr. Lester said. “You barely make a living doing this.” Most fish houses in New York City charge the fishermen for the carton, ice, and freight. “If the price dips below 15 cents [per pound],” Lester said, “it’s gonna cost you more to ship a 70-pound carton than they pay for the fish.”

The price does occasionally fall below 15 cents, particularly in the spring and fall when porgies school up offshore and New England dragnets scoop up large numbers of fish. But summer is the time for the pinhookers. “Everybody gets their chance,” says Hoek, who lives in the Springs and first started fishing here with his father in the 1960s. “This time of year, the fish move into the rocks where traps and dragnets can’t reach them. It’s our turn to catch them.” The supply drops and the price jumps, sometimes above \$1.50 per pound, which is about \$4 for a big fish and which makes the fishing much more fun.

Several decades ago, a good pinhooker could make much of their annual income on porgies. “Twenty years ago, when a cab ride cost \$7 from 125th Street in Manhattan to Sheepshead Bay,” says Matzkiw, describing the trip from his bartending gig in Harlem to his 26-foot boat in Brooklyn, “on a bad day, each guy caught \$100 worth. You were allowed 400 pounds then. It cost \$8,500 each year to maintain the boat. You made that back and more just porgie fishing.”

“The price of bait goes up and the price of fish goes down. Figure that out,” Hoek adds. “The price of fuel goes up and the price of fish stays the same. That’s the worst one.” The warped economics of fishing aside, Hoek concedes that this is considerably less stressful than a former career managing a painting company. “I’m doing what I really want to do.”



EAST HAMPTON—“Ounce for ounce, I don’t think there’s anything more fun in the world than porgie fishing,” said one Sag Harbor native who has been fishing for porgies for 40 years and respectfully drops the “r” in the fish’s name. “They just keep hammering and hammering and hammering.” The smart, tenacious species puts up a fight many times their size, which makes pursuing them particularly entertaining. Except when they’re stealing your bait. In which case the steady heave of the boat, stink of the chum, and impatience of a small group of tired fishers becomes a demonstration in vulgarity, with insults slung with equal force at each other and the fish.

On one particular July day, on a 31-foot fishing boat, floating in Gardiner’s Bay, just past Bostwick Point and just north of Gardiner’s Island, a crew of three fishers (and one writer) attempted to see how quickly it could catch its 250-pound quota for these flat, oval fish that are so much fun. “Go ahead, you’re on the mark,” says Captain Bruce Hoek as he cut the engine and dropped the anchor. “This isn’t exactly where I want to be, but who cares? I think you’re on the mark. Right on top of it. Oh, hell. What do I know?”

And with this self-effacing comment, our bipolar morning of porgie fishing begins. The “elusive porgie” is the sarcastic moniker many fishers and seafood sellers use to describe this beautiful, moon-shaped fish. But stiffening regulations are the big challenge, particularly for people who continue to “pinhook” for porgies, a group of a few dozen men on the East End who catch porgies with rod and reel as other commercial fishers prefer traps or dragging nets or just ignore the fish altogether. Pinhookers won’t quickly forget this season, with steady catches of unusually large fish since June—a change that some attribute to greater restrictions on recreational fishers, who often go out in party boats that might catch more fish than permitted by a commercial fishing boat.

Hoek jumps from the captain chair to his spot on the backside of the boat, next to the rest of us, who have already baited our hooks with clam strips, cut and placed on the gunwales to expedite rebaiting. Hoek swings the boom on the downrigger—a short-armed crane mounted on the side of the boat—and drops the chum pot into the water. This metal basket weeps with black-brown clam ooze, a dinner bell of sorts for porgies and other fish.

We release the locks on our reels, which begin to whistle as our lead weights pull our baits down to the bottom. After feeling the thud of our weights hitting bottom, we relock our reels and start working our rod tips up and down, bouncing the bait off the bottom of the bay. Our simple, almost Medieval, rigs seem destined to catch fish. Each of our lines splits at the end to a contraption that looks like a wire hanger with a baited hook hanging on the two corners of the hanger that would normally hold a shirt. This typical porgie setup allows the occasional bonus of pulling up two fish at once. Which might be why porgie fishers are prone to fits of euphoria.

We start catching fish immediately. First, in near silence, as an errant comment could upset the flow. And then, as each of us begins to pull in particularly large fish or two fish at once, the bravado begins to shine. “They’re thick now,” says Hoek, the first to declare

how good things are. “We’re on top of ‘em now.” In the rapid-fire chaos, some fish gain freedom just as they leave the water, which, at least right now, is more humorous than agonizing. “Uh oh. Get ‘em on the boat! Get ‘em on the boat. He dropped him!”

The typical porgie is 1 to 1½ pounds. But this year, people are regularly catching fish twice this size, which doubles the struggle. “If these weighed 10 pounds, forget about it,” says Jim Schaleman, as he landed two fish the size of dinner plates. (The big ones are called “huggers,” since one can’t get his hands around them, but holds them by hugging the fish to his chest.) Schaleman captains a commercial fishing boat that splits its time between Florida and Long Island and often accompanies Hoek when he has extra time. “I’ll be home before

Opposite: The day’s catch lays flourescent and imbricate. **Below:** A double hook of huggers.



