

# OH NOBLE SALMON!

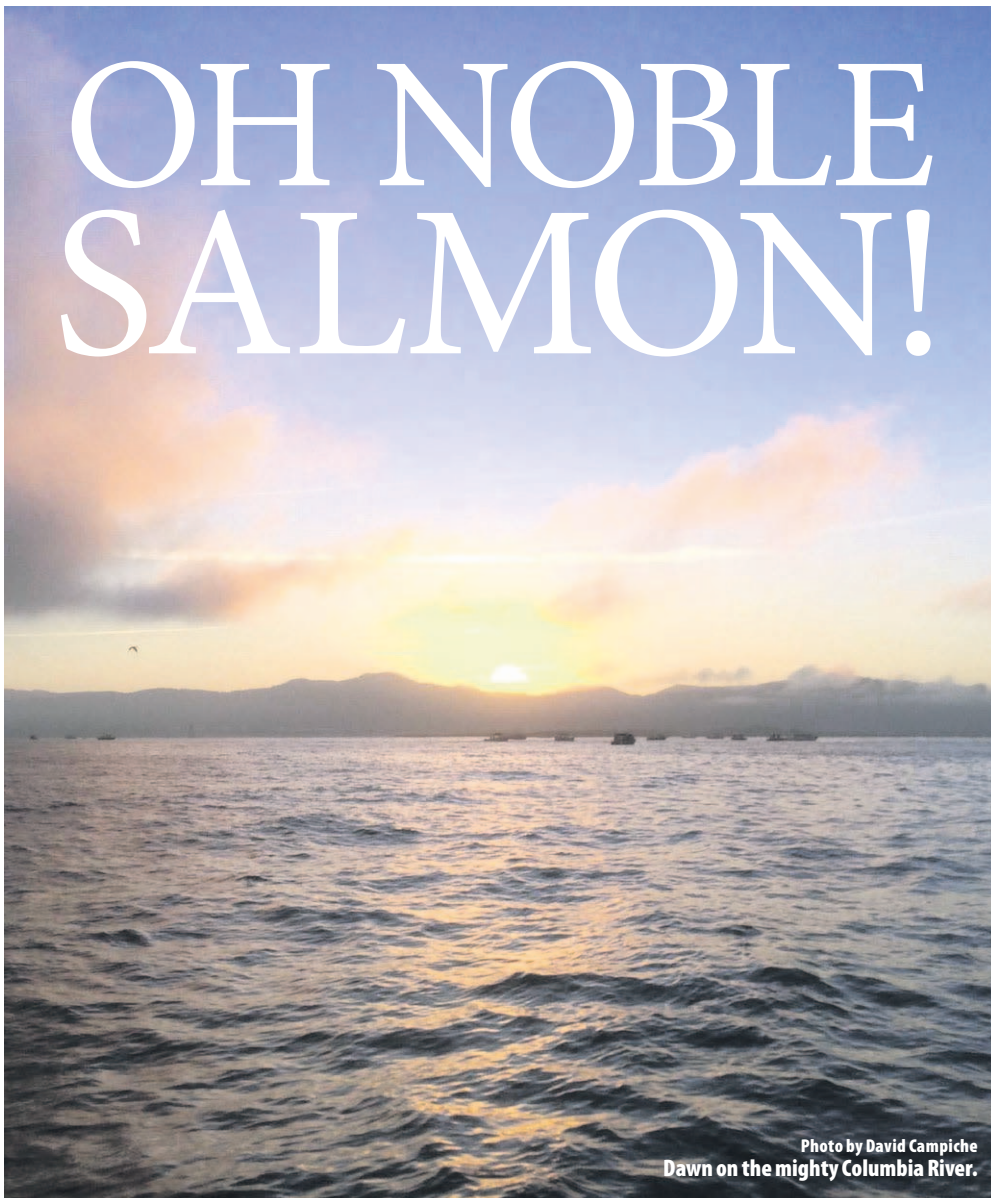


Photo by David Campiche  
Dawn on the mighty Columbia River.



Submitted photo  
Coast Weekend contributor David Campiche holds his 35-pound Chinook salmon.



Photo by David Campiche  
Jeff Campiche holds a large Chinook salmon on the docks in Ilwaco, Washington.

## Coastal Life

Story and photos by DAVID CAMPICHE

Highlighting a big chrome head are two enormous eyeballs that remind me of glass shooters we kids shot into a dirt ring. Those big eyes and stout grizzly-like head guide a sleek sculpted body of bone, flesh and scales: Welcome, oh holy salmon!

