

FISHERMEN'S VOICE

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News & Comment for and by the Fishermen of Maine

FREE

Trout at Dusk

At the last minute before we headed south on *Helen J*, our 40' cruiser, we'd grabbed a half dozen various fishing rods and reels and tied them to the table pedestals on the flybridge. There was one surf rod, a couple of trollers and the rest spinners. There they stayed for much of the winter. One reason or another I hadn't wound any new lines on or geared up for any serious fishing, so when good friend Ron Munzenreider suggested I join him and son John with four other friends for a go at sea trout, I jumped at the opportunity.

AJ had decided she would head for Naples and an Aretha Franklin concert that weekend, so after several boat chores (we'd been dockside for about a month) I lit a fire under "Helen J's" stern and headed south. Fire would be an acronym? Her bottom looked like a garden in full bloom. Six-and-a-half knots was all she wanted. Long ride for a short distance. We were fishing that night and I was far from geared up. Ron had said to be ready by 4:30 and I dropped the Danforth at four. With a quick call on the radio to let him know I was in anchorage and where. I tore off the old line on my spinning rod, re-lined it with 8# test and tied on a 20# leader with bare hook, satisfied a serious hunger and packed a small fishing gear bag. I taped a flashlight to my cap then tied a line to the floating live bait bucket and rigged another line so that if I was indeed lucky enough to catch something and because we were wading and casting, the trophies could be so tied to the line to swim. Ready to go with time to spare. Fresh baitfish was the attraction of the trip and though the younger contingent at first had trouble finding enough, by five-thirty the 18' Aquasport pulled alongside and I passed my gear aboard and jumped in. With handshakes all around we slowly pulled away.

"Now," John says looking at me, "The boys know you write," continuing to look me right in the eyes.

I swallowed a bit nervously, "This is a spot hardly anyone knows about and very few know how to fish it," said Henry who happened to own the boat.

I got the picture. Okay to tell about the trip but location was off limits.

After running back through cuts and around islands and a discussion of the best route and what had filled in with the hurricane, designed I'm sure to confuse me. Wasn't difficult. All Florida mangroves look alike to me. We finally anchored on a long sand flat bordering on underwater sea grass, idea was we could wade, spin the hooked minnows and hope for fish to bite. Bait buckets were filled with shiners and I went to grab my rod. Not in the racks. Not on the boat. I'd left it in the cockpit. Talk about embarrassed. Henry's son volunteered an extra boat rod and I followed the rest as we spaced out along the bar and waited for the tide to flood.

Sun was dropping quickly for another beautiful Florida sunset and with a cool stiff breeze playing across the water I tightened the strings on my jacket, put a minnow on the hook and threw it out. Bad cast. Open-faced spin spool really had too much line. Make the best of it—time was passing. Untangled. Reeling in the third cast felt like a 5-gallon bucket had struck on the other end. Set the hook then pumped and reeled. He ran. Pumped and reeled again. Broke water twice. I was alone, others by now had spread out. Pulled him in close to grab the leader then he ran off again. Couldn't get tension drag on the reel just right. Too slack or locking tight, finally both of us were worn down, but I won. Grabbed the leader then the trout (about 4 lbs.), took one look at his teeth and decided pliers were in order for hook removal. Gingerly poked the light live line through his mouth and gill and set him in the water. There to lazily swim around my feet making for an interesting near fall or two, until I learned to trudge not walk.

My luck has always been such that an early fish was a bad omen. Thought this evening would probably be the same. I struggled with an unfamiliar reel, cutting out snarled line and re-tying leaders. Lost entire setups, hooks and all. With cold fingers tied on new and finally in the rapidly gathering dusk I watched as one after another the boys were reeling in fish after fish. Finally I managed to get my end of the gear under control and with every cast there'd be a bite. These fish were ferocious. Every so often they'd chew through the leader and I'd have to replace again. Caught ladyfish, bluefish, trout and mullet.

“How you doin' son?” Henry said as he waded by. “Son” being a Southern term I guessed, as I outweighed him by a few years.

He commiserated with me with a “par for the course,” and said, “Lee, all this is is one jerk throwing out a line and waiting for a jerk.”

Dark had fallen hard as we counted off down the line and allowed that we were close enough to limit (four 24" trout and assorted others such as reds and bluefish). Time to head back.

Now I'm here to tell you that I was some glad to de-gear, put my back up against the console and enjoy a taste of brandy against the chill. However, a ride at full throttle, dark of night, no lighted markers, and three men gesturing, often in opposing directions, in very skinny water is just a tad unnerving. About twenty minutes of racing by day markers through narrow channels, we pulled up to the marina channel, idled in to “Dreamboat,” Ron's 50' trawler and layed out our catch on the swim platform. What a sight. With twenty-four trout and others the platform was covered. A small crowd gathered as younger crew began to clean our dinner.

There are a few trips in a sportsman's life which stand as free and memorable as a diamond. This was one. Dinner of dirty rice, fresh pan-fried fish and bread rivaled the finest restaurant in the world and the day to come would be unequalled as well. The cold and stiff joints were soon forgotten as I pulled the quilt over late that evening.

This week, back in Maine, was the first time I've tried my hand at this combination of Carolina's “Low Country Boil” and a similar Rhode Island “Shore Dinner”.

In a good size boiling pot, chop up two medium sized sweet onions, one to one and a half medium sized potatoes (I like reds) per person quartered or smaller, and a cup of white wine. Put on to boil. In the meantime, cut a kielbasa or chorizo sausage into one-inch pieces, shuck 4 to 6 ears of corn and break in half. Add the sausage. Pile 2-3 pounds of steamer clams and 5 pounds of mussels (preferably fresh picked natives) on top. Set the corn over and bring to a boil again. The steam will open the mussels and when the corn is done, shut off the heat and allow to set about 5-10 minutes.

I've never wanted to tamper with the ingredients for our tried and true shore dinners, but children give this a try. The broth is elegant just by itself. I'd give it at least three "wicked goods".

Good roads and fair winds.

Lee S. Wilbur