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NUMBER



R E P O R T E R

CLAY "MUSKIE FERG" FERGUSON is a river rat. On the St. Lawrence River, which flows east from the Great Lakes along the border between New York and Ontario, this peculiar honorific signifies a lifelong exploration of every deepwater channel, granite shoal, and hidden cove between Wolfe Island and Chippewa Bay, the unofficial boundaries of the Thousand Islands. And like all guides who troll this stretch of waterway at the northeastern edge of Lake Ontario, Ferguson makes his living when the fish are biting.

On a sunny late-summer morning, he strides down the plank in his boathouse on French Creek, just beyond the town of Clayton, New York, and begins lowering coolers of bait, food, and beer into the stern of a varnished mahogany 1951 Chris-Craft Cruiser. A lanky iconoclast sporting a *bandito* mustache, scuffed deck shoes, and a faded Chris-Craft T-shirt, the 56-year-old Ferguson has wisecracked his way around this river professionally for 37 years, hunting yellow perch, walleye, northern pike, and, during late autumn, muskellunge, a primordial

the St. Lawrence. A stocky fellow with bottle-thick glasses, the 59-year-old Brabant rationalizes retirement. "Aw, it's getting too much to handle," he rasps. "Time for the old girl to go." At least his boat isn't going far. The Antique Boat Museum in Clayton is keen to add the 1953 day cruiser to its collection of river craft.

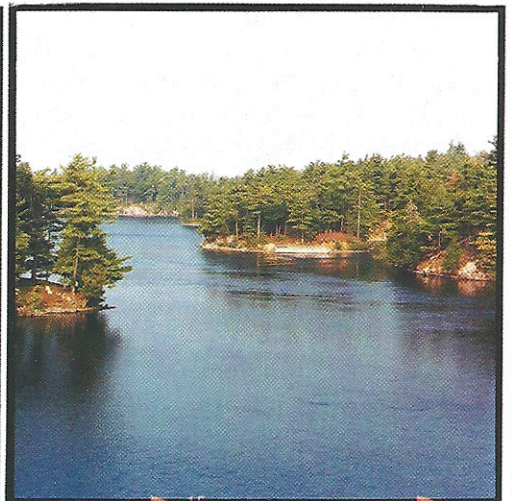
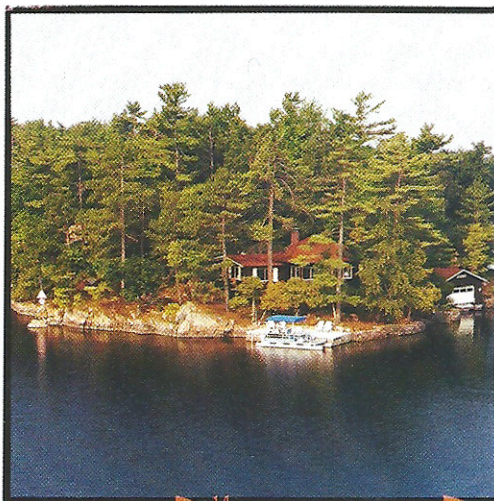
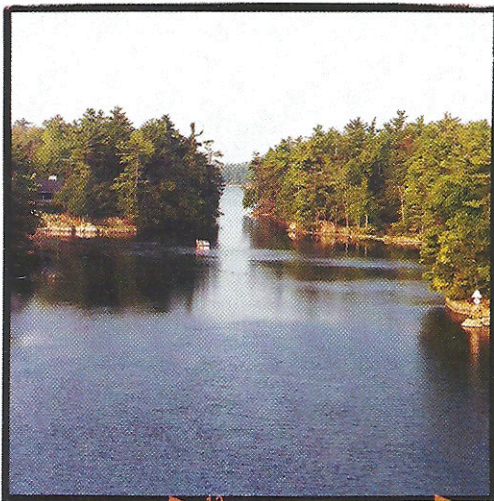
The St. Lawrence guiding tradition dates to the mid-19th century, when recreational travelers began to venture into New York's remote North Country on fishing and hunting trips. By 1864, a local builder had perfected the St. Lawrence skiff, and it was quickly adopted for rowing sporting parties out to secret spots. The daylong outing usually included an afternoon break on an isolated islet, where guides would set up a temporary camp and prepare their clients sandwiches, fresh fish, creamed potatoes, french toast (for dessert), and strong coffee—a meal that came to be known as a shore dinner. In 1872, a presiden-