These are the sunshine days: July, August and September. The river — our Columbia River (roll on oh mighty Columbia) — runs fast and sleek, just like the Chinook salmon. On its mirrored blue and silver surface — isn't this really just skin on a liquid body? — floats these tiny boats. Tiny, I say, thinking in relationship to this mighty ocean, this Pacific, which, in my case, has been front and center for nearly all my adult memory, a friend, a solace, a moody force as predictable as wind and tide can be.

Perhaps it has a heart, for the body seems to breathe. Look now, here on the beach. Watch the surf flood in and then pull out, in and out like blood pumping from chamber to chamber, ventricle to atrium, and then down all those narrow passageways. Pulsing, pulsing, pulsing. The life blood of what? Our heart? Our minds? Our memories and our ancestors' memories? The sustainer of life, body and soul.

And that magnificent salmon, riding piggyback on those same currents, head turned into the tide, guided by a broad fan tail. Flood in, ebb out, and always feeding. The buck or the hen feeding rapaciously, storing up body fat, so that they may, when river conditions are perfect, detect a tiny signal. And then, they race like Jackie Robinson for home plate.

Of course, there are no crowds yammering and hammering and stomping, yelling their lungs dry. Understand, for the salmon, the return to home base is a deadly and silent passage. Their voyage is filled with ominous obstacles — such as my brother and me, fishing this very day from a small 18-foot boat on the enormous ocean several miles at sea and running directly west of the mouth of the Columbia River Bar.

I am a poor seaman, susceptible at times to sea sickness and predictably unhelpful at fishing chores like baiting herring and untangling lines or, as on one recent occasion, of properly netting a huge Chinook salmon.

Not so my little brother, a junior by three remote years. He is a champion of seek and find; of baiting and hooking; of luring in the most noble of salmon; deftly setting a hook, and then, with skill and finesse, leading the salmon to the net and ultimately, into our kitchen.

Which brings me to this subject: What, exactly what, is devotion and holiness to the salmon all about? You, my faithful readers will naturally ask, what is the writer talking about? Well, here is a small bit of history.

Among North Coast Native Peoples, First

Americans, salmon was and is considered holy. An entire culture centered around this swimmer. Salmon was more than a mainstay. Salmon was survival. Salmon was sustenance. Salmon was a totem, a sacred being that returned after four years from the Pacific Ocean and flooded up rivers, was trapped, cleaned, dried and prepared, often by smoking. Laid in cedar baskets and covered with oolichan grease, for preservation, in preparation for the dark winter months when bellies were tight and the berries gone. Then — yes, they were patient — the prepared salmon flesh came out. Then and there, these proud capable people, the Kwakiutl, Tsimshian, Chinook and Haida ate and laughed and sang and chanted and danced in the fine cedar long houses under long winter skies. And, I assume, they were a content people, the People of the Salmon.

Jeffery, my younger brother, guides his Boston Whaler over and through white-capped waves until he stills the engine and drops line. We wait, he patiently, and me, not. We wait until the pole jerks and 25-pound line races out, the small clicker on the reel exploding with frenetic high-pitched shrieks that seem a contradiction to the holiness of the moment. That moment is the battle of the great fish, in this case, a 35-pound Chinook (King) salmon. In the fish world, it might just be the Mohammad Ali of the ring, the ocean ring, the IT of big water, the largest body of liquid on our planet and probably in our solar system.

Be that what it may, the fish has different ideas than ours. The salmon could care less of being prepared lovingly for service before an adoring crowd, or friends, family, and in somebody's cast iron skillet. She, carrying three pounds of tangerine-orange eggs, wishes to lay and propagate. Propagate those tiny smolts or fry of which 3 percent might return in three or four years to, yes, to this very spot (salmon have an internal sophisticated GPS) on this same river, and even on the same branch of the soft moving water that sings sweet songs to the salmon. If only, we could hear. Well, you ask, what if she throws the hook? Certainly, this happens, and frequently. Welcome to fishing.

She doesn't, as the photo in this column will attest to. She doesn't. And I spend three hours cleaning and filleting the beautiful red carcass. Three hours smoking and packaging salmon flesh. Three hours curing Gravid Lox, and sushi meat, and of course, tasting, tasting as I go. Part of the fine experience is umami. Fresh salmon qualifies. Taken and eaten with respect; eaten with friends; eaten alone; eaten with a lover. I consider it one of the greatest treats in the culinary experience.

How happy I am. Finally, late at night under full yellow moon, I walk into my backyard where I can faintly hear the soft murmur of the Pacific Ocean, and there, I bury the bones deep beneath a rose bush, and say a blessing for this great fish that sustains us as it has and did for our neighbors and ancestors over eons. Blessed oh great salmon for thou art holy.

No, not a god, but perhaps a harbinger or gift or a force who must love us, for like other missionaries, the salmon has shared great gifts, two of which are its succulent flesh and life itself.