THE MEN FROM THE BOYS

"I hear you knocking but you can't come in," Matzkiw chants occasionally, using Dave Edmunds lyrics to ease the spots of slow fishing. And with the fishing slow, the friendly banter intensifies.

"Who cut this bait? Who cut this fucking bait?," the captain asks, noting that a bushel of shucked clams now costs \$25. He takes the rod out of his hands to recut the unnecessarily big strips. "It's an atrocity the way you cut the bait. You cut like you're codfishing. A guy doesn't need to chum with you guys fishing." (Later, in response to repeated bait criticism, Schaleman reeled in two huggers and offered, "You know what they say. Big bait, big fish.")

The crew readily offers its own comments on Hoek's shortcomings.

RECIPE

Porgies Wrapped in Grape Leaves

From *Recipes from Home* by David Page and Barbara Shinn
(Artisan, New York, 2001)

Porgies are small silver fish that swim around the rocks in Long Island Sound and Peconic Bay. Very small in the spring, they grow bigger all summer, finally becoming fat as geese by Christmas. It is important that porgies be extremely fresh, for their flesh becomes mushy even by the day after they are caught. You can substitute butterfish or sand dabs, or other small white-fleshed lean fish.

Although this takes some time to put together, most of the work can be done well before guests arrive. When it's time to eat, all you have to do is put the fish on the grill. If you haven't brined your own grape leaves, use the commercial ones that can be found in any well-stocked grocery store.

1 c. extra virgin olive oil	2 tsp. red pepper flakes
6 garlic cloves, chopped	6 whole porgies or other
6 lemon slices	small finfish, not more
6 small fresh thyme sprigs	than 1 lb. each, cleaned
6 small fresh oregano sprigs	and fins removed
6 small fresh savory sprigs	12 large preserved grape leaves
salt and black pepper to taste	olive oil, for brushing

Combine the olive oil, garlic, lemon, herbs, and red pepper flakes in a large bowl. Season with salt and pepper. Add the fish and gently toss with the marinade, making sure they are evenly coated.

Lay one of the grape leaves on a work surface. Place one of the porgies on it with its head pointing toward the stem. Place one lemon slice and one sprig of each of the herbs on top of the fish. Place a second grape leaf on top of the fish. Using butcher's twine, tie the grape leaf on top of the fish in three places. Repeat with the remaining fish. Let marinate in the refrigerator for 30 minutes, then bring them to room temperature before grilling.

Brush the wrapped fish with olive oil, season with salt and pepper, and grill them over a medium-high fire for four to five minutes on each side. The grape leaves will get slightly charred. Remove to a serving platter. Cut off the twine and serve. Serves six.

"A good captain would have all the bait cut and salted the night before," says one crew member. "At least he's chumming. He's helping us out a little bit," the other offers, before correcting, "but he should have a second chum pot ready to go down as the first comes up. He should set two anchors so that the boat doesn't swing around when the wind or tide shifts."

To which, the captain replies, "This is fucking bullshit. We ain't got gack. We're fishing in fucking gaga land." And he puts down his rod to move the boat.

"You try everything when it's slow," says Matzkiw, as we all wait for the new spot. One might use the belly of the clam versus the foot. "Huggies love the snot," was the consensus on larger porgies favoring the loose, drippy bellies. "These suckers are just smelling it today," said Hoek. "Please, somebody catch some fucking fish, so I can go home."

And just then, as the sun bursts through the clouds—usually not good for porgie fishing—the captain cries: "Porgie fishing on Gardiner's Bay. How wonderful."

FROM FERTILIZER TO FOOD

Porgies are among those delicious and versatile fish that get little exposure. The Narragansett Indians, who trapped copious amounts, called the fish, mishcuppauog, which comes from "pauog," their word for fertilizer. Early New Englanders shortened the name to scuppaug, and later to scup. Others called the fish porgy or dropped the "r" for paugy as the fish was called in old New York, and still is by people who say the word often and endearingly.

"The shops have stopped buying them in favor Chilean sea bass and all those other fish with evocative names," says Hoek, noting that porgies are more popular with ethnic communities. "Call them something else, like they did with Mako or mahi mahi or Chilean sea bass. Call them Gardiner's Bay moon fish."

Wise fishers and chefs know that the oily, flavorful fish can be done many ways. "The big ones you can filet," Hoek explains. "You can trim the fins and spines off, split 'em, butterfly 'em and grill them with olive oil, salt and pepper. You can broil 'em and eat 'em off the bone. One side will have no bones. You eat the whole thing. Fatty, white flesh. Local fish. Not real expensive. These are fat fish. There is a lot of meat on each."

Charlotte Sasso of Stuart's Seafood, where porgies line the cases much of the year, said shoppers who have been exposed to the "whole-fish craze" might consider the porgy in place of branzino, dorade, and other farm-raised offerings from the Mediterranean. Cooks might consider barbecuing unscaled porgies, and then peeling off the charred skin. People cleaning their own porgies should watch out for the sharp dorsal fins, Mrs. Sasso added, but thinks that is the only deterrent. "The risk-reward payoff is worth it," she said. "The meat is so sweet. We have this perfect fish that's less expensive than imported fish right in our own bayside. It supports the local economy and grills fabulously." □