



Trolling for Giants

Fishing with Canada's top chefs in Haida Gwaii

BY JACOB RICHLER

When you're out trolling in the northern Haida Gwaii and the tip of your fishing rod finally shudders and dips, there's no telling what sort of hungry fish is having a go at your bait down there, out of sight in the dark, icy depths. For starters, it's something of a salmon traffic jam. Feisty Coho are as locally abundant as the mighty Chinook. Pesky Pinks are hard to avoid. And now and then even a Sockeye or a Chum turns up.

Then there are the passing halibut, lingcod and rockfish—and on the rare occasion you'll get into an irascible bundle of fangs called a salmon shark.

When in the mood, each will respond lustily to your bait of a herring, decapitated for seductive underwater spin. And—save for the sharks, which you are highly unlikely to land on salmon tackle—they all look good on the dinner table with a nice bottle of wine. So, technically, what exactly is tugging at your line doesn't matter much. What does is that you leap into action immediately, post-haste, like *yesterday*.

At the moment of the strike, your rod will already be bent nearly double

from the strain of connecting your advancing boat to the trailing line, hooks and herring—and more particularly the downrigger, a solid, grapefruit-sized metal weight that keeps your bait down where the fish lurk. So your rod handle will

be very tightly wedged in the bracket that holds it to the side of the boat.

No matter: yank it out quickly, then reel down fast to take in all the slack in the line, until the tip of your rod touches the water. Then, jerk the tip upwards, hard, to free your line from the downrigger clip, and...

"Set the hook! Set the hook!" exclaims my fishing companion, chef David Hawsworth, who fishes up here regularly, and has been doing so for years. He has personally bumped off entire schools of salmon. In short, if whatever-it-is down there had struck his line instead of mine, it would likely be half-way to the boat by now. "Set the hook!"

Where was I? Right. Once you are free of the downrigger, you reel in again, fast, until the fresh slack is gone and the tip of rod is once again dipping into the water. Then set the hook by jerking the rod tip upwards vigorously, and—simultaneously—lifting reel and rod handle upwards,



Located off a remote island in sight of Alaska, the West Coast Fishing club is as far from civilization as you could ever want to be.

to chest level, to add to the upward pull on the line. All this before the fish below realizes that he dislikes the taste of headless herring bristling with metal hooks, spits the lot out and moves on.

You do not want to let that happen. And the only way to prevent it after the hook is set is to maintain the tension on your line—because the hooks are not barbed, and will part ways with your cantankerous prey as soon as their grip is loosened. So, reel in hard and quick—crank that spool as fast as it will go without making a mess of your line—and the whole while, keep the tip of your rod up high. Always remember, you want to get that fish to the boat as fast as possible, before its startled little piscine brain can get a grip on what's going on and try to do something about it.

More often than not, the first loud clunk of its evolving defensive thoughts won't be heard until said fish gets a first glimpse of your boat. Chinooks in particular appear to be congenitally conditioned to understand that large Boston Whalers are a very bad thing. One glimpse of your boat's white flanks at the surface and a Chinook will slam on its fin-and-tail brakes hard, throw everything it's got into a U-turn manoeuvre and power out of there, chop-chop. If your fish does that, and you catch a good flash of silvery flank when it changes direction, chances are good that you are into that big Chinook that you were hoping for. And if, while you are letting it run, you can feel a rhythmic tug like it is shaking its head, you know with certainty that you are into a Chinook. Then the fun really begins.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. A Coho is also a lively fighter—pound for pound, maybe more than the Chinook. All the same, as they seldom surpass the 10-pound weight class, Cohos lack the grunt and torque

required to take back your reeled-in line and plunge deep. Instead they fight it out near the surface, darting and tacking from side to side, sometimes with their dorsal fin exposed, often jumping. Halibut are the opposite: lifeless in the fighting department, but somehow as resistant to being reeled in as a fully deployed parachute. Lingcod and rockfish are not fighters, either. As for the sharks, well, more on that later.

On the first day, when we arrived mid-afternoon and only had an hour or two at sea, my only catch was a plump eight-pound Coho—which happens to be a perfect fish for making gravlax. And then it was time to repair to the lodge for a hot shower, a couple of single malts, some sushi, and the first of our four-course menus with paired wines. Really.

THE West Coast Fishing Club's premier lodge, The Clubhouse, is perched high on the steep northern shore of Langara Island, from whence, on a (rare) clear day, you can see Alaska. To get there, you take a two-and-a-half-hour flight from Vancouver to Masset, on Graham Island, and then a 30-minute helicopter ride, which—when weather and visibility permit—hugs the two islands' adjoining coastlines. And it is invariably somewhere in that last leg of the journey, with conversation halted by the din of the rotors, that the strange and eerie beauty of the place sinks in hard and leaves you awestruck.

This time it happened when we caught sight of a dead humpback whale beached in the shallows. The pilot doubled back and flew lower for a second pass, so close that we could practically count the ventral grooves on its throat. But other times the feeling has sunk in just as



dramatically as you take in some other part of the desolate and empty scene—the grey mud of the beaches scattered with fallen trees, the impenetrably dark waters, or the pillars of volcanic rock that rise from the water’s edge. And then, just as you are beginning to feel small and unwelcome amidst all this big bad nature, you crest a hill and touch down to find lodge manager Terry Cowan waiting there as usual, hand outstretched, with his charming assistant Stephanie Beachy right behind him on the walkway to the lodge.

