

CALL of the SEA

These New England traditions run deep –
the lure of cod, haddock, salt air and the endless ocean





Early morning light streaks the sky as we pull into Eastman's Dock in Seabrook, N.H., for a day of deep-sea fishing off New Hampshire's coast. Arriving anglers huddle in groups, unloading gear in the gray mist. We pull on jackets against the April chill, get our tickets and venture down a gangplank lined with colorful flags to board our home for the day – the Lady Audrey Mae.

BY JANE VACHON

At 6:30 a.m., the 85-foot boat is already a bustling hive of activity. More than fifty anglers are busy stashing their gear and claiming spots at the railing for their rods. Theories abound as to the best position – the stern is quickly staked out by early arrivals; others prefer the “pulpit” on the bow of the ship. We grab our rental rods and secure a spot midway along the side.

I've brought my husband along for the adventure, though he's new to fishing. He takes Dramamine and settles onto a bench inside for the 23-mile ride out to Jeffreys Ledge. Soon the boat's engine cranks to life, and we chug out of Hampton Harbor under the raised Route 1 drawbridge, out to the open sea. I brave the cold wind to stand at the railing, watching the line of beachfront buildings fade into the distance, eager to partake in the time-honored tradition that brought the earliest settlers to the New England coast – fishing for cod.

A GREAT ESCAPE

Back inside the cabin, the ship's mates have opened the galley and are serving coffee, pastries, burgers, beer and tackle. It's tight quarters, but no one seems to mind. Some doze; some snack; others are glad to talk about what draws them to the deep-sea fishing experience. For Erin Enwright of Chelmsford, Mass., it's not just the fish that brings her out. “It's great therapy,” she says. “You get to put your life on the side and feel the tug of the fish. You get to be outdoors, and everybody's so friendly and willing to help. Out there on the ocean, you become one small family for the day.”

“We do fish for food,” says her companion Tom Moser of

Leominster, Mass. “I like being connected with the food on the table. Sometimes we get a cooler full, sometimes dinner. We always bring home dinner.”

Rob Laverdiere of Concord, N.H., has been going deep-sea fishing since he was a kid. He likes the challenge of catching bigger fish, and, being self-employed in construction, he finds it a much-

needed chance to “get away and get some fish.”

Some have traveled long distances for the experience. John Dina, of Smithtown, Long Island, N.Y., had driven up that morning – 320 miles – with his buddy Naresh Morgan of Queens. Dina has been deep-sea fishing since the 1960s. He comes to New Hampshire for the cod. “I like to catch the codfish – there's an aura about them – and the big haddock are back,” says Dina. “Plus, we get to see wildlife – seabirds, and sometimes whales.”

For Dina's friend Morgan, a New York City police officer, the attraction is getting outdoors. “It's the relaxation, a good get-away,” he smiles.

Nick Poulicakos of Nashua has fished over the years with his brothers, friends and son. Today he's alone. Why does he come? “For the fish, of course,” he says, biting into his hamburger.

There are young anglers, too. Fourteen-year-old Kyle Kathenes of Liberty, N.J., has already been deep-sea fishing for years. He is fishing today with Bob Dworak of Nottingham, N.H., a friend of his dad's. “I like the bigger fish, and the surprise. You don't know what you're going to catch,” Kathenes says.



Tom Moser (left) and Erin Enwright go deep sea fishing off New Hampshire's coast as often as they can. They always bring home dinner – and sometimes a cooler full of fish.

FINDING FISH

On the upper level of the boat, Captain Eddie Eastman steers us to the fishing grounds. He is one of three brothers in a family business that has operated since 1948. His job is key – finding the fish. At the helm, he has an expansive view of the sea and a bank of electronic equipment that gives him precise information about the ocean floor. Other fishing boats are visible in the distance. Eddie checks in with them by radio. Has anyone found fish?

Party boats begin going out with the start of the recreational cod season on April 1 and continue through the summer and fall. Half-day trips target mackerel and bluefish. Groundfishing for cod, haddock and pollock requires a full day trip out to where the fish are – places like Jeffreys Ledge, 20 miles or more offshore. The ledge is like an underwater island, explains N.H. Fish and Game Marine Biologist Kevin Sullivan, a vast rise of 180-220 feet deep water in a surrounding sea of 400-foot depths. Fish congregate near the edges, where colder, nutrient-rich water wells up as it hits the drop-off. Schools of Atlantic herring, the primary food source for predacious groundfish, spawn on the ledges and follow the plankton rising to the surface in the water column.