SHORE DINNER

Since the late 1800s, fishing guides in the Thousand Islands have been serving up the catch of the day with plenty of local lore

BY SHANE MITCHELL

A few of the islands, seen from Hill Island in the Canadian channel of the St. Lawrence.



berserker that lurks in deep pockets and underwater drop-offs.

The Hidden Harbor Fishing Charters boathouse is cluttered with St. Lawrence memorabilia: an old cedar canoe hangs in the rafters; a gaping muskie head is mounted on a beam; signs warn, NO FISHING IN THE BOATHOUSE. As we prepare to board Ferguson's boat, fellow guide Jim Brabant shows up to hand over his own Chris-Craft, a virtual twin floating in the adjacent slip, to a new owner. Ferguson and Brabant are the last of the 12 Clayton-based fishing guides to operate wooden boats, once a common sight on

tial angling trip sparked a tourism boom. Railroad car tycoon George Pullman hosted Ulysses S. Grant and General Philip H. Sheridan during a six-day expedition on his private island opposite the riverfront town of Alexandria Bay; national news coverage quickly turned the Thousand Islands (there are actually about 1,800 of them) into a resort for well-to-do New Yorkers.

Today, most river towns in the area have their own guiding associations, and the 50 or so fishermen who staff them are still able to make a living as river rats. Territorial feuds are rare, although there is one well-known rivalry, between neighboring Alexandria Bay and Clayton; but this face-off involves ingredients, not fishing rights. Most guides begin their shore dinners with the classic bacon,

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lettuce, and tomato sandwiches. For some reason, A-Bay guides forgo the lettuce, while Clayton guides serve an unusual artery clogger of rendered fatback, the pork lard traditionally used for frying, with raw onion. If you raise the issue in certain riverfront taverns, a surprisingly heated discourse will likely ensue.

FERGUSON BACKS his craft out of the boathouse and motors toward Forty Acres shoal to look for lunch. Sitting in the stern with my husband, Bronson Hager, and his longtime river buddy Brand Gould, I watch the sun flash silver on steel blue ripples spreading out from our wake. Scattered between the hemlocks and oaks onshore, a few maples are starting to flame. Canadian geese honk at us from sheltered bays as we round the head of Grindstone Island and squeeze through a narrow channel. The shoal off Black Ant Island is famously fertile muskie ground, so Ferguson decides we should stop. "Some people still call this Ferguson Flats," he says, gesturing with his cigarette at the open stretch of water. "It was named for my dad." A local farmer wounded in World War II, Ferguson's father became a guide in the 1950s after deciding it was more fun than milking cows. Ferguson Senior eventually opened two bait shops, where his son fileted fish during summer vacations. At 19, Ferguson Junior bought a boat of his own and turned pro.

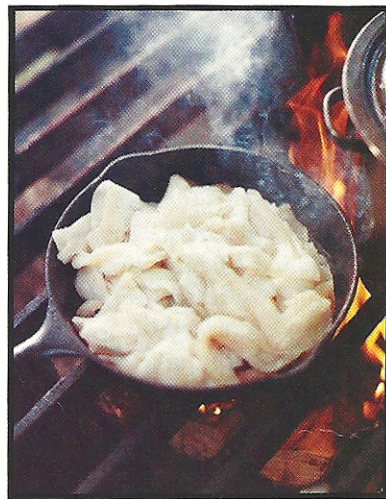
A sudden breeze churns the water gray. Ferguson squints and

Both pages, clockwise from top: inside the Hidden Harbors Charters boathouse; rendering slices of salted fatback; fried fish draining on paper towels; author Mitchell with Clay Ferguson and her catch; a fatback sandwich.



