

Wild Alaskan Salmon feat. Maria Dosal

Hey to all you fish enthusiasts out there. Whether you're an avid angler or just curious about fish, we'd like to welcome you to Fish of the Week!, your audio almanac of all the fish. Monday, August 8 2022. This year, we're excited to take you on a week by week tour of fish across the country with guests from all walks of life. I'm Katrina Liebich with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska.

And I'm Guy Eroh. And this week, we're getting back to the show's roots in honor of Alaska Wild Salmon Day.

And I'm very pleased to welcome our guest, we've got Maria dosa, who I know to be a fisherman. She's a mother. She's someone who cares a lot about salmon, culture and family ties to the land. So I thought she'd be the perfect guest to help us celebrate salmon today. And Maria, I'd also invite you to share where you're from where you are today, because I know a lot of people refer to you know, the places out there as Alaska Peninsula, western Alaska, Bristol Bay region, but they're also the homelands of Alaska Native people. So hoping you can kind of give us a little perspective into that as well.

Oh, you bet. Yeah. My name is Maria Dosal, I am an Unangañ from King Cove, Alaska. And I'm currently in King Cove, Alaska right now I flew in yesterday. So I'm very, very happy to be here. And I currently live in Dillingham Alaska on Curyung lands, which is the land of the Yup'ik people and also Alutiiq people and Cup'ik people as well. But it's kind of a melting pot of different cultures. And we like to practice subsistence and work with a lot of Alaska wild caught salmon, one of my favorite things in the whole entire world.

You were on a you're on TV show, right?

Yeah. Is previously on the Deadliest Catch on the boat Cornelia Marie as a deckhand.

Right on. Yeah, I know that salmon, but figured I'd ask about it.

That's awesome.

Okay, so I think of salmon is kind of more than just a fish. I think here in Alaska, they're a huge part of family, friendship and place. And I'd love to hear your perspective to kind of kick things off as to what salmon represent to you and also to your family.

Absolutely, yeah, salmon are a way of life. As far as cultural importance, Unangañ translates in English to sea-sider, basically. And so we grew up on the water. And salmon is just a huge part of that. Our whole year really revolves around the seasons of salmon, I mean, harvesting salmon, putting up salmon, eating salmon. It's just magic, really, when the fish are running, it's a magical time and how they keep coming back to us and returning is absolutely incredible.

The seasonality, what does it look like throughout the year in terms of just catching and then eating salmon throughout the year and kind of the whole the whole scene?

When the salmon first hit, we are really focused on doing a home pack. And that's in the spring, they start running in the springtime in Alaska. And what we call home pack is just putting away salmon, whether it's in vacuum seal bags, or smoked or canned, or dried, that's what we're focused on at that time is putting salmon up for the rest of the year. Because once salmon start running, depending on whether or not you are partaking in the commercial fishery or not, that's a really crucial time is in the spring to start putting that up for the home pack for the rest of the winter. And then you can start chipmunking it away, you know, putting you know, putting it in your freezers, stocking your shelves with it in cans, and then you have that for the rest of the year. And then you can also experiment and there's so much to learn. I'm still learning constantly of different methods to put away fish. How to use the ulu for example, and how to properly cut up a fish without wasting the meat. And when it's us putting away salmon with my family here in Cold Bay or King Cove. It's just the best time ever having my mom and my sisters and my daughter around. And just sharing those moments together of processing salmon in the correct way in like traditional ways just so fulfilling to us. It's really just one of my favorite places is around the filleting table with my family, and you know, BSing over putting up salmon in all sorts of different ways. That goes on until fall. And then I participate with my mother and my sisters and another run of salmon which is like late red runs in Cold Bay on the Aleutians. And so I'm putting up more sand with my family so that we can share it with other family members or our elders that aren't able to go get fish anymore and help them fill their smokehouse or help them stock their shelves. In the winter months. I think about you know how exciting it's going to be when the salmon start showing up again because it means a couple different things. It means one, the weather's going to be better and there's going to be more sunlight. And there's going to be, the fish will be running and so we'll get to enjoy the fresh fish and you know, honor it in every way that we can.

Do you have an earliest fondest memory of salmon fishing when you were a kid?

When I was growing up here in King Cove, we would chase salmon through the streams, you know, when they're coming upriver, in the creeks and they're going up and their backs are sticking out of the water, all of us kids would just have a heyday going and chasing salmon up and down the streams, it is the funnest time. If you caught one, you know, you just let it back. You could let it go again. But it's you know, showing off to your friends that you caught a salmon with your bare hands. That was like my earliest memory and it's just so fun.

Has your daughter touched the salmon or had any part in the harvesting so far?

