

# A Winter Treat

Fishing, cooking and enjoying smelts

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANET WALLACE



■ Colourful ice-fishing shacks on the ice means fishing in any type of weather.



**Scene One:** *The sun is shining and the sky is deep blue, with not a cloud in sight. It's a beautiful day on the ice. I hear peals of laughter and spot a woman and her children bundled up in matching snowsuits. A boy proudly holds up a small, silvery fish on a line; his two brothers gather around the action.*

**Scene Two:** *We stare into the hole in the ice. Although the inside of the hut is nearly pitch black, the rainbow smelt swimming below are easy to spot. Daylight filters through the ice and the smelt shimmer in the water. It's dark, quiet and incredibly peaceful.*

**Scene Three:** *My plate is piled high with fried smelt. I smile, then dig in and enjoy an excellent meal.*

### **"Like being in a spa"**

Winter in Atlantic Canada can be challenging. To escape the winter blues, people find ways to enjoy and appreciate the winter, and ice fishing is one of these treats. Eating fried smelts is another.

I must admit that I never understood the allure of ice fishing—until I tried it.

"I love ice fishing. It's meditative," says Bernard Bourgeois as we sit in the dark in his ice shack. "An hour can go by so fast. You have no stress. It's like being in a spa."

After a couple hours of looking through a hole in the ice at the fish, I emerge, blinking, into the sunshine. I feel completely relaxed and imagine that this is what it feels like to come out of a sensory deprivation chamber, except I have the bonus of getting fresh smelt for my dinner.

Ice fishing strengthens community bonds. The huts and tents are grouped like little villages, rather than spread out. Inside, you'll often find two or three people, sometimes friends, sometimes family, and sometimes strangers.

"I've taught a lot of people to fish," says Bernard. "I like having people around and they enjoy the experience. Whenever someone asks me about smelt, I tell them to come around."

"The other day," he continues. "I saw a man outside sitting on an upside-down five-gallon bucket. He had just bought a tent but couldn't get it set up, so I invited him in. Turns out he was a doctor from Moncton. He kept saying, 'This is the life!' He just loved it."

### **Sharing experiences and fish**

As I visit another ice hut village, I encounter a man teaching his nine-year-old granddaughter to catch smelt using a hook and line.

"It's fun," she says pulling a fish out of the water and adding it to the half dozen already lying on the ice. "I've been fishing since I was seven years old."

I ask if she likes eating the fish.

"Yuck," she replies with a grimace. "I give them to my mom. She actually likes eating them. My favourite part is catching them."

Beyond sharing the experience, the catch is also shared.

"Around here," Bernard gestures to Cocagne Bay, on the New Brunswick side of the Northumberland Strait, "everyone eats fish. I give them to people who can't afford fresh fish, and the elderly. If I catch sixty a day for three days in a row, I don't want to eat that many so I give them away."

Rainbow smelt are small, silvery fish that often reach seven to nine inches in length. Like their relatives, the Atlantic salmon, smelt spend most of their life in salt water but come inland to spawn. The fish feed on zooplankton; many larger fish prey on smelt.

While the commercial fishery can use various types of nets and traps, there are three main options for recreational fishing: dip nets, spearing and angling. Dip net fishing often involves wearing waders and standing in a river or stream while scooping fish with a net. For ice fishing, the options





■ Captions



■ Caption

are usually spearing and angling, using a hook and line. Each province regulates its own fishery; the open season and daily limits vary depending on the method of fishing, whether the water body is tidal or inland, and the specific water body. Dip netting has the shortest season, along with the most restrictions and lowest limits.

“We can fish from the beginning of January until the end of March,” says Bernard Bourgeois. He can get sixty fish a day. Often he and a buddy or two will fish until they get their combined limit.

Bernard explains how to fish with spear. “So what you do, is you put your line in. At the end of the line there is a piece of yarn and a weight.” There is no hook: the yarn is just to attract the fish.

“You’ll need the *farine*,” he hesitates, searching for the English word, “the flour.” He opens a tin of sardines, takes out a few and rolls them in the flour.

“This gives the flour the oily smell of the sardines,” he says and sprinkles a bit of flour on the water.

“We think that’s how it works,” he laughs. “We hope this will bring them.”

With one hand, he holds a rod with fishing line and piece of yarn at the end. In the other he holds a spear, a hand-made contraption jerry-rigged from a car’s radio antennae, a metal snake used by electricians to move wires behind drywall, and other bits and pieces welded together.

“The smelt lets itself drift in the current,” he explains. “If it sees food, it will swim to get it, but otherwise it will just drift with the water. When they see the flour and the yarn on the line, they will say, ‘What is this?’ They’re curious and will come over and then nibble at the flour. Once the flour has fallen to the bottom, they are more likely to go for the line because that’s the only thing in the current.”

He waits until a good-sized fish is in the hole and then spears it. One of the advantages of spearing is that you can select the fish you want – with a hook and line, you end up with more small fish. That’s not as productive as selecting only large ones because the limit is based on sixty fish, regardless of size, and it takes as much time to clean a small fish as it does a big one.





■ captions



Spearing requires good eye-hand coordination and a shelter that keeps the light out. A simpler way of fishing is to use a hook and line.

### A feast of fried smelts

On the ice near Bouctouche, I meet a woman who has her three sons out fishing for their first time. She recalls her father, a commercial fisherman, hauling in nets of smelts; as much as a ton of fish in a day.

“It was exciting when I was a kid,” she explains, adding that she wants to share a similar experience with her sons.

“And a feed of fried smelts is great,” she adds with a big grin. “I roll the fish in granulated garlic, then egg and then flour before frying.”

Just like fiddleheads in the spring and corn on the cob in the summer, a smelt fry-up is a seasonal meal in Atlantic Canada. During the winter, you can find fresh smelts at grocery stores and fish markets.

I was amazed when I first saw them for sale and realized I would enough fish for several meals for just a few dollars. Not only are smelt tasty; they are also healthy: being small, short-lived fish, they don’t accumulate mercury and other chemicals. The other advantage of being small is their tiny bones are

easily eaten, which means you get calcium with your fish.

At Auberge vue d’la Dune (the Dune View Inn) in Bouctouche, NB, I ask chef Carson Edwards how he cooks smelt. “Fried with a just light coating of flour,” he replies.

“I love them,” Bernard Bourgeois says. “We just clean them up, roll them in flour and cook them in butter in a frying pan with a bit of salt and pepper. We clean them using scissors: just cut off the head and clean the insides. No need to scale.”

“They should be cooked just long enough so the meat comes off the bone—two and a half minutes on one side, then two and a half minutes the other, and it’s done. Some people overcook them and they get too dry.”

Eating the spine is a matter of choice. Bernard, for one, doesn’t eat it. “When the fish is on your plate, you split the back. When it’s cooked, you take it from tail and start peeling the meat off and almost all the meat will come off the bone.”

Nicole Edwards, wife of chef Carson, says the spine is a “crunchy treat, crispy like potato chips.”

After a couple hours in Bernard’s ice hut, I return home with my treasure (all caught by Bernard). For dinner, my partner cooks up a great feed of fried smelts. Winter food in Atlantic Canada—gotta love it!