

EAT WITH THE FISHES

For the freshest fish in Brooklyn, just don't ask too many questions.

BY MERRILL STUBBS

SHEEPSHEAD BAY—"Bluefish! Porgies!" barks the bearded fisherman from the deck of his boat, a lit cigarette dangling from his lips.

"What kind of fish are porgies?" my friend asks politely as we stand on the pier, straining to get a look at the large white cooler he's opened, and, inside, his still-writhing catch.

"They're the kind of fish that swims in the ocean. You're not from around here, are you?" is his reply, delivered with a pointed wink. We both blush, and he seizes his opening: "I tell you ladies, if I was 30 years younger..."

We have just met Little Joe. Alongside a dozen or so competitors, Joe hawks fresh fish at the Sheepshead Bay piers every afternoon, spring through fall. For over a hundred years, this vibrant seaside community has offered the borough's freshest fish, caught in

surrounding waters, to those in the know. Party boats depart around 7 a.m. with enthusiastic hordes of amateur fishermen (and women) aboard, and when they return around 3 p.m., there is fish to be had by anyone waiting on the piers. By high summer they're slinging blackfish, baby striped bass, and the Sopranos-evoking Jersey croaker.

Questioned about the rigors of his job, Joe sighs. "It's time to move on, or I'm gonna get divorced. But it's better than my old job—at least I don't have to run around with a ski mask on anymore." Another wink.

Switching back to salesman mode, he brags about his product: "When you're on your way home, you don't want to smell the fish. You want to smell it when you cook it. I'm not naming names, but some stores, they keep stuff around for days. Not me." His freshness claims are hardly necessary, as every time he lifts the lid of the cooler, we catch a glimpse of tails thrashing. I can't help but wonder how far offshore these lively specimens were hooked as I eye gulls bobbing contentedly in iridescent waves. But if the crowds are any indication, the getting's good.

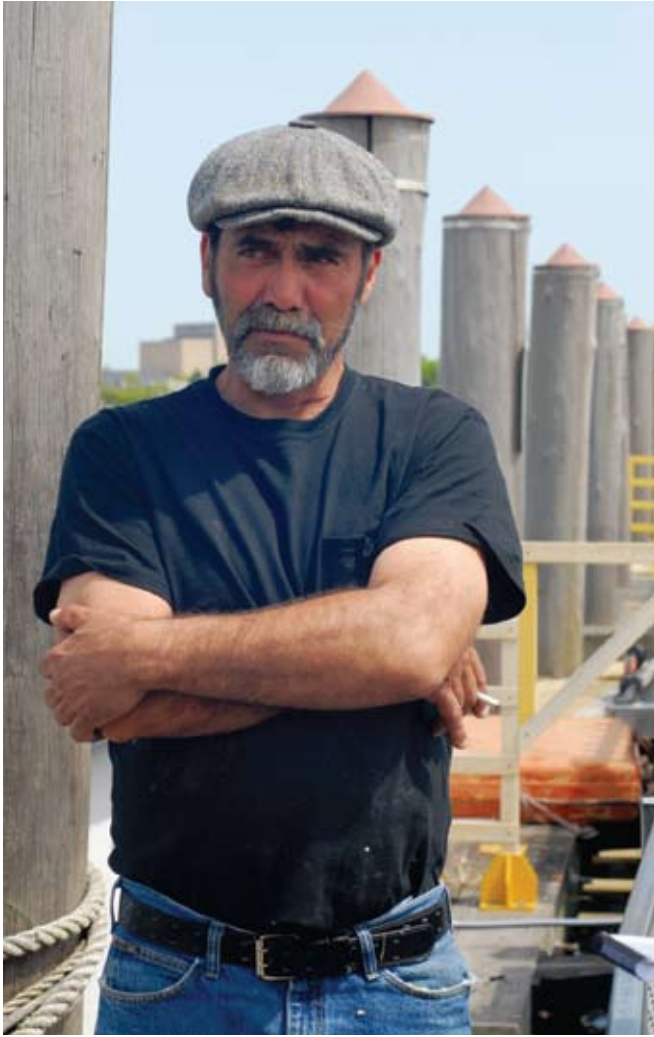
As we watch the fish tails thrashing, his freshness claims are hardly necessary.

Joe tends to a customer, a wiry West Indian man with an infectious smile who loads several handsome bluefish into a basket on the back of his bicycle and rides off, an impromptu song trailing behind him: "Every day, fishermen are here!"

A party boat, *The Jet*, pulls in, and about 20 people file off, proudly clutching their catches. The captain addresses the crowd over the loudspeaker: "Okay folks, thanks for coming. Now go home." "Go home? What for? My wife and kids are there!" retorts a middle-aged man to hoots of laughter.

Meanwhile a small crowd has gathered, leaning hopefully on the pilings. With a sidelong glance at my notepad, one of the mates shakes his head and asserts, "No fish. We don't sell fish." I ask him why not, and he recites mechanically that, according to Environmental Conservation regulations, party boat operators aren't allowed to sell fish they've caught while out with a group. "So, you guys never sell fish?" I prod conspiratorially. He grins and shrugs his shoulders. "I plead the Fifth."





Photographs: Michael Harlan Turkell

When I return a few days later, a fisherman on one of the spiffier boats, just in from a tour, openly peddles big, beautiful bluefish, at least 2 feet long. When I ask how he can do this legally, he claims to have “a special permit.” Like the boat’s captain, it seems we’re navigating murky waters here. But none of this concerns the Hispanic man scoring three giant bluefish for \$10. “I’d buy more if I had space,” he grins.

I consider buying a blue but decide that even one is too much to handle. Spying another boat pulling in a few piers down, I put away my notepad and melt into the small, waiting herd. Sure enough, one of the deckhands lugs a tall, blue bucket down the pier and over to the promenade, hoisting it heavily onto a bench.

We peer inside and are greeted by about 15 flopping fish. “I got ling and I got bass,” announces the baby-faced fisherman, his yellow gators smeared with entrails. I let an older Russian couple make their selection before I ask what he recommends. “To be honest,” he replies sheepishly, “I don’t like fish.” Everyone laughs, and I point to a black bass that looks to be about two pounds.

“How much?”

“Five dollars.”

I can’t believe my luck. The same fish would cost three times as much at Citarella and wouldn’t be half as fresh. My bass is so fresh, in fact, that he manages to split the plastic bag and leap onto the pavement. I jump back as if defending myself from a rabid dog, but an amused passerby steps on the slippery creature to keep him from flopping into oncoming traffic. He put up a good fight during most of the 30-minute drive home, and I note that rigor mortis has only just begun to set in when I tip him into the sink to clean him.

Later, with my catch roasting happily away, I wonder if it’s safe to eat from Gotham’s moat. But when that first firm, flaky bite passes my lips, all worries fade. True to Joe’s word, it’s the best fish I’ve ever tasted. 🍷

Sheepshead Bay fishermen dock at the piers along Emmons Avenue seven days a week, from April to January. If you’re looking for fish, aim to arrive by 3 p.m., when most of the boats come in. If you come by car, leave a little extra time, as parking can be a challenge—especially on weekends. Sheepshead Bay is roughly a 40-minute drive from downtown Brooklyn, or take the B or the Q train to the Sheepshead Bay stop.