Oh, absolutely. One of my favorite my favorite memories. So far this season was I put up all these king salmon strips in my smokehouse. And after they were done. So I brought him into the house to put them away and start canning them. And they were sitting on my island. And some of the strips were like hanging off over the side of the island in my kitchen. And she goes up and puts her mouth on the tail end of the strips and starts chewing on it. And she just went crazy on these strips that I had made. And it was just the cutest thing ever. Because we know she was...I was like, "Okay, maybe she had enough" because they're a little bit salty because of the brine. And she's only 15 months old. And so I kind of took them away from her and she just completely lost it like "these are just too good to let go of Mom, give me those back."

We know that there's on the show before we've talked about salmon. You know, we started out in Alaska. And we know there's a lot of different species of salmon up there as well. And if you could kind of recap for some new people what the different species of salmon are in Alaska, and maybe highlight some that you find that are really important to you and your work.

My personal favorite salmon is the red salmon, sockeye salmon. And it's just such a hearty, good, red fleshed firm, deep meat. I mean, it's so fulfilling to have and it's kind of the first salmon to run the red salmon. And once they start running, you know, it's just gonna it's go time, it's like the busiest time of the year. And then the Kings show up and when the kings are happening and hoppin, and it's just so much fun to catch a big king in the net and pull it out and harvest it and honor it in the way of putting it up. And then there's also king salmon is also known as a Chinook salmon. Then there's the chum salmon, which is the dog salmon, and then a pink salmon, which we call humpy. Where I'm from as well. And then I'm feel like I'm missing one...

Silver.

The silvers! Yeah, and it's silver salmon season and Bristol Bay right now. So the silvers are running and everyone's busy putting up Silvers and it's just a fun time.

So we're talking about like, when the salmon start to show up. It's like okay, it's go time all hands on deck, so to speak, I guess figuratively and literally in this sense. Do you guys sort of have a plan? Okay, we're gonna go out this date this one, they usually come back and we'll see what we get. Or is it sort of like someone comes run into town saying, Hey, we see them. Let's go.

Yeah, it's, I mean with the creation of social media now, you know, of course, someone posts a picture of the first salmon caught, you know, in the net, and then everyone's putting their own subsistence that's out in the water. And then the commercial fishing season kicks off which my family is a commercial fishing family as well. So my fiancé's out fishing in Bristol Bay commercial fishing for salmon now and their seasons just about wrapped up. But he's kind of doing like the late season scratch fishing. But once the first salmon shows up, yeah, it is like you said all hands on deck where our subsistence nets are in the water. We're getting the fish we're happy whenever a fish hits the net, you know, yelling out "hitter" and then we'll bring him home. And then around the fillet table, depending on how much you have for a certain amount of time. We're putting them up and then it's deciding on what to do with them whether the flame is good enough for vacuum sealing big for the freezer for the winter, or putting them in the smokehouse or making strips or dried salmon. There's so much you can do with salmon. I mean, our livelihood depends on it not only for the commercial fishing side for putting money in our bank accounts but also for filling up our freezers for food source for the winter.

Yeah, I've heard the phrase red gold out there and I think that's specifically talking about the sockeyes right? Yes. Was that salmon in general?

It is red gold it is red gold for sure. And when you're putting them in jars, it's love in the jar because of how much work it takes and it's it really is just like like a currency red gold. We use it for trading. We use it for, you know, trading goods for if someone has a certain amount of moose meat or something in

their freezer moose jerky is a hey, would you like some of my canned salmon for some of that most jerky? And they're doing a good trade that way.

So far, you've been describing the subsistence fishery up there, but you're also a commercial fisherman. Can you describe that for us as well, and then maybe contrast the two?

Yeah, the commercial fishing industry is just go go go. It's very fast paced. All of a sudden, spring hits, the fishermen start to show up in the 1000s, the processors start to show up for the 1000s the economy just like hits this big boom up in Bristol Bay, because of all these people showing up, and all the provisions that are needed for successful fishing season. And then they get their crew once Alaska Department of Fish and Game says, "okay, we've reached our escapement", the fishermen can go out, a lot of them are already on the water waiting for the fish to set their nets. And then when it's time to set the nets, it's go time there's a you know, certain hour limit for the opener so that it's on and off and the fish are allowed to come up and reach the lakes and rivers still. Catch the fish, they put them on board. And now there's so much different quality standards to take care of the fish when they're catching them. It's remarkable the way that they take care of the fish now. They have fish slides to help protect it from hitting the deck and slamming on deck. So you know prevents from bruising, they have to have RSW standards. So refrigerated sea water on their boats, and then the deck holds. So that helps take care of the fish and get them in the cold seawater right away so that they just stay firm for the processors. And then once they go to the processors, they're offloaded in their brailer bags onto the tenders, then the tenders bring them to the processing plant, pump up their fish holds, which are also refrigerated seawater. And then it takes it goes right to the processor. So it's very fast from the time that the fish are caught to the time that they go to the processing plant. It's just a fun, exciting time of no sleep and a lot of catching fish. This year, the commercial fishery in Bristol Bay, Alaska, brought in over 70 million fish.

