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Teaching a woman to fish Trading places on a doubleheader dream vacation

BY CINDA CHAVICH, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD AUGUST 19, 2009

With the first wild spring salmon arriving in both streams and supermarkets, thoughts around here turn to fish, and fishing.

My husband and I see eye to eye on most topics, but when it comes to planning the perfect summer vacation, things can go sideways.

He imagines nothing better than a foggy morning with a fishing guide, reeling in a wild, fighting sockeye or pretty rainbow trout. I'm thinking about fresh wild fish, too, but standing next to a top chef, learning to perfectly fry it up in the pan, or matching it with a crisp Chardonnay.

If you think that means heading off on separate vacations, think again. We found vacation nirvana --and a new understanding of each other's passions--at the West Coast Fishing Club's annual culinary weekend, four days of serious salmon fishing, combined with enough face time with top Vancouver chef David Hawksworth to learn everything about preparing fish like a pro.

Our adventure starts like any good fishing trip, very, very early in the morning. But as we board a small jet in Vancouver to head to the Queen Charlotte Islands--arguably the best fishing grounds on the West Coast--there's already something different. The club's usual clientele is skewed heavily to the allmale demographic, but this group is mainly couples.

"We're always looking for new things we can do together," says Debbie Hendsbee, here with her husband Gary Ostry. "We like to be doing some kind of activity, so we have stories. It's not just travel, it's an experience."

When we land in the small Haida community of Masset, we're met by a big Bell helicopter that ferries us the rest of the way to the isolated resort, perched high above the pristine waters around Langara Island. The other thing about the West Coast Fishing Club that's immediately obvious--this ain't no rough and ready boy's club.

From the attentive staff to the wellappointed rooms--complete with down duvets, cosy bathrobes and femalefriendly amenities such as makeup remover -- I feel instantly pampered. There's even a small spa and a massage therapist on staff.

Lunch is a precursor of things to come--tender mesquitesmoked ribs, honeyglazed chicken and a fresh potato salad studded with the kind of tender translucent eggs that require slow sous vide cooking. I'm impressed and, wine glass in hand, head out to the sunny deck to enjoy the ocean view.

But, as my husband reminds me, this weekend is about fishing and soon we're down in the equipment room with the rest of the gang pulling on our big red flotation suits and searching for rubber boots that fit.

It's not exactly a stylish look, but it's a safe one, especially for a landlubber like me.

Down on the dock, we're introduced to the guides who will shepherd us through the fishing side of this adventure. Our man is Kuiama St. Gelais, a young French Canadian with what turns out to be an almost innate understanding of the water and what's lurking below.

As we board our 27foot Boston Whaler, along with our new fishing buddies, Jim Reidy and his wife Whitney, I can't help but notice that chef Hawksworth and his "sous chef" for the weekend, Dino Renaerts of Vancouver's Diva at the Met, are already zooming off in their own boat, in search of salmon.

It's pristine, if not exactly peaceful, as we pull into a bay where more than a dozen other boats are trolling slowly back and forth in search of salmon and halibut. Eagles wheel in wide circles overhead and even before we get our gear readied, we see a humpback whale surface in the distance.

Kuiama--or Kui as he's known --offers a lesson in weaving the big hooks through the silvery herring plugs, the bait he hopes will tempt a big chinook. I soon decide this is a skill left to the experts, but the smelly lure snares a big fish almost instantly and I find myself at the back of the boat reeling my heart out, while Kui tells me what to do next.

"Wind, wind, wind, OK, let it go, let it go, rod up," he barks while steering the boat away from the crush of traffic.

"That's a really big one, REALLY big," he grins as the rod tip bends low and I struggle to keep it, and myself, upright.

In the end, my prize snaps the line off against the gear of another boatload of fishers that's travelling, and rubbernecking, too close.

"You got rigged, caught on the wires," says Kui, relaying our loss to the other guides within radio contact. We mourn the "big one" that got away, but there will be other fish to fry.

Soon my boat mates are reeling in their own feisty fish, my husband proudly landing a sizable coho. The smaller coho are good eating, but every fisher dreams of hooking a massive tyee, the monster salmon that top 20 or so kilograms and more.

After several hours on the water, I'm dreaming of dinner. And chef Hawsworth and his team don't disappoint. From the smoked duck with baby beetroot and raspberry gastrique to the panseared halibut, served on a puree of local chanterelles with bacon foam, and a fig tart tatin, glazed with sweet citrus and served with a creamy stiltonlaced zabaglione, this is not your typical fishing trip fare.

I head to freshair induced dreamland, between crisp cotton sheets, imagining what he will teach us tomorrow.

After a hearty breakfast, we gather in the sunny dining room for the other educational component of this trip, cooking school. Hawsworth and Renaerts are out of their red flotation suits and back in their chefs' whites, and we each have a portable gas burner, a knife and cutting block, ready to prepare wild salmon braised with baby leeks, asparagus and fresh fava beans.

This is my kind of handson learning experience, but surprisingly, there are as many men as women in the room. My husband is behind his own stove, listening intently and carefully chopping vegetables, which is a miracle.

We're not the only couple trading places. Don Rowntree is cooking alongside his sister and tells me his wife, Robin, has already caught the fishing bug--the first timer has been out on the water since 7 a. m.

TroyAnne Constable caught six fish, but not before her husband Greg learned the finer points of cooking it.

"I really got inspired," says Greg after a lesson with Hawksworth. "I need to buy some of that Malden salt."

And so it goes. Fishing and cooking instruction, eating and drinking and telling fish stories --a kind of strange role reversal, teaching us both something new.

It's a vacation we'll never forget --even if, back on dry land, my husband seems to quickly revert to his noncooking self.

But our days at the West Coast Fishing Club left us with more than fish in the freezer. It taught us both a little more about each other, and that's always an important lesson to learn.

If You Go - The West Coast Fishing Club offers exclusive fishing adventures from four unique fishing properties for salmon and halibut fishing. Three-or four-day all-inclusive fishing trips from the main Clubhouse start at \$4,425. - The next David Hawksworth and Friends getaway goes Sept. 6-10, 2009, including cooking classes with David Hawksworth of Hawksworth at Hotel Georgia. This year's special guests from Vancouver restaurants: Vikram Vij of Vij's and Rangoli, and Dino Renaerts of Diva at the Met, with special wine tastings, spa visits and, of course, fishing. - The WCFC is also offering a new series of guest chef events until Sept. 10, 2009. Some of Vancouver's hottest chefs will host culinary getaways, including Vancouver magazine's chef of the year Robert Belcham of Fuel and Campagnolo; Dale Mackay of Lumiere; Don Letendre of Elixir at the Opus Hotel; and Seigo Nakamura of Miku Aburi restaurant.

For more information, call toll-free 1-888-432-6666 or visit www.westcoastfishingclub.com.

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