



She ain't no chicken of the sea

By Corinne B. Livesay



Kaul

Montessori school, and characterizes herself as a "workaholic." Her husband,

recent long-liner and purse-seiner for 35 years, fishes about 1,000 miles from Fran and is gone five months of the year catching halibut,

blackcod, salmon and other species. Occasionally, he's caught an escaped farmed salmon.

Fran extols blackcod, which, she says, "is unbelievably good when smoked, and almost like eating butter."

So how does a McCalaster graduate in anthropology end up competing with a pack of Alaskan fishermen?

Originally from Minneapolis, Fran has a large family, and "one really adventurous brother," she says. "When I was 14, I went to Alaska to visit him, went trolling with a friend and knew then that I wanted to be a fisherman. I started

fishing on boats in summer at age 18," she said.

"Back in 1985, when I met my husband, there was huge money to be made, which enabled me to buy a boat and start my own operation. Those were the times when one paid the top price for getting in, with permits ranging in six figures. Now, a permit costs about \$35,000, varying according to demand and health of the fishery.

"Farmed fishing and the Japanese economy has had an impact on the economy of wild fisheries," says Fran. "I took five years off when I had the kids and thought about not going back. But then, Leader Creek Fisheries Cooperative opened, servicing 57 refrigerated boats committed to producing a quality product. They bleed and flash-freeze the fish. I was so interested in creating a better product that I went back to fishing; it gave more meaning to the job."

This year, Fran reserved 20,000 pounds to sell. Cloe Geschke, Fran's sister and a 15-year resident of Lake Elmo, is Fran's fish distributor. (Cloe also spent time fishing in Alaska.) The fish

are boneless, hand cut, dipped in brine to prevent freezer burn and then cryovacked. It's a lot fresher than fish that takes over three days to reach the consumer, and tastes as if just caught. It is also cheaper by approximately \$5 a pound than Copper River salmon, which can run from \$13 to \$17 a pound.

Right now, Fran and Cloe are developing new markets for this healthy, ecologically-sound fish. It will be carried exclusively at River Market Co-op in Stillwater, Mississippi Market in St. Paul, Hagbergs Market in Lake Elmo, and served at Phil's Tara Hidaway in Oak Park Heights and Little Chickadee Cottage in Woodbury.

On the other hand, if you don't care about dangerous levels of PCBs and pesticides, and don't mind being fooled by artificially-dyed salmon, feel free to buy farmed fish.

As for me, I'll choose the real McCoy, instead.

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In the shallow waters between the sand bars of Bristol Bay, Ala., in the Bering Sea, hundreds of small boats gather near river outlets, jockeying to be first in line to set nets for wild sockeye salmon. Five river systems produce two thirds of the world's salmon catch, and 14,000 boats are fishing this year.

Fran Kaul, an attractive, feminine mother of two, two other women and Charlie maneuver the vessel, Chaloupe (translated: small boat), amongst those of macho fishermen in the very competitive Egegik district. All wait for the daily fish count signaling that enough salmon have entered river outlets so harvesting the incoming salmon can begin.

The melee is well-policed, as each district has north, south and west lines, or

boundaries, which if violated, translate into large fines. It's all a mad scramble "when fishing is hot" especially on the north line, with drifting boats sometimes so close that nets become entangled, boats collide or others "go dry beneath the falling tide," said Fran.

I'd expected to meet a bruiser-type fisherwoman, but was disarmed by a somewhat shy young woman who simply loves what she does: fish for plentiful wild salmon and align with the socially responsible co-op that processes her catch.

Fran fishes only four to five weeks of the year, has two boys and lives most of the year in Winthrop, Wash., on an 11-acre hobby farm in the north Cascade Mountains. What does she do in her spare time? She's administrative director of a