

The Life

Men and women describe the life of commercial fishing

We are pleased to present an opportunity for those involved in commercial fishing in the Pacific to describe the way they work, the way they live.

If you have a story to tell, send it to editor@pacificfishing.com.

Egg money



By Sara Loewen

At our fish site in Uyak Bay on Kodiak Island, we set nets that extend 100 fathoms from the shore into the path of migrating salmon. From net to net, we shake or pull salmon out, one by one, until our boat, boots, and raingear are caked with jellyfish, slime, and blood.

When salmon fishing is your livelihood, you don't think about the gurgling sound as you wrench a salmon from the net by its gill plates, or of the fish flopping on the bottom of the skiff. You think about pennies per pound. The faster you pick the nets, the sooner you're done, and the more you catch, the better.

After a morning pick, our skiff cut a straight path across Uyak Bay from the cabin to the Larsen Bay cannery

where our salmon are processed. The cannery came into view like an old retouched photograph, red metal roofs crisp against gray buildings and the low gray sky.

Older walls are the mottled hues of a spawned out salmon. High tide covers the pilings under the mess hall and dorms; the buildings seem to float like a neighborhood of house-boats. When we tied up at the dock, the air smelled of hot creosote and brine. My husband shouted over the rumble of cannery generators that he'd find me after he dropped off the mail.

I was looking for Jade De La Paz, the supervisor of salmon roe production for Icicle Seafoods. To find her office, I pushed through the heavy plastic strips hanging over the egg house entrance. The egg house is prettier than I expected — although pretty is not usually a cannery adjective — with its clean aqua floors and tangerine ribbons of eggs in blue baskets.

Here they make ikura, or red caviar, from the pea-sized eggs of chum and pink salmon. Ikura, the most valuable roe product, is sold primarily to Japan. The smaller eggs of sockeye and coho are also processed in the egg house for cheaper products like heavily salted sujiko, or roe shipped frozen in the skein.

I've tried ikura at sushi restaurants, but the novelty of chopsticks, wasabi, and mysterious mounds of seafood overshadowed it. I admired the edible orange pearls as sushi embellishment without paying much attention to the taste. A true ikura connoisseur savors the honey-like flavor and the mouth-popping feel of each egg.

I was curious about the egg house after hearing fishermen describe it as a mysterious place where Japanese men in blue coveralls performed secretive work.

After the thousands of whole salmon we harvest at our fish site, the egg house feels like a different world. Here, workers hover over tiny, fragile eggs. De La Paz explained that there is nothing covert about making salmon caviar, though it is a difficult and specialized process.

"I feel like caviar is the forgotten child. Nobody understands the egg house," said De La Paz. "In the fish house everything was really big. With the fish, you cut them, you clean them, you put them in a box, and you're done. In the egg house everything is details, details. You really feel like in the fish house it's large-scale things. In the egg house, here's one tiny piece of caviar and it's very, very important."

When she took over as egg house supervisor in 2007, De La Paz had no experience sorting and grading caviar, so Icicle Seafoods sent her to Seward to learn the workings of the egg house. She was also expected to learn from the 15 Japanese roe technicians at the Larsen Bay cannery.

Like an oenologist attuned to the nuances of wine grapes, a roe technician has mastered the sensory evaluation of salmon eggs. Technicians taste the eggs at room temperature where the

flavor is most pronounced. They search for defects like a sour, sharp aftertaste, or bitterness caused by fat oxidation.

Roe technicians grade roe as it enters the egg house. Grading is a central part of producing salmon caviar. The eggs must be nearly flawless to be considered top quality, and Japanese buyers have strict standards for the ikura they import. Japanese buyers rarely trust Alaska processors to make salmon caviar unless Japanese technicians have supervised and graded the eggs.

"They have a feel for it. They make the calls when it comes to grading. That's their expertise; they've been doing it for years," said De La Paz.

Salmon caviar gets two grades. Ovaries are evaluated by stages of maturity from 1 to 6. The most valu-



able eggs come from stage 4 ovaries, which fill the belly cavity with single eggs that are easily detachable. Eggs from a mature salmon are brighter, bigger, and stronger than immature eggs. An old female may have eggs that are too runny to process. When we catch a stage 6 salmon in September, her eggs often squirt out when we pull her through the net.

The second grade is based on the attributes of eggs after they are removed from the skein. Japanese technicians judge individual egg quality by the color, texture, size, appearance, flavor, salinity, firmness, and membrane thickness of the eggs. This grade must be adjusted if egg quality decreases during processing.

Salmon caviar is a simple food. It's a raw fish egg. Yet the trip from egg house to packinghouse takes three days and a staff of roe technicians, plus 20 to 40 regular cannery employees. After roe is graded, it is weighed and rinsed in a chlorine solution.

