

# FISHERMEN'S VOICE

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*News & Comment for and by the Fishermen of Maine*

**FREE**

## **Blackberry Brandy (or Coming of Age)**

Coot, known to Audoboners as Surf Scorers, to natives as “white wingers” are “almost ducks.” These birds were quite prevalent on the Maine coast in the 40’s through 60’s. Prevalent actually, in big numbers until the 70s. Then the eider duck population, recovering from near decimation at the turn of the century, began to make inroads on the feeding grounds.

Term “Crazy as a Coot” is quite apropos. Hunters of coot should, by definition, be just a bit crazy as well. Coots fly at continuous afterburner speed. They have a hide that soaks up #2 magnum lead shot and still never misses a wing beat. Takes a head shot to drop them and they’ll often dive to bottom for a death grip on seaweed. Half joke to our hunting was “Box of Shells per Bird.” There were mornings when it seemed even this would have been a good ratio.

Best weather to hunt was blowing, nasty cold, fog or snow. A day of fingertips not turning white or drip on the end of your nose not icing was too warm. We tried everything, pocket warmers, hot seats, whatever. Still cold. Only the elected, who rowed out for downed birds, had a chance to rouse body heat. Course when it was rough, and generally was, he’d get doused and icicles would form. Hot coffee or tea was best drizzled on wool mittened fingers, then pull outer shells over quick, so as not to lose momentary heat. Interior degrees of the elders could be lifted with a touch of blackberry brandy on special occasions throughout the hunt. Only on the very most special time—such as a double—was I graced to even wet my lips with this nectar. That was the way it’s supposed to be and the brandy was a very minor sidebar to the event.

Placing my soul with the dedicated crazies of duck chasing, I looked forward to every Saturday morning and “free from school” day, October through December, broken only by a week of deer hunting in November. Coot hunting lasted till mid-January, but by then even crazy couldn’t scale.

Dad the doctor, myself when old enough to shoulder a shotgun, Austin Gott a local one man contractor, and the eminent bird carver and next door neighbor, Wendell Gilley made up the core. At least two were generally ready anytime—tide and time—would correspond. Night before we’d pack the pickup or jeep with gear, green five gallon buckets from Sears, tin johnboat and the heavy wooden handmade towlers. (Dad and Wendell had each carved identical sets of towlers and needled each other often on whose would towel the best. Because of his renown, Wendell’s, which now float in a pool at the Gilley Museum would be worth a bundle to decoy collectors. Dad’s set new resides in a couple of canvas sailcloth sacks, long unused and worth only sentimental value.) Well before daylight we’d be unloading gear and setting the towlers. Our favorite spot was

Hadley's Point near Salisbury Cove, long exposed sandbar poking well into Frenchman's Bay where we could pull the towlers with us on the incoming tide.

As time would have it, there came a weekend in my 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> year, pre-driver's license, when parents were off on a trip. My sister Suzanne and I were left under the eye of an elderly house sitter. Neither Austin nor Wendell could hunt that Saturday. Minor challenge to a young and forceful duck addict not minding to walk the edge. I called another avid hunting neighbor, Terry Stanley, older by a few years and later an excellent bird carver in his own right, and easily convinced him this would not be a day to miss. I'd supply the gear and he the transportation. Then I tackled the sitter. No contest. I could talk faster than she and with sister in league—sitters earned hazardous duty pay at our house—she soon acquiesced. Promise of a race of birds cemented the deal.

Saturday became the perfect nasty day. Tide was before dawn low, and we wailed away at the elusive critter till the tide was near high. Limit was seven birds apiece. We probably killed eight between us. In my shell can I'd tucked in a fresh pint of Dad's blackberry brandy. End of the mornings hunt, chilled to the bone I dug the bottle out and passed it to Terry.

He looked at me quizzically and said, "Where'd you get that?"

"Old man always takes this along."

We had a sip to "Well done, well shot, great day," loaded the gear and headed home to a warm house.

Sunday, Dad and Mother got home. I showed off the birds hanging under the porch. Dad was somewhat impressed but made a rather strong remark to the effect that I should have gotten permission before they left.

Few days into the week I was summoned to the cellar where the hunting gear lived. Dad was pointing at my shell bucket.

"What's this?" as he pulled the barely touched pint of blackberry from amongst the new and spent shells.

I'd cleaned my shotgun, stowed the gear away and forgotten to put the pint away. Or maybe I hadn't forgotten. Perhaps it was a nudge of the envelope.

A disapproving frown crossed his face, "Son, there'll be plenty of time for this—you're still a bit too young," as he looked me square in the eyes, opened the gun and shell locker, set the bottle down and gently closed the door.

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Christmas is a time for friends and family dropping by so AJ and I enjoy having some special treats squirreled away. This pâté or French meatloaf makes for an easy yet elegant offering.

1 ½ lb. ground veal and same of ground pork  
2 eggs and salt  
1 tsp. white pepper  
1 tsp. each chopped rosemary and marjoram  
2 cloves minced garlic

6 green onions chopped  
½ cup dry sherry  
8 oz. Virginia ham cut into ½ inch cubes  
½ cup shelled natural pistachios  
1 lb. good sliced bacon

Mix till just blended, veal, pork, eggs, salt, pepper, herbs, garlic, onions and sherry.

Use bacon to line sides and bottom of ungreased 9 x 5 x 3 loaf pan or 2 quart terrine. Allow bacon to hang over sides for wrapping over top of mixture. Pack mixture tightly into pan and cover with the bacon slices hanging over sides of pan. Place pan in a shallow pan containing 1 inch of water.

Bake in a preheated 350° oven for 1 ½ hours. Cool then refrigerate. Will keep in fridge for 2 weeks.

Serve with dark bread or crackers, pickles and a good Dijon or coarse grain mustard.

A Merry Christmas to all from AJ and I. I've certainly enjoyed your emails this year.

Fair winds and good roads.

*Lee S. Wilbur*