While the clubhouse is located securely in the proverbial middle of nowhere, this strange and impractical reality should not affect you here much more adversely than it would if you were to find yourself, say, in the middle of the Atlantic aboard the *Queen Mary II*. Guest rooms are all mod con. BBC World is available on the big-screen television in the lounge. When you’re out fishing, and get chilly or peckish, the West Coast Fishing Club provisions Zodiac has an odd habit of emerging spontaneously from the rain and fog, with an offering of hot sandwiches and coffee, or maybe some Dungeness crab and a bottle of chardonnay. If you fancy a large single malt when you get off the water, there are several to choose from at the bar (or rather, bars)—and no sooner is your glass dry than Stephanie or one of her staff magically refills it. (Admittedly, this occasionally proves to be a mixed blessing.)

You think—correctly—that Hawksworth Restaurant at the Rosewood Hotel Georgia is the best restaurant in Vancouver. Well, if you’re smart enough to visit the lodge during its end-of-July culinary retreat, chef Hawksworth will be there to cook a four-course meal (say, tuna ceviche, olive-crusted halibut, bison striploin and sweet-milk ice cream) with a

sommelier on hand to select wines for each course. This year also attracted guest chef Ed Lee, from 610 Magnolia in Louisville, Kentucky, whose meal featured rib-eye sashimi with uni butter and cucumber, spot prawns, scallop sausage with bourbon brown butter, an exquisite, barely cooked miso-glazed salmon with mussels, jicama and lemongrass, and togarashi-spiked cheesecake. Another night, the highly skilled Vancouver chef Dino Renaerts put together a spectacular buffet of locally harvested seafood and game that spanned oysters, crab, spot-prawn pasta, roast venison and elk—and the firmest, sweetest, most exquisite grilled scallops I have ever sampled anywhere.

AFTER three full days of fishing, the morning you fly out of Langara is designated for packing and rest. But all the same, along with a handful of other diehards, I thought to squeeze in an extra hour on the water. So, at 5:45 a.m., I headed out into the fog for one last kick at the can with Brian Grange, the affable head of marketing for the club—who is also the son of one of its founding partners, and the hungry mastermind of its culinary program. During the previous days the best local fishing zone had been in the waters just off Lacy Island, a rock off Langara’s west coast. But we headed instead for Brian’s favourite last-ditch morning spot—off Macpherson Point, on Langara’s eastern flank. The moon was still out and dense mist clung to the shore. The water was uncharacteristically still and glassy. As we slowed to a near halt to prepare our tackle, a monster sea lion broke the surface nearby and let out a lungful of wet air in that strange, noisy way of theirs that always sounds like they have just held their breath under water for the very first time.



Catch of the day: In Haida Gwaii 50-pound salmon aren't an uncommon sight.

Sea lions usually eat herring, as they are far too slow to catch a free-swimming salmon—but a salmon slowed by a hook and line is a different animal altogether, and a meal any sea lion will enjoy whenever it can. Wary of providing them with that opportunity, we decided to drop our lines all the same, not too deep—around 35 feet. The sound of the downrigger attracted more sea lions. Not long thereafter, I got a bite, failed to hook the fish, and quickly rebaited. The sounds of reeling in line and then letting out the downrigger again reverberated in the morning silence, and still more sea lions gathered around.

“Brian, I say, we’re being stalked. Shouldn’t we move on?”

“We’ll bring the fish in quickly,” he said, optimistically.

He has been fishing here since he was a child. Why argue? And as things would turn out, Brian promptly hooked a Coho and handed me the rod to reel it in. It came to the boat easily. Well, just about to the boat. But when it was just a few feet away, it discovered some untapped inner strength, or perhaps just took full advantage of the newly swirling, shifting tides. The end result was that it darted hard to the right, and swam right between the boat and the downrigger ball that was hanging just below the surface. Then it circled back and wrapped itself around the cable holding it there. And then it circled it three more times—and perfectly entwined, swam alongside the boat, just a foot or two out of reach of the net or gaff hook.

There was nothing to be done. Brian and I looked at each other, shrugged and waited. It took about a minute. And then promptly, a sea lion came in noiselessly, jaws wide open, and—looking rather like SPECTRE’s shuttle-eating spacecraft in the opening sequence of *You Only Live Twice*—clamped down on my salmon, hard. Then just a couple of feet from the boat, it breached surface, and with one eye on the two

of us, tossed the fish up in the air, grabbed it by the tail, slapped it hard against the water to stun it and sent it skittering across the surface like a skipping stone. He promptly took after it, scooped it in two bites, bel-lowed triumphantly, and slipped back beneath the surface.

“Wow,” Brian said. “Just like the Discovery Channel.”

Quite. There are plenty of ways to lose a salmon. Serving breakfast to a sea lion is surely the most dramatic—but it isn’t that hard to avoid. When you see lions, move on. Out of their range you are free to lose fish in all sorts of other ways: poorly set hooks, a botched gaffing or netting, a crossed line with a fishing partner who had a strike from Mrs. Chinook at the exact moment Mr. Chinook had a go at yours. I’ve hooked fish while dropping the downrigger, and only realized it too late. The list of things that can go wrong is long, and on some days—bad days—can seem inexhaustible. The only one that truly haunts me was a fish that flashed a Chinook-like silvery flank at the boat, then took off on a run that was harder and faster than any salmon I had ever experienced. Then it stopped, immovable, took a breather and did the same thing all over again, like a freight train, and finally snapped the leader. “That could have been a shark,” Hawksworth suggested, as I reeled in. It could also have been a monster Chinook. They were out there. During our stay, one angler successfully landed—and released—a 70 pounder in Bruin Bay, which many consider the premier hunting ground for giant salmon anywhere. The culinary trip’s sommelier, Mark Davidson—on annual loan from Wine Australia—landed two 45 pounders in a single day. The fishing was excellent. I flew home with six salmon—two shy of my limit. Each was cut into sides at camp, and vacuum-packed with a tag bearing my rod number as well as the lovely phrase: “The one that didn’t get away.”