Opinion: Bristol Bay fishermen raise bar on salmon quality

Guest opinion by Izetta Chambers

Having grown up in a fishing family in Bristol Bay, I have watched and taken part in the slow and sometimes painful journey to improve salmon quality.

When I was little, I remember how fishermen used pews—essentially pointed stakes—to stab the fish in the head or belly and fling them into a delivery truck. It was an irreverent way to treat food. Fortunately, the practice stopped in the late 70s or early 80s.

In those days, nobody used ice or refrigerated seawater. Bleeding the freshly caught salmon was unheard of. But I remember people on the Naknek beach being proud to deliver their fish in a timely manner. My family never let their fish sit long in the boats. It was a matter of pride to deliver the catch quickly.

As they say, change happens slowly. One small change was the switch by processors away from the knotted-rope brailer bags that inflicted body-bruising damage to salmon pressed against the bottom and sides of the bag. The new bags used a flat mesh design that did far less damage. And when mesh bags got smaller—another small but important step—quality improved again.

The really big changes began in the 90s, when fresh, high-quality, farmed salmon began showing up in markets around the world. While farmed salmon producers were going after the younger generation's growing demand for fresh and frozen salmon, we here in Bristol Bay were still chasing the World War II generation's desire for salmon—together with bones and skin—in cans.

The appearance of farmed salmon did get fishermen to pay more attention to the quality of their product. But the road to higher quality had its potholes. In Naknek, I saw many different operations come and go, each with the notion that they were going to do things differently, with the focus on quality. Most of these early endeavors didn't pan out, but they did get all of us talking about how to improve the quality of our salmon.

The 90s also were marked by falling salmon prices, which led to seafood processing plant closures and consolidation of the industry. Fishermen were hit hard, too. It wasn't easy to make a living as a fisherman when the price was only 40 cents a pound. A lot of fishermen packed up and left during this time. There didn't seem to be any easy solution for how our fishery was going to survive, much less improve.

Looking back, these painful changes were needed. I'm still too proud to outright thank farmed salmon, but I have to admit that farmed salmon was the kick in the pants we all needed to adapt to new realities in the marketplace.

Of course, it took time, and we still have a ways to go. But good ideas like careful handling of each fish and icing or refrigerating the salmon at sea have taken hold. More change came when the Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation started making investments in such things as village ice machines, slush bags, and insulated totes. It has helped a lot that such ideas were promoted with education and training by the Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program, the Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation, and, more recently, the Bristol Bay Regional Seafood Development Association and the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute.
Some people didn't believe that we could make real gains in salmon quality. When I tried to convince my mom in the early 2000s to use her slush bags and to ice her fish, she said, "Why? We deliver our fish within 30 or 40 minutes to the beach, and they get iced there. Why should we ice them onboard when we don't get paid extra for it?" It was a good question. The answer would come as the surviving seafood processors began to pay higher prices for higher quality salmon—not to pack into cans, but to turn into beautiful frozen and fresh fillets and whole salmon to claim markets dominated by farmed salmon. These days, only about one-third of the sockeye harvest ends up in cans, a percentage that has fallen each year since 2008. The rest is sold as fresh and frozen whole or as fillets.

Thanks largely to the efforts of fishermen and processors, as well as both public and private groups, the volume of Bristol Bay salmon delivered in ice and refrigerated seawater has gone up each year. In 2012, for the first time, the majority of the 131-million-pound harvest was either iced or put into refrigerated seawater at the time of harvest.

This focus on quality has had tangible benefits. The higher prices paid for salmon have generated bigger paychecks for the region's fishermen. The ready availability of high-quality salmon also has spawned new businesses that specialize in value-added seafood products, and has spurred more than a few fishermen to process their own catch and sell directly to restaurants and seafood shops.

The sea change that is happening in Bristol Bay is a testament to multiple groups working to spread the gospel of higher-quality seafood. It also is a story of survival through adaptation. Preserving our fishing identity and way of life for our children required us to change, and will require continued change. Can we stop here? Of course not! We have to continue to adapt and respond to global market forces. But as fishermen and caretakers of the salmon resource, we now better understand that wild salmon is not the only—or even best—selling point. Wild salmon of exceptional quality must be our selling point.

Izetta Chambers is the Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program Agent for Bristol Bay. She lives in Dillingham and participates in the Bristol Bay salmon fishery with her family.