

*Covering Asheville's
most fascinating women.*

More Fish in the (Bering) Sea

Heidi Dunlap is back from Alaska with one of her best catches yet.

by Jess McCuan . portrait by Matt Rose



Yes, the world's oceans are over-fished. And this year, no one's anxious to get their seafood from the Gulf Coast. But up in Alaska's Bristol Bay, where Heidi Dunlap and her boyfriend Steve Maher spend their summers fishing for wild salmon, the fish were healthy and plentiful. "Our river was hitting over 100,000 fish a day," she says of the Wood River, one of several that feed into the vast 250-mile-long bay, an arm of the Bering Sea. To be sure. Her haul this summer wasn't quite as big as last season, when Bristol Bay was having one of its biggest salmon runs in 20 years. In fact, the last five years or so have been banner years for the bay, and over three months, Dunlap can easily reel in more than 100,000 pounds of salmon.

Dunlap, who's been visiting Alaska since age 6 and started fishing there at 15, has one of the most unusual jobs in Asheville. During spring, fall and winter, she and Maher live in Montford, taking mountain bike rides and having friends and family over for dinner. But to prepare for the summer fishing season in May, they fly to Alaska and spend a month basically living inside a shipping container.

For those few weeks, their lives are all about boat maintenance--fixing pumps and replacing engine parts on their large fiberglass fishing rig. Last season, they got up to Alaska to discover that they had to rebuild their engine in just a few days.

There's a lot of wear and tear on the boat, even though it's a short season, Dunlap says. That's because for three months, the couple does nothing but fish. Sometimes they fish in shifts, casting out a large net and hauling it back for 20 hours in a day. They nap, then fish. "It's total extremes," Dunlap says. "Sometimes I'm so tired and so cold, I think--Why am I doing this? And then when it's dark and the water is all glassy, I think--wow, this is the most beautiful place and I can't believe I get paid to do this."

Dunlap sells most of her fish to a large processor in Seattle. But she does keep about ten percent of it to sell directly to families in Asheville. Now that she's back from Alaska, she's started selling her salmon in 20-pound boxes at tailgate markets around town. She'll offer some salmon to local restaurants like Tupelo Honey and West Asheville's Sunny Point, but she likes selling it directly to family through the markets.

Dunlap's father, Bill Dunlap, is also a commercial fisherman. Until 1998, her parents ran a mail-order smoked-salmon company, Alaska Smokehouse. In 2004, she decided to buy a boat and get into the game herself. "I guess my life has come full circle," she says.

For more about The Wild Salmon Company, check out www.thewildsalmonco.com.