Prime times for groundfishing are April-May and September-October. The fish are still there during the summer, but anglers then have to contend with spiny dogfish migrating from southern waters. Three-foot long sharks with sharp spines in front of their dorsal fins, spiny dogfish are species of concern along the southern coast, but a nuisance for recreational anglers in the northeast. They compete for the same foods (including bait) as groundfish.

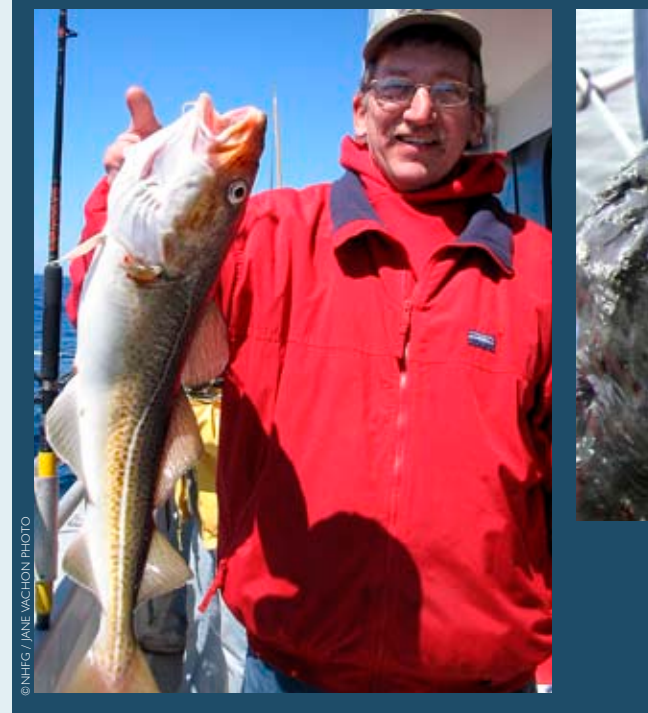
With increasing restrictions on commercial fishing in the Gulf of Maine, people sometimes wonder about the health of the fishery. “There are two sides to the groundfishing story,” says Sullivan. “Commercial take is down because of strict federal regulations limiting how much fishing can take place. On the other hand, recreational fishing is improving, especially for haddock.”

To understand, it helps to look back to the 1980s, considered the “golden age” of groundfishing in the Gulf of Maine, with 20 million commercial landings a year of both haddock and cod. These stocks crashed and are still considered over-exploited, so commercial catch is severely restricted by federal fisheries managers. “These fisheries are still depleted, but we’re not over-fishing now, so the stock is rebuilding,” says Sullivan.

Though they are prolific, cod have not responded as well as managers had hoped. While recreational catch of cod is up considerably from the lows of the



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late 1990s, these stocks are not rebounding as quickly as desired. In response, the minimum length for cod was increased from 22 to 24 inches and an April 1 to October 31 season was implemented.

The situation for haddock is much better. Recreational take in New Hampshire has increased from just 5,000 fish in 1996 to more than 200,000 in 2006 – a dramatic success story. “The haddock fishing in New Hampshire has been phenomenal in the last 4 to 5 years,” said Sullivan. A sign of this success

While the commercial take of groundfish has been limited in recent years by federal restrictions aimed at rebuilding the stocks, recreational fishing, especially for haddock, has improved.



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(From top left, clockwise) Atlantic herring, prime food for groundfish; camaraderie at the rail as a fish comes up; the wolffish's intimidating teeth are used to prey upon lobster; Dennis Vachon and his first catch at sea.

is that the minimum size for haddock has gone down from 23 to 19 inches in recent years.

INTO THE DEEP

Captain Eddie downshifts the engine and a murmur of approval rises from those on deck. Time to fish! Anglers move quickly to their positions at the rail, bait up from the nearest clam bucket, and, as soon as they hear the captain's okay, drop their lines. It takes a while for lead sinkers weighing a full pound

to settle 200 feet to the ocean floor. The biggest fish tend to stay within 20 feet of the bottom, though, so that's where you want to dangle your bait.