recites, "Wind outta the east, fish bite least. Wind outta the west, bite the best." It must be true. Brand and Bronson, both dangling eight-pound-line Shimano rods in the water, don't catch a thing. Ferguson fires up the engine, and we head down the Canadian channel through the picturesque grouping of islands called the Lake Fleet. Along the way, Ferguson tells tales about fishing with Abbie Hoffman and the founding Yippie's stint in the Thousand Islands. Grinning slyly, he notes, "He was a master baiter." Hiding from the authorities on Wellesley Island in the late 1970s, Hoffman took the alias Barry Freed. When the Army Corps of Engineers proposed dredging and blasting the St. Lawrence to widen commercial shipping lanes, Hoffman launched a Save the River campaign. Switching from political radical to outspoken environmentalist wasn't the most prudent thing for a fugitive on the FBI's most-wanted list to do, but on a remote border that had historically winked at rum running, petty smuggling, and other river rat shenanigans, Hoffman fit right in.

As we float under Jolly Island's pink granite bluff, Bronson pulls a banana from his knapsack. "Jee-sus! Get rid of that thing," Ferguson says, waving his arms. "No wonder we're



M E T H O D

Fatback Sandwich

SOME FISHING GUIDE clients like to add mayonnaise and sliced tomato to their fatback sandwiches. The Clayton guides themselves, however, prefer them unembellished. Clay Ferguson cooks his fatback, indeed his entire shore dinner, in a skillet set over a hot campfire; this is the home version. Slice 3 lbs. skinless salt-cured fatback

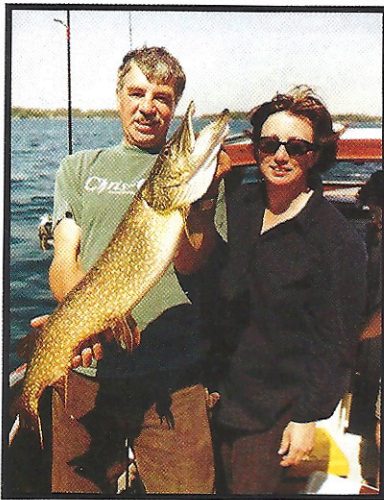
(see page 101) into ½"-thick strips. Put fatback into a large cast-iron skillet and cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally with a slotted metal spoon, until most of the fat is rendered and fatback strips are deep golden and crisp, about 30 minutes. Transfer fatback with spoon to paper towels to drain, reserving rendered fat in skillet for fried fish (see method, page 31) and/or guide's toast (see method, page 32), if you like. For each sandwich, put 1 or 2 slices peeled sweet onion and several strips of fatback onto a slice of soft white sandwich bread and top with a second slice of bread. Makes 8.

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M E T H O D

Fried Fish

CLAY FERGUSON HAS BEEN using the same two cast-iron skillets to prepare shore dinners since 1966. Heat the reserved rendered fatback fat (see method, page 30) or about 2 cups lard in a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat until hot but not smoking. Meanwhile, put 1 cup dehydrated mashed potato flakes, 1 cup pancake mix (Ferguson prefers the Aunt Jemima brand), and ½ cup dry plain bread crumbs into a large wide dish, mix well, and set aside. Cut 2½ lbs. skinless freshwater fish filets, such as pike, perch, or bass, into large pieces. Season fish on both sides with lemon pepper to taste, then dredge in potato flake mixture, gently shaking off excess. Fry fish in batches, turning once, until golden and crisp, 3–4 minutes per batch. Transfer fish to paper towels to drain, reserving rendered fat in skillet for guide's french toast (see method, page 32), if you like. Serves 8.



not catching any fish." He gets blank stares from the three of us. "Don't you know bananas are bad luck on a fishing boat?" Looking at his poker face, we can't tell whether he's serious, but shortly after the peel goes overboard, smallmouth bass start nibbling at the minnows on our lines. Since we aren't catching enough fish for a shore dinner, though, Ferguson switches on the electronic fish finder. Spotting a school next to a hole, he starts casting alongside Bronson and Brand. They

pull in some puny yellow perch and bass. We're about to give up when I casually dip a pole over the side. Usually just a happy spectator on fishing trips (my record catch is a six-inch rock bass), I'm not even paying attention. But—wham! The line goes taut and the rod bends double. "Nail your sneakers to the deck!" yells Ferguson. Afraid to lose whatever is trying to yank me overboard, I crank the reel. Line pays out unexpectedly as the fish runs away. Everyone shouts advice. I reel harder, and up swims an angry northern pike. I wrestle this cousin of a muskie next to the rail, and Ferguson whacks it on the head with a small bat and crams it into a steel garbage pail. I have just beaten my record by 32 inches and 6.2 pounds.