The eggs are agitated in brine because salt increases egg firmness to withstand the hopper and improve yield. Garbage roe, milt, and debris are collected and must also be weighed and accounted for.

Employees open and spread the salmon ovaries flat onto a conveyor belt. Like peeling open a pomegranate, this exposes the eggs once held inside a translucent membrane. They are placed skein side up for the trip through the hopper, a machine that pushes the eggs down through a sloping screen and deposits them as a flat orange sheet of individual eggs.

Workers use tweezers to pick out bits of eggshells, stringy tissue, blood, and debris. After a second agitation, caviar is transferred to red netting in large bas-

kets and taken to the draining room.

When the blast of the state's oldest operating steam whistle signaled "mug up," I followed De La Paz to the carts of coffee and baked goods. Workers shed their uniforms of stiff green raingear and stood around in black cannery-issued boots, eating cookies, smoking cigarettes, and speaking in Polish, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, and English. It was my first glimpse into the cannery culture that De La Paz thinks of as one big family. In recent years, workers from around the world have replaced the cannery staff of college students on summer vacation.

Within the cannery community, the Japanese roe technicians tend to keep to themselves. You don't see them playing volleyball on the sandy outdoor court or loitering around the cannery store and docks. They live communally in a small house, rather than live in the dorms where other cannery employees are housed.

I tried several times to ask the roe technicians about their work. Each time I knocked on their door and asked for

an interview, they seemed surprised that I considered their job unusual. I was always turned away with a polite "No."

De La Paz showed me the draining room, the second stop for salmon caviar and her favorite place to escape for a few minutes of quiet. The room is cool, with silver walls that soften the cannery noise. Here the caviar cures for eight to 12 hours.

The packing room is the last stop for salmon caviar at the Larsen Bay cannery. Walking there, I sidestepped a forklift and then a golf cart rattling over the boardwalk planks. They honk at every corner and doorway, weaving around aluminum skiffs up for repairs, workers on bicycles, and towers of pallets.

The packing room was full of girls. Salsa music played in the background, but there was little conver-



sation. Women are often given the first shot at these positions because their hands are smaller and better able to get at the eggs, according to an online job site that describes the packing room as “less hectic than working on your average slime line.” However, it warns, “Employees . . . should be prepared to stand at a table packing eggs into boxes for many long hours.”

“You have to pay a lot of attention to details. I think girls are chosen because they’re the ones with the patience for that work,” said De La Paz.

As I watched the women, their hairnets tilted down as they concentrated on the caviar packages on stainless steel tables, I wondered what thoughts would sustain me if I spent the same monotonous hours here. They smoothed and spread caviar with rice spoons into plastic containers the size of a box of cake mix, and then picked out any last debris before patting on a clear top sheet.

In the packing room, workers navigate around buckets of diluted iodine and chlorine. Immaculate sanitation is strictly enforced to lessen the chances of bacterial contamination. By the end of summer, you can spot a packing room girl by her bleached boots. Workers throw away their gloves and protective coverings after each shift.

I didn’t expect to find an ikura aficionado the same day I visited the egg house, especially in the village of Larsen Bay. I had pictured these packages traveling to sushi restaurants or Japanese kitchens. But Joe Lindholm had been given a package of salmon caviar and invited me to try it. He’s the skipper of the tender vessel *Tana C.* and spends the salmon season collecting fish from setnet sites around Uyak Bay and delivering them to the Larsen Bay cannery.

“It’s an acquired taste, like scotch,” said Lindholm, “It’s fishy and there’s a neat little pop in your mouth. It’s got a different texture. I certainly wouldn’t want to sit down and have it like French toast. Just a dozen little eggs on a cracker, that’s just right.”

Salmon roe is a crucial part of Alaska’s commercial salmon fishery, and while most roe is exported to Japan, sales were increasing worldwide, especially to Eastern Europe and Russia — at least until this year. Currency exchange rates, coupled with the worldwide recession, have limited the ability of Eastern Europeans to buy Alaska caviar.

Could this Japanese staple ever be an American dinner choice as ordinary as meatloaf? I try to imagine bringing raw salmon eggs to a Super Bowl party, or packing them in my son’s lunchbox. It seems more

likely that I’ll continue having ikura at sushi restaurants.

Now, with every bite, I’ll wonder if these eggs came from our nets. I’ll picture the Larsen Bay cannery and crews in a working meditation above the elemental form of salmon eggs plucked from salmon returning to Alaska to spawn.



Sara Loewen helps operate a setnet with her husband, Peter Danelski, their 2-year-old son, Liam, and Pete and Jan Danelski, Peter’s parents. Loewen graduated in 2000 with a degree from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, and later earned her teaching certificate. She now is working on a master of fine arts degree from the University of Alaska, Anchorage.