



By Lisa Albers

Fish Tales

*Women in the Northwest
Fishing Fleet*





A Family Affair

For Fran Kaul, fishing is a family business. She fishes for sockeye salmon in Alaska's Bristol Bay, and her husband fishes for salmon, halibut and black cod in the waters of Southeast Alaska.

Kaul was only 18 when she began pounding the docks at Seattle's Fishermen's Terminal looking to be hired on one of the boats as a cook. She'd spent the previous summers catching rides on purse seiners up to Ketchikan, Alaska, where her brother lived. She got to know the fishing community and eventually landed a job on a salmon gillnetter in Southeast Alaska.

"That was good experience because the crew on a gillnetter is very small, just two or three people, so everyone does everything,"

she says. Still very young, she spent her summers in Alaska working at a deli until she learned how to cook so that she could use that skill to land a job on a salmon purse seiner – a larger operation than gillnetting – out of Seattle.

"Even though I liked gillnetting better, in a week I made more money than I'd made in months on the gillnetter," Kaul remembers.

But when it came to purchasing her own boat, she decided to stick with gillnetting. "It's much more manageable if you're thinking of going out on your own," she says. Five years after she pounded the docks in Seattle, Kaul bought a turnkey operation, with a gillnetter, permit and equipment all ready to go. She would fish for sockeye in Alaska's legendary Bristol Bay.



Clockwise: 1. Stefani Smith and Karre Ljung repairing a net aboard the Forum Star. Photos courtesy of Stefani Smith. **2.** Fran Kaul and crew aboard the F/V Chaloupe. Photo by John Stetson. **3.** Winter 05-06 crew of the F/V Pacific Challenger in Dutch Harbor. From left to right: Chris Peterson, Stefani Smith, Toni Redfox and Steven Berry.

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Goddesses in Grundens

Kiyo Marsh of Imago Imagining near Pike Place Market is working on a cookbook that will contain stories, photographs and recipes from women involved in the adventurous Northwest life.

"These are seafood recipes from women who found themselves working in Alaska's fishing industry," says Marsh.

The book, still in its gestation period, is titled *Goddesses in Grundens: Women, Fish, and the Great Northwest*.

"I love to cook," says Marsh. "All the people I know love to cook. We have so many great recipes, and the book seemed like something that hadn't been done yet. There are not a lot of women in the fishing industry, or at least the number of women is disproportionate to the number of men. It's a special group. People are so fascinated when you tell them you've been crab fishing."

Marsh herself used to go crabbing out of Dutch Harbor with her sister, Tomi Marsh, who still fishes out of Ketchikan and markets seafood under the label Sea Witches.

"We ate fish every day," Marsh says of her fishing days. Some of the recipes in *Goddesses in Grundens* come from that experience, such as her sister's pink peppercorn and brown sugar rubbed salmon. Another recipe, seared halibut encrusted with lemon grass and chilies, comes from Marsh's stepmother who is Vietnamese.



"I didn't really know what I was getting into," says Kaul. "It was *the* fishery to be in, and I'd bought in a week before the season opened." She remembers how unprepared she was for the derby-style race for fish. "I lost 15 pounds; I never slept. We fish in super shallow waters with tides constantly carrying us out of bounds. To go up there cold turkey having never crewed in Bristol Bay was crazy."

Kaul points out that while the mechanics of gillnetting are simple, fishing in the Bristol Bay region is challenging. "You're trying to stay legal in an area where all the fish are right on the boundary lines. You're trying not to go dry; you're trying not to get web in your wheel. Everyone is setting their nets on top of each other to the point where the nets sometimes get velcro'd together with fish."

And why would anyone, let alone a woman on her own, want to participate in this fishing rodeo? Gillnetters were getting excellent prices for their sockeye salmon back then – \$2.50 per pound, making each fish worth around \$15. But Kaul has another answer: "It's an adrenaline rush. It's fun."

So fun that she stayed in even when the bottom dropped out of the salmon market in the 1990s due to an influx of cheaper farmed fish. She stayed in until the prices dropped to 40 cents per pound. At that point, she couldn't justify staying away from her children for a month or so when they were young, especially when she factored in the hassles of heavy government fisheries management and intense competition.

But she couldn't stop fishing. She kept returning to Alaska periodically once her sons were older. Then in 2002, Kaul heard



about Leader Creek Fisheries, which uses an all-refrigerated fleet of boats like hers, and joined them. "Our goal is to maximize the value of our product by handling it with care," she says. Leader Creek sets stringent rules on how the fish are handled during fishing and tendering (tenders bring the catch back to shore so that fishing boats can remain at the grounds), as well as processing.

Kaul sells her fish under the label Misty Fjord Seafoods to food co-ops, specialty grocery stores, caterers, and restaurants in the Northwest (including the PCC Market) and the Midwest, where she was born. She sells 25,000 to 30,000 pounds of fish a year, a fairly small volume in the fishing industry. "For now, I'm intentionally maintaining the volume I sell. If I get too much bigger, I won't be able to keep it personal or balance the other parts of my life."

One of her motivations for continuing to fish is her children. Though they are used to living aboard their father's 56-foot, comfy vessel, nanny in tow, they have never seen their mother in action on Bristol Bay. "They don't even consider me a fisherman because they've never seen me doing it," she says. This season, her son Alec will accompany Kaul aboard her 32-foot gill-netter, the *F/V Chaloupe*.