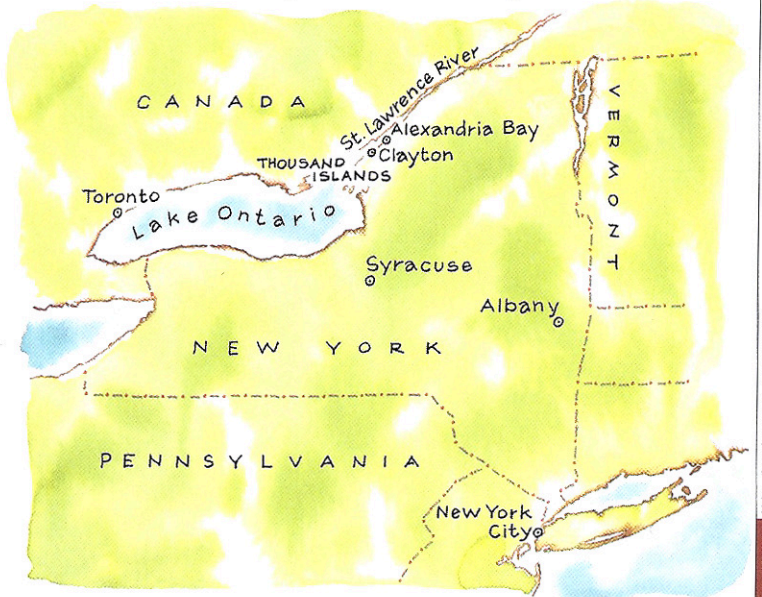
Bright sun and ozone have sharpened our appetites. Heading back

to Grindstone, we tie up at a ramshackle dock on sheltered Buck Bay, lined with tan marsh reeds and shaded by hardwoods. The men haul supplies off the boat. Ferguson always brings his own cooking water and wood, preferably oak. He starts a fire over an open grill, then proceeds to boil the water in a ten-gallon stockpot and filet our catch with an electric carving knife. "Just like the Indians used to do it," he jokes. Meanwhile, Bronson and Brand crack open chilled beers and lounge at a plank-board picnic table. I help unpack salad greens, tomatoes, sliced onions, flour, shucked corn, potatoes, and shakers of

salt and pepper. Soon, three pounds of thickly sliced fatback are rendering over the crackling fire in a cast-iron skillet seasoned by decades of use. The moment Ferguson pulls the browned cracklings out of the resulting liquefied fat and drains them on newspaper, I'm first in line for a fatback sandwich. The warm, crunchy strips dissolve like cotton candy in the mouth, and sharp raw onion cuts the glorious salty grease, which has soaked into the squishy white bread. Ferguson keeps working, sprinkling the fish with lemon pepper, then dredging each piece in a combination of Aunt

Jemima pancake mix, potato flakes, and dry bread crumbs. (All guides have their own breading recipe; Ferguson likes to include pancake mix because the self-rising flour in it creates a slightly puffy, golden crust.) The shore dinner menu hasn't changed much since President Grant hooked his first muskie. As Ferguson slips the filets into the roiling fat, he tells me one difference is that present-day guides generally skip the creamed potatoes, opting instead to make boiled ones, which are a lot less involved. Then there's the salad.