Minutes after the lines drop, an angler toward the back of the boat cries out, "Mate, fish on!" A deck hand hustles over to help him land a gasping cusk. Here and there around the boat, anglers begin to haul in their prizes. Tape on the railing makes for an easy check on whether a catch is long enough to keep. "Shorts" are thrown back in headfirst, but only after gently massaging the fish's belly to release some of the expanded air in their swim bladders, a result of the rapid pressure change as the fish comes up from the depths.

I make a circuit around the deck to check out the action. Some veteran anglers employ "cod jigs" instead of bait and are getting quite a workout keeping the heavy jigs moving. Sizable catches are already in evidence in several coolers, including a fiendish-looking wolffish. I take a close look at its sharp canine teeth and mouth roofed in molars, powered by enormous jaw muscles for crushing lobsters and clams. Despite its fearsome look, this diet apparently makes the fish absolutely delicious to eat.

Knowing my own cooler is empty, I decide I better get back to my line. My husband looks a little less "green around the gills" now that he is out in the fresh air. A friendly mate advises him to look at the horizon, not the moving water. I bait his line with a juicy morsel of dripping clam. A hubbub at the other end of the boat draws our attention as a shimmering haddock is pulled over the railing. The mates circulate, hoisting heavy fish, offering encouragement and untangling lines.

The sun gets stronger, a welcome warming, and the boat quiets. "Pull 'em up," announces the Captain, and the engine rumbles as he moves us to a new fishing spot. Just as we make headway, a school of porpoises races past the bow. Inside the cabin, mate Telly Case has talked one of the regular anglers into giving up a cod. He fillets it and starts a fresh fish chowder simmering in a crockpot.

At the next stop, we drop our lines, and soon anglers around us are pulling in haddock. Then an unexpected visitor appears – a harbor seal is checking us out, poking his head up next to our fishing lines and playing in the water. The crowd loves the aquatic show – until the seal grabs a released cod and deftly enjoys a fresh fish dinner of his own.

I turn back to fishing. The boat rolls gently, and I find myself contemplating the sun, the sparkling water, the day unfolding with a simple focus – drop the line and wait for a hit. Suddenly, I see my husband reeling his line like crazy. "I think I've got some-

"A hubbub at the other end of the boat draws our attention as a shimmering haddock is pulled over the railing."

Huge cod, like this gigantic specimen taken off the coast of New Hampshire in 2007, are caught most often in May and June. Recreational cod fishing extends from April 1 through October.

thing!” he says, and before we know it, he pulls in a 28-inch cod. As I snap his picture with the fish, I realize an angler has just been born. Beginner’s luck or no, I inform him he is ready to bait his own hook.

This cod will give us fresh fish to eat for several days, but is really just average in size, about 9 pounds. Cod can live for 26 years and grow enormous – 70 pounds or more and 4 to 5 feet long. In fact, the all-tackle game fish world record is a 100-pound cod caught at the Isles of Shoals in June of 1969.

The afternoon passes too quickly; lines are regretfully reeled in and the Lady Audrey Mae heads back to port. In the stern, a mate fillets fish. A group gathers to watch and see who will win the pool for the largest fish (it is Dina, of Long Island, with a cod twice the size of any other on the boat). Young Kyle Kathenes has caught a nice haddock. Enright and Moser had no luck today, but they will have fresh-caught fish for dinner – haddock fillets shared with them by an old timer. Mates begin to wash down the decks, and people retreat inside to test the chowder or climb topside to watch the sea, the squadron of swooping gulls and the approach of the distant shoreline. I, too, have a fine fish to cook tonight and a contented feeling for being, if only for a day, part of the gritty, seductive world of the sea.

Jane Vachon is Associate Editor of the Journal. Special thanks to Fish and Game Marine Biologist Kevin Sullivan for providing key background.



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LET'S GO DEEP SEA FISHING!

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- ▼ Al Gauron Deep-Sea Fishing, Hampton Harbor, www.algauron.com
- ▼ Atlantic Queen II, Rye Harbor, www.atlanticwhalewatch.com
- ▼ Eastman's Fishing Fleet, Seabrook Beach, www.eastmansdocks.com
- ▼ Smith and Gilmore Deep Sea Fishing, Hampton Beach, www.smithandgilmore.com
- ▼ Yellow Bird Deep Sea Fishing, Hampton Beach, www.yellowbirdcharters.com