



PRODUCER PROFILES: Ugashik Bay Salmon Co-operative

By Tim King

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RANDALL - Being a member of a cooperative gave Roger Pietron and his family an opportunity to get a better price for the high quality wild Alaska salmon they catch each summer. The Pietron family, who spend most of the year near Little Falls, in Morrison County, are co-founders of Ugashik Bay Salmon co-operative. The cooperative is made up of a number of families that fish in Bristol Bay on the north side of the Alaska Peninsula. Ugashik Bay is a bay within the larger Bristol Bay. Both are part of the Bering Sea. The 42 mile long Ugashik River empties out of the tundra and into Bristol Bay at Ugashik Bay. Roger says Ugashik Bay is a delta formed by the Ugashik and two other rivers.



Part of a good day's catch on Bristol Bay.

The sea, bay, and river bring the Pietron family to fish camp each June and July to capture the sock-eye salmon as the fish return to the Ugashik, and other rivers, to spawn. Roger describes the fish that come out of the Bering's cold depths as crowding around a river's mouth to smell it. They want to find their

birth river and go upstream, he says. Most years two to three million salmon make a run on the Ugashik and its spawning grounds. On very good years up to five million fish will be in the spawning run.

"Game and Fish (The Alaska Department of Fish and Game) monitor it very carefully," Roger said.

To sustain the fishery, the State's biologists monitor what is called the escapement. Those are the fish that aren't caught and that reach the river. Salmon lay enough eggs so that only about a third of the run needs to reach the spawning grounds in the lake at the end of the river. The biologists, and their assistants, actually are on the river monitoring the escapement while the Pietrons, and others, are

out in the Bay fishing. At times, during the season, fisherman are told to pull in their nets to let more fish through. Roger says the annual escapement ranges between 500,000 to 1.2 million fish.

"Game and Fish announce the fishing hours for the day on the public radio," Roger said. "The notice of the opening can be as short as a few hours. The average opening is about eight hours and then you have to pull your nets in and get off the water. Then you go back in the next day or you may have to wait a couple days."

Fishing and weather are variable while the fishermen are on the water. Sometimes the fish run heavy, in large schools. As the crew pulls in the 300-foot long nets, they remove salmon, and the occasional flounder, from them. The fish are put into heavy water proof bags filled with ice and seawater. The bags are in the bottom of the open 24-foot long boats.

"They come out of the water at a little over 50 degrees," Roger said. "We get them down below forty as soon as possible."

When the boats fill with fish, they are loaded onto the ships that transport them to processors. These transport ships, known as tenders, are often crabbing ships being put to use in their off season. These tenders can hold well over one hundred thousand pounds of fish.

"Once you have a few thousand pounds in your boat, you have to deliver the fish to the tender or directly to the processing ship," Roger said. "They have cranes to take your fish. They weigh them and take their temperature. Then the fish are placed in refrigerated water. If the weather is rough it can be pretty exciting to get your fish onto the tender or processor. You have to be careful and you have to keep track of things."

Weather on the Bay can be calm but it is also violent and often unpredictable. The Pietrons will quit fishing when wind speeds hit forty-five miles an hour. Although they may be only a thousand feet off shore, quitting fishing for the day is no simple matter. Extremely high tides, commonly varying twenty feet between high and low tide, can make approaching shore difficult or impossible. A boat and its crew can get trapped in the water, with winds occasionally as intense as eighty miles per hour.

"It's not like Central Minnesota," Roger said. "It's often over cast and you can't see the weather coming. It can switch in just a few minutes. When that weather does come, you have to pull your nets in. That can take an hour and a half. Then you have to deliver your fish to the tender or processing ship. They are usually a couple of miles away in deep water."



Fishing is done in small boats, which are used to tend the nets.

It is difficult and demanding work, but two generations of Pietrons have been fishing Bristol Bay for three decades. In the early years their primary salmon markets were the canneries. Roger was never quite happy with that arrangement.

"We were catching these beautiful premium quality fish and sending them to canneries," Roger said. "Going with the co-op allowed us to maintain top quality and to sell a premium filleted product."

In 2010, the Pietrons formed their cooperative with nine other fishing families. Ugashik Bay Salmon cooperative then entered into a joint venture with Seattle-based seafood processors to form Cape Greig LLC. One result of the collaboration was the purchase of a 190-foot 1,134-ton floating processing ship. The group renamed the ship the Cape Greig. Cape Greig is also a cape in Bristol Bay.

"They have a crew of up to seventy people," Roger said. "They clean the fish and freeze them quickly. Then the frozen fish are transported to Seattle by freezer ship. Processing them so close to where they were caught maintains their high quality."

The floating processor changed life on the Bay for co-op members. The Cape Greig is also a floating grocery store. It brings food and fuel to the Pietron's fishing camp, which is miles from any services. It also provides precious ice for the fishermen to maintain the high quality of their fish.



Although most of the Pietron's salmon is sold through the cooperative's marketing arrangement with Cape Greig, LLC, Roger brings some back to Minnesota to market. The salmon, as well as Alaska cod, is available through a number of cooperative markets. Among them are numerous Twin Cities food co-ops and the Rochester, Brainerd, and Bemidji food co-ops. He also sells through Whole Farm Cooperative in Long Prairie.

When it comes to preparing salmon Roger loves to grill it. He suggests just salt, pepper, and a dab of butter. He also says it's delicious with a teriyaki or barbecue sauce or even with fresh salsa.

The Alaskan salmon fishery is one of the most sustainably managed fisheries in the world. A receding tide allows these fishermen to stand where a boat was needed only a few hours before.

"We like to bake it, too," he said.

Salmon from Bristol Bay comes from the pure clean waters of the Bering Sea and is both nutritious and delicious. The Bristol Bay commercial salmon fishery dates back to the late 19th century and the Pietron family is proud to be part of that history. With continued careful management they will be able to bring Whole Farm Cooperative customers wild caught Bristol Bay salmon for years to come.

In fact, sustainable management of Alaska's fisheries is actually part of the State's constitution. Alaskans take that constitutional provision seriously and are recognized world wide for their sustainable fisheries practices. As part of the top to bottom system of sustainable management, the salmon and cod from the Pietron family and their cooperative are certified sustainable by a third party certifier. To learn more about sustainable Alaska fisheries go to <http://sustainability.alaskaseafood.org/intro> and download the Sustainability in Plain English Brochure.

Authors note: *You can find some more interesting images of the Bristol Bay area at this link: <http://www.tetongravity.com/forums/showthread.php/200187-Ugashik-River-SW-AK-Summer-TR>*