That's crazy.

The ultimate biggest run in all of history that's ever been recorded. So it was a fast and furious year for the fishermen out there. And I've got updates from my fiancé the whole time and it's just been outstanding.

I'd like to double back real quick to cover some of the things that you just said because, you know, both of you guys are up in Alaska, but I'm kind of out of the know here. So when you're talking about like an ulu knife and the best ways to make sure you're using all the salmon, can you just go into some more depth on those?

Sure, yeah, putting up salmon and filleting a fish is just a technique that has to be kind of learned over time and getting a feel for the fish. I like to use a fillet knife personally because to me it's faster. I'm not really like super skilled with an ulu yet so watch learn but I use a fillet knife and I like to take the knife and go and kind of cut right behind the gills make a little mark. And then I insert it until it hits the backbone. And then I scrape along that backbone, because you could feel it with a knife, you know, insert it until it hits and then go along the backbone. Just lay it flat, like as if it was like you're going along the horizon all the way until you hit the tail so that you're getting most of the meat off of it. Including like the belly and then you flip it over that meat, that chunk of meat and then you take off you

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know whatever bones are leftover on it. If you're really good and skilled with it, then you can avoid getting those bones on it. But sometimes they still make a mess up and get the bones and then you just remove the bones and you have a big nice juicy chunk of red gold.

What are some other parts of the salmon that you eat?

So we eat everything from the skin to the heads. We boil the heads sometimes and you could salt them there's so many different methods and techniques but the most prized piece of meat from the salmon that our family fights over is when we boil the fish heads and eat the cheek of the salmon. It's like the tenderest best piece of the salmon that you can have and it's this cheek it's probably about like if you touch your tip of your pointer finger to your thumb it's probably about that size of the cheek. I mean the average red salmon cheek is about that size. And it's so good.

There's a lot of meat on the head. I've been surprised. We've been saving our heads too and like on the neck area and the jaw and that cheek muscle. Yeah, I mean there's a lot that gets wasted if those heads get thrown away and I don't think a lot of people necessarily know that kind of outside of certain circles.

And also the gristle in the heads people go crazy about the gristle. I love to chew on the gristle. The top of it has like a mix between meat and the gristle. And just to chew on that. I mean, we just go crazy over the heads. And then another way we do them as raw fish heads too and in our language we call it [Unanga language] heads. And what we do is we wrap the raw heads in poochki leaf, which is a wild celery plant, and we let that sit in it and to like, absorb the taste. And then we cut off little chunks of bite sized pieces of the skin on the heads, and all the cheeks and all the little pieces of gristle, and it gets that nice, like wild, earthy tastes on it. And it's like the best appetizer that you can imagine. I mean, it's like a gourmet dish for us. And we like to present it all beautiful and eat off of it, it's just lovely.

What are some of the things that worry you about the future of salmon in this area, and also that give you hope?

Speaking to the landscape in Bristol Bay like, it's just kind of one big mossy area, so it's a little bit swampy. So as far as if water touches one area, the chances are likely that that water is going to seep, and, you know, disperse along amongst all the areas. So I am worried as far as you know, for the future of salmon for my daughter and the generations after and my family and the generations to come in all of Bristol Bay and all of Alaska, like we've talked about, you know, the salmon have been returning to Bristol Bay for 1000s and 1000s of years for eons as my family would say, and that in of itself the sustenance that it provides for the people there. I mean, you can't replace that. If that goes away, you know, with any sort of development, what do we have left?

I think another thing we know about the Bristol Bay region, and we had Dr. Schindler join us last year and kind of talk about this is there's so much diversity of habitat. So if there's, you know, if one stock is kind of blinking out over here, the stock is doing really well. And over time, those stocks working together provide that really kind of sustained, large run to this region. So yeah, I think any kind of degradation to any of those. I mean, we've seen this in other areas like the Northeast US and the

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Pacific Northwest, it slowly kind of adds up to 1000 cuts that affect the overall population. And Bristol Bay is lucky enough at this point in time not to have those cuts happening to it.

I am also scared for the future of salmon of ocean acidification, and beach pollution and ocean pollution. I am scared of all of those things because I know that it's happening. And I know the rate at which our seas are being poisoned from these things and how algae is disappearing and food sources for salmon are starting to dissipate. So that scares me and I sometimes can't even sleep at night thinking about it. But I try to let go of that worry sometimes and do just what I can on a local level to help that and you know, if I see trash, I tried to pick it up and bring it to a proper place for disposal and just try to do my best locally and personally to try to stop ocean acidification and pollution and those little things that I can personally help.

