

Chinook salmon: Chinook people preserved the fish and habitat for thousands of years

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Like birds of prey on that spring day, hundreds of boats crowded the waters, and so did a plethora of predators, sea lions and bald eagles, each to be avoided by the wary anglers and the fish. We anchored from one of the river's sand islands in 20 foot water. Our long wait began. The Chinook salmon is a wary critter and their numbers, while reviving somewhat in the last few years, don't begin to compare to what they once were. The salmon returned religiously up the river until the arrival of white settlers in the 19th century.

Astoria was founded on furs, salmon and massive virgin timber. Much has been whittled away, no surprise to a pair of wide eyes. Descendants of all that commerce, we waited, hoping for a chance to catch even a single spring run salmon, a springer, the rarest and most delicious of all salmonoids, competing with the best of all finned creatures. We were hardly alone as every size and shape of watercraft bounced on the murky, turbid waters.

Everyone with common sense bows to the reputation of this powerful river. In the region, stories reverberate about the unfortunate and the unwise who underestimated its power. The Columbia rolls on, neither caring nor aware of the grazing animals that inundate both sides of the big water, including human beings. The Columbia is a mighty river and defers only to the twice daily cycles of the Earth, moon and sun. The water is neither cautious nor incautious. It is simply a great liquid body, moving at about 5 knots and shaping all that lies before its movable force.

The first strike happened nearly four hours later and the fishermen jumped to their feet. The salmon favor the current but struggle against the limber fishing pole and

the skill of the angler. Ten minutes later, the fish was in the net, just ahead of the gaping mouth of an 800 pound sea lion. Staring into the net, one quickly detected that the fish was with an adipose fin, a wild salmon, and we had to let it go. Visions of a fillet of the tasty flesh evaporated in the cold wind. Perhaps the stellar sea lion and nightfall hovered like the disappointment of turning away a fine dinner.

We were on the water the next morning by 5 a.m. Again, our wait was several hours, but luck favored us then. The salmon snapped at our lures and soon we had two aboard, hatchery salmon without fin, a treasure trove considering the many trips onto the big river that sportsmen had already made, waiting for the annual arrival of these majestic fish and the chance to snare one.

The day ended with one more catch, a beauty by any definition. This salmon was nearly 20 pounds, sleek and shining with sparkling colors, dozens of vibrant tints ablaze and shimmering like oil on water. The fish is meant for ocean travel, swimming

thousands of miles each year until their noses lead them from the Pacific to their final destination.

I arrived home a conquering hero, a 15 pound salmon waiting for the fillet knife and a further encounter with pan or oven. A fish like this is meant to be savored in its most natural state, the flesh is too perfect to smoke. With extra trimmed pieces of the succulent orange flesh, I designed a Thai soup for our first meal and imagined more to come. With a catch this fresh, the preparation would be simple, no need for a fine sauce. Accompaniments were more important, maybe fried rice with oyster mushrooms or a pasta with fresh asparagus. Or sweet onion and szechuan eggplant. Perhaps a big salad.

And don't forget to slip in thanks to the gods of the Columbia River, to the swimmers, *Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*, the great pacific salmon. And an acknowledgement to the Chinook people, who preserved the fish and habitat for thousands of years.

David Campiche

Jeff Campiche holds a 20 pound spring Chinook salmon.



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