As the fish sizzle, Ferguson tosses salad greens and tomatoes



R E P O R T E R



with some of the chunky, garish-pink dressing that introduced the Thousand Islands to America at large. And we have former Clayton resident Sophia LaLonde to thank for this. According to local lore, LaLonde's fishing guide husband, George, began serving her special mayonnaise-and-chile-sauce salad dressing at shore dinners in the early 1900s. A client—vaudeville actress and summer resident May Irwin—requested the recipe one year and, upon returning to Manhattan, passed it to hotelier George Boldt of the Waldorf-Astoria, who directed his maître d'hôtel, Oscar Tschirky, to add the so-called thousand island dressing to the hotel dining room's menu. Several variations on this tale exist, including one in which Tschirky himself invented the dressing during a cruise through the islands on Boldt's yacht. Regardless, St. Lawrence guides continue to serve iceberg lettuce and beefsteak tomatoes with the region's namesake dressing (see method, page 97).

Pine needles crunch underfoot as Bronson reaches into the cooler for another bottle of Lake Effect Lager, made by a local brewery with a wintry sense of humor. By now it's almost 3 P.M., and we're all tired, talked out, and anticipating the rare treat of eating our own catch. After the salad, Ferguson serves a stack of crispy fried fish. I'm particularly taken by the pike, which has a sweet, meaty flavor, amazing for such a tough customer. While we chew in silence, Ferguson brews camp coffee in a speckled enamel pot. Crushing an eggshell, which acts as a flavoring agent and a filter, into a bowl of grounds, then

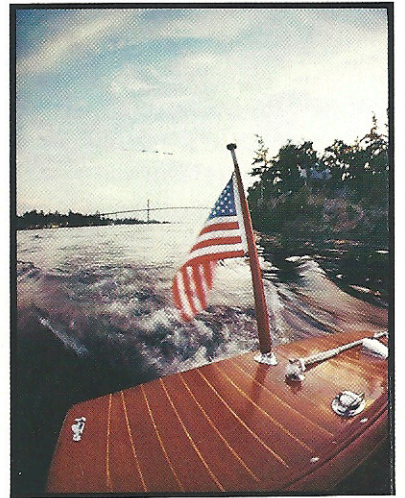
Clockwise from top: Clay Ferguson (left), Bronson Hager, Mitchell, and Brand Gould at table; the stern of Hager's boat; a serving of guide's french toast.



dumping the mix into boiling water, he says, "You can run around the island after three or four cups of this stuff." Next he moves on to the final cooking chore of the day, dessert. Ferguson tosses slices of potato into the pan to absorb any fishy essence and after a few minutes replaces them with hunks of French bread coated with a cream and egg batter. Topped with a splash of local maple syrup and a capful of whiskey, this guide's version of french toast is marvelous.

As the sun begins to glow red, we pack up and motor back toward Clayton. Spray lashes against the windshield. A freighter passes under the center span of the Thousand Islands Bridge. Pulling in to the dock on French Creek, we notice that Jim Brabant's Chris-Craft is gone from its slip and an undistinguished fiberglass boat has taken its place. Ferguson sighs: "If they was meant to make plastic boats, there'd be plastic trees." Tying a line to a dock cleat, he addresses his own perfectly preserved day cruiser: "You're all alone in here, old girl, but you're the prettiest." 🍷

IN THE SAVEUR KITCHEN, page 97: A recipe for thousand island dressing; THE PANTRY, page 101: A source for salt-cured fatback and how to book a fishing trip in the Thousand Islands.



M E T H O D

Guide's French Toast

SHORE DINNERS traditionally end with this dessert, which is cooked in the same skillet of rendered fatback used throughout the meal. Set 8 thick slices from a loaf of soft Italian or French bread on a work surface to dry out for about 1 hour. Whisk 3 eggs and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar together in a large bowl. Stir in $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups heavy cream, 2 tbsp. whiskey (optional), and 2 tsp. ground cinnamon and set aside. Heat the reserved rendered fatback fat (see method, page 30) or about $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups lard in a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat until hot but not smoking. Add 1 thickly sliced russet potato to skillet and fry until golden, then discard potato slices. Working in batches, dunk bread slices into egg mixture, wiping excess batter from each slice of bread against side of bowl, and fry, turning once, until deep golden brown on each side, about 2 minutes per side. Serve with butter, maple syrup, and a little whiskey, if you like. Serves 4.