Is there any good news? I mean, from what I heard you were saying that's been you know, a banner year for sockeye and they've had several good years recently in terms of salmon biomass total now granted that's a lot of pink salmon. You know, some of the greatest the Gulf of Alaska and the Northern Pacific Ocean has ever seen. So is there any good news in the future?

Oh, yeah, absolutely. With this return in general and Bristol Bay, it's looking good for the future of it. I mean, forecast this year was outstanding. And the return just goes to show how, how amazing that the salmon can be with they're constantly returning every summer to the lakes and rivers and streams that we have in Bristol Bay. It's incredible. I mean, it's magic when you think about it.

So we're talking about wild Salmon Day here. But as you know, farmed salmon is becoming a bigger and bigger product in the marketplace. I'm just curious, what opinions do you have about farm salmon and the farm versus wild salmon debate.

There is a bumper sticker and it's kind of vintage now but it says "friends don't let friends eat farm salmon." And I stand by that through and through.

Now, I recognize that you're a commercial fisherman and you appreciate trying to go out and make a living off of doing this too. But seemingly, if you're meeting demand by supplying farmed fish that could reduce Some of the fishing pressure on some of these wild socks and leave more for subsistence users couldn't or no?

What I know is 70 million fish that returned to Bristol Bay this year maybe like the prices would be better if people educated themselves about Alaska wild salmon and only asked for it at a restaurant only asked for it for the stores on the shelf at their store shelves, you know, if people become more educated about Alaska wild salmon, and that's what they wanted, because there is so much of it. I mean, this year alone, they had to cut processing short, because there's not enough freezer room for all of these salmon. So what does that tell you there? You know, like, there's the freezer space has been filled up by all the processing plants that they couldn't even accept more. I mean, they're put on limits to accept more fish.

Bristol Bay region, I mean, that landscape is producing all those fish, I think it's I mean, it's over 50% of the world's catch of wild salmon comes from the Bristol Bay region, and the lands that drain into Bristol Bay and the ocean that you know, surrounds it. So it is really interesting just to think about yeah, how, how we how fish are made, and whether you're gonna let kind of the natural landscape really act as a nursery, versus kind of that getting really hands into producing them in these kind of artificial systems. But yeah, I mean, it's just like you described earlier with the landscape is really good at making fish, if we take care of it.

take care of the land, and it will take care of you. And that's a lesson that we all should follow. And we all should just practice in our daily life. Why wouldn't you want anything else than Alaska, wild salmon, you know, go to your stores and ask for it, not only ask for it and demand it because it is the best protein that you can get out there. I mean, there is other sources, but it is an incredible source of protein to fuel your body and to fuel your brain and to make your hair and skin shine and full. And it's just so good.

That was awesome. Is there any way for the consumers might be able to bypass their local market and buy directly from fishermen up in Alaska? They want that wild Alaska Salmon?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, definitely. And I highly recommend to find, find a direct marketer, because that supports I mean, individual families, individuals in itself, they go out and they do the work, and they should get a piece of the pie directly. You know, and sometimes, you know, it is a little bit more than your average retail price. But just supporting and knowing your fisherman and where your fish came from. is so good. You know?

Yeah. That's interesting was salmon. I mean, it's kind of like, a lot of people think about catching a fish. But then it's like that whole year of enjoying the meat and being with your family and friends and eating it and reliving it and stuff like that. Yes. Yeah, that's, I guess there's a day to celebrate salmon here now, but it seems like every day is a good day to celebrate them and take care of them.

Absolutely. Yeah, and so versatile. And it shouldn't be celebrated every day, like we *do* do up here. I mean, it's just such a such a... I mean, growing up, as sometimes I would admit, I would get sick of eating fish, because it's just, you know, "Oh, fish again on your plate." But then as I grow older, it's like, oh, man, this is, like you said, red gold. It's this the nature's bounty. And we get to enjoy that and we get to partake in it. And it's right at our fingertips. And we're so blessed. And we're so lucky to have this resource for us that keeps coming back every single year. And you have to honor it and lift it up. And I if you want to talk about salmon, I could do this all day long.

Perfect. Thank you.

Thanks for this has been great talking to you. And yeah, we're excited just to celebrate salmon and we hope everyone gets out there and enjoys all the fish thanks for listening to fish of the week. My name is Katrina Liebich and my co host is Guy Eroh. Our production partner for the series is Citizen Racecar. Produced and story edited by David Hoffman. Production management by Gabriela Montequin. Post production by Alex Brower. Fish of the Week! is a production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service,

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