"My boat is much smaller. It's hands-on fishing," she says. "Alec will be able to pick fish, run hydraulics and cook. He's really into it."

For this fisherwoman, the best thing in the world is to show people what it's like in Bristol Bay during the season. In the past, she always had crews of mostly women – it is easy to find women who want to fish in Alaska, she says. She's even taken her niece with her a few times. But this time, she looks forward to fishing with her son. "It's a wild place," she says. "It can be incredibly exciting. He'll see what it's like to fish in a storm;

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The Webs She Weaves

While Stefani Smith has been in the fishing industry for more than 20 years, she's chosen not to own a boat. Smith has crewed on large factory trawlers in the Bering Sea, has crabbed in Norton Sound, and was once recruited to help bring back fishing boats commandeered by the Russian mafia.

But it was the gear itself that drew her to the fishing life.

As a teenager in Astoria, Oregon, Smith quit school and started working in a cannery, but after a couple of years was drawn to a small Astoria shop run by a master shrimp trawl builder, an "old Texan" who wanted to pass on his skills. He showed Smith how to build shrimp nets for the shrimp fishery out of Astoria. "He liked hiring women because they tended to be more skilled, in his opinion, and they didn't leave to jump on a boat," says Smith.

In the mid-1980s, she came to Seattle to work for Seattle Marine building shrimp trawls, but soon found work aboard a factory trawler. "I was always curious about the way the gear worked on the water," says Smith. "And I heard there was good money to be made." She had tried to get hired on fishing boats in Astoria, but no one would hire her on the small boats. "The men said their wives wouldn't like it if they hired a female to their crew."

She worked aboard the *F/V Snow King*, a super seiner converted to a factory trawler. Smith was hired as a processor but in no time found herself back on deck where she belonged. Knowing the deckhands of the *Snow King* from working in the net shop gave her an in, and she was invited to fix the nets. "The skipper called me up to talk to me, and I thought I was in trouble," she says. "But it turned out that someone had told him I was a web person. He said, 'Don't even think about going back down to the factory. You're a deckhand.'"

After the *Snow King* came work aboard the *Arctic Storm*, a good operation to work for, in Smith's opinion. "I stayed busy and

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enjoyed a lot of materials and resources. The crew is pretty self-sufficient on those large boats." Danny Hansen was running the *Arctic Storm* at that time. He comes from a long line of fishermen and was instrumental in establishing the Fishermen's Memorial at Fishermen's Terminal, a monument to lives lost at sea.

Smith has been able to remain employed continuously through word of mouth. Her reputation for being able to do the hard work has been passed along by men who value her contribution. That was how she ended up on the *Sea Wolf*, a well-respected boat run by John Gruver when she joined the crew. "It was great to work for him," says Smith, who was able to try out new gear designs and to experiment with innovative ideas for catching fish. "And we caught a lot of fish."

Wanting to try something different after a few years, she accepted an invitation to join a crabbing operation in Norton Sound run by Richard Foot. "He told me it was a daylight fishery," says Smith. "It didn't occur to me that the sun is out for 24 hours a day in Alaska that time of year. The work was grueling."

Smith eventually returned to school but continued fishing to support herself. She became a videographer whose subject matter often involves the sea. For Chicago's Field Museum, she took a trip to Panama aboard the research vessel *Afantis* to film the study of undersea hydrothermal vents using the submersible *Alvin*. Her film *Bering Sea Memoir* won an honorable mention at the Rutgers International Film Festival and showed in the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival.

In all her time as a fisherwoman, Smith says she's never wanted to own her own boat. "I don't want that kind of headache," she says. In a few weeks, she will go back to Alaska aboard Chris Peterson's *Pacific Challenger*. They will fish for cod out of Dutch Harbor. "We'll fish as long as the fishing's good," she says. ■

Lisa Albers is a freelance writer living in Seattle. She is also the first woman to edit Fishermen's News in its 61-year history.

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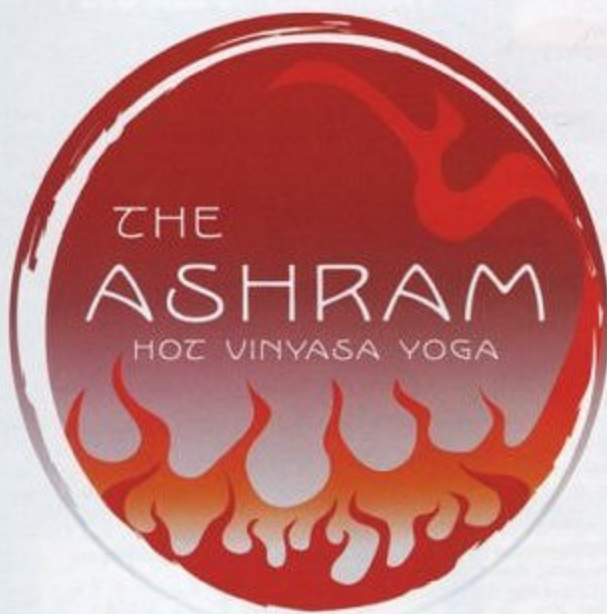
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