

run is on, there is something simple and elemental about being here on a warm May night with people in bright orange caps who stand between smelt and their destiny. It's a modest pastime, a rite of spring, a feast of plenty... a chance to run around in rubber pants.

The camaraderie—and the thrill of netting more fish than anyone else—brings smelters back year after year. Some reminisce about the days before police cracked down on the consumption of alcohol and the construction of all-night bonfires (sometimes fueled by picnic tables and fences) at the smelting sites.

Today's restrained atmosphere doesn't seem to bother those who, like Saarela, weren't around for the halcyon days. She and her friends will still party when they take their smelt home for a fish-cleaning celebration later on. But 25-year-old Therez Erkel, a dental-hygiene graduate of UMD, has lost her appetite for the fish since she and three friends sampled the critters at a smelt fry. "Have you tasted smelt?" she asks. "One smelt dinner a year is enough."

IT'S THE CHALLENGE OF CATCHING LOTS OF SMELT, not the desire to eat them, that attracts people like Erkel to the smelt run. Twenty yards out from shore, for instance, UMD students Pat Retterath and Scott Lau vie for space. They're waiting to feel a rippling sensation crawl over their legs so they can lower their aluminum dip nets into the water. "It's like pebbles hitting you," says Lau, a 20-year-old business major. "That's how you know they're running. You get the big schools then."

Their technique is simple: just rake the net over the rocks and scoop up a catch from the many smelt that rush by. But their nets are relatively small, so to end up with a worthwhile load, the solo smelters have to repeat at a fast pace the process of scooping up the fish, dumping them in a container, and scooping again. Some people work as partners, each holding one end of a seine—a 10-foot-long or longer net resembling a hammock—across the water to catch as many smelt as possible. Meanwhile, participants try to ignore the icy water that spills into their waders ("the worst part," says Retterath with a grimace). Sometimes smelters get territorial, he adds, and tempers flare. The scene recalls Aesop's fable about the dog, why be content with just one bone? Indeed, why settle for only 100 smelt? Retterath and Lau manage to fill a five-gallon bucket in 15 minutes.

Later that night, as I load my gear into my car, smelters load coolers brimming with small fish into theirs. The Lester River is still spitting out smelt (as are a few exhibitionists). I'm a little reluctant to head the 150 miles back to St. Paul, but the stench of the fish is beginning to get under my skin. It doesn't seem to bother the smelters who are still busily netting



Scott Lau, a University of Minnesota junior, shows off some smelt he scooped from the cold, chest-high water of the Lester River.

pounds of their prey, though.

My last look at the crowd reminds me of old photographs of prospectors bent over a stream and panning for gold. In the days of the gold rush, gold diggers tested for fool's gold by smashing a nugget with a hammer. If the nugget flattened, the lucky guy danced a jig.

The smelters search for their own sort of gold—in the form of little fish. But their method of separating the true smelt from upstart minnows is about as easy as chomping a candy bar. If

the head comes off, it's a smelt. Probably. The smelters ought to dance little jigs in their waders anyway. Just having the courage to perform such a test is reason enough. ●

Smelting Basics

The best smelting is in the Duluth area along Highway 61 at the mouths of the Lester River (about 10 minutes north of downtown) and the Knife River, another 15 minutes north. Parking costs \$5 at the Knife's mouth, but farther up, campers can park for free in a marked field.

It's best to wait for the smelt to start running before making a trip north. For up-to-the-minute reports on conditions in Duluth, call the Thompson Hill Information Center (218-624-4845). In the Twin Cities, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) answers smelting questions at 612-296-3325. The DNR's information is updated weekly.

Folks in Michigan and Maine do their share of smelting, too. Michiganders head to lower Lake Michigan and Lake Huron, near Traverse City or Cheboygan, respectively. In Maine, people smelt from December to March, rather than in April or May. Outfitters build shacks on the Kennebec and Androscoggin rivers near the towns of Augusta and Brunswick, cut holes in the ice, and drop fishing lines through them. Smelters then rent the four- to eight-person shacks for a tide (six hours). A fee of \$5 to \$8 per person includes bait and wood for the shack's wood stove.

Necessary Equipment You'll need an aluminum dip net, and hip boots or waders. Call your local sporting-goods store to see if it rents equipment; buying the stuff in Duluth will cost you at least \$35. You must also have a valid Minnesota fishing license: \$8 for a one-day license; \$13 for the year.

Cooking 'Em Up First, clean the fish. What's left once you're done won't feed the masses, so expect a marathon cleaning effort. Next, make beer batter. The paperback *Betty Crocker Cookbook* (Bantam, 1987, \$5.95) has a tasty recipe under "Chicken in Beer Batter." Mix it up, dip the smelt in it, and deep-fry. You'll have the perfect finger food.

On the Town If you want to escape all the goings-on by the river, head into Duluth, to Grandma's Canal Park (522 Lake Ave. S., 218-727-4192), a lively entertainment complex. Grandma's Deli serves sandwiches like Dante's Inferno—French bread stuffed with corned beef, pastrami, onions, and mustard, then topped with Swiss and pepper cheeses for \$5.95. Mickey's Grill serves steak dinners for \$7 to \$13. At the Wooden Leg Saloon, a deejay plays dance oldies from the '50s and '60s every night but Monday and Tuesday, which are comedy nights (cover \$4). Then, work off all those smelt at Grandma's Sports Garden, a 30,000-square-foot arena with indoor basketball, volleyball courts, penny arcade games, and a pool hall.

For dancing, the only place in Duluth with live music seven nights a week is Schooner's Beach Club at the Park Inn (250 Canal Park Dr., 218-727-8821). R&B for a buck on Sundays and Mondays. Top-40 bands from the Twin Cities (no cover) the rest of the week. For a more laid-back pace, Sir Benedict's Tavern on the Lake (805 E. Superior St., 218-728-1192) is a pub in the English tradition. On Wednesdays, the Bluegrass All-Stars take the stage (no cover).

—R. C. and Jane Clower