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Day Drinking

with John Currence

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ESSAY

The Smell of Salt Air

BY JOHN BRILEY

THERE CAME A POINT IN EVERY ROAD TRIP TO THE beach when my mother insisted she could smell the salt air. With my dad driving and my three sisters and me piled in the back of the 1968 Mustang convertible, nary a seatbelt clicked among us, mom would shout over the wind, "We're close, kids. I can smell the ocean!"

My mom believed (and still does) that salt air and seawater can cure all ills, from open cuts and common colds to terminal diseases, and if she wanted to smell the ocean one hundred miles from the coast nobody was going to stop her.

These days, with a wife and two kids of my own, I often smell the salt air while packing my car in Takoma Park, Maryland, probably because I failed to rinse off our gear from the last trip. We are headed to Hatteras Island, North Carolina, a ligament of sand, marsh, and defiant vegetation that elbows into the Atlantic Ocean along the Outer Banks. Hatteras has long been my sanctuary, but it once led me astray—inspiring a knee-on-the-beach marriage proposal to the wrong girl. More on that later.

Fifty miles long and rarely more than a half-mile wide, Hatteras challenges the definition of barrier island. The bony point of that elbow, where the northern Labrador and southern Gulf currents collide, is separated from the mainland by thirty miles of Pamlico Sound. This means that fish are abundant, as is another aroma of summer vacation: the smell of seafood cooking.

There was a time when I could name most of the restaurants on Hatteras Island, all within a shell's throw of Highway 12, the island's sole artery. These days I take pride in acquiring and cooking the freshest fish I can find.

This stems in no small part from my mother's enthusiasm for fresh seafood. I have a gauzy

memory from a family vacation in the Bahamas of her delight in the taste of a pan-seared grouper she and her dad had caught that day, and another recollection, as a 10-year-old, of her teaching me to clean, season, and broil a five-pound flounder I had pulled from Oregon Inlet—the first fish I ever caught on Hatteras Island.

Later, during windsurfing trips to Hatteras in my twenties, I befriended Tilman Gray, a commercial fisherman and owner of Avon Seafood. My buddies and I would stop by his dock on Pamlico Sound to buy whatever had wandered into his nets—speckled trout, striped bass, flounder, drum, and the occasional oddity. We'd stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his crew cleaning fish. One day, a young heavysset guy was cleaning a triggerfish. We asked if it was good eating. "Oh yeah!" he replied. "Just wrap that sucker in bacon, throw him in a pan..." he trailed off, eyes closed in reverie.

Once I found Tilman at a dock down in Hatteras Village, at the far south end of the island, just as he'd returned from a deep-sea trip. He was slicing up a bluefin tuna and he slid a cut half the size of my leg—easily \$250 worth of fish—into a plastic bag and handed it to me.

I asked how I should cook it. "Hell, that's sushi, buddy," he said, handing over a small sliver. It melted in my mouth.

When I can't find Tilman I'll pop into Jeffrey's Seafood on Oden's Dock in Hatteras Village. Like many islanders, the guys manning the scales here often struggle to mask their unease with the barrage of questions that certain (ahem) Yankees ask them. But once you



get them talking, their soft sides

come out, and they're particularly warm with kids. They gave my son, age 7, and daughter, 4, a full tutorial on the parts of a spanish mackerel the guys were filleting.

And when I miss Jeffrey's, I'll scoot across Highway 12 to Harbor House Seafood, an actual retail market, where Vicki Harrison, a Dallas transplant with a Texas-sized smile, sells whatever her husband, son, and friends are catching. One day that meant yellowfin tuna for five dollars a pound, because a friend in Wanchese "ran into so many of 'em out there he almost sank his boat!"

Even the mere pursuit of seafood can bring serendipity. In the late 1990s, as I struggled with that ill-fated engagement, I drove my Ford Explorer out to the tip of the Cape to join the crowd of anglers casting into the roiling currents.

First, I wanted to take a few photos and happened upon a 60ish, rural Virginian in faded jeans and a white T-shirt holding two fresh-caught bluefish. He lifted them together, as though they were kissing, and waited for me to snap a photo. He went on to say how lucky he was that his wife, whom he referred to as "the warden," authorized him to extend his stay long enough for the fishing to improve.

"She's a good woman," he said, then looked up at me. "You married son?"

When I told him no, he said, lightly shaking a bluefish for emphasis, "Well, when the time comes remember this: it ain't so much

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what you think of her that matters. It's how she makes you feel about yourself that really counts."

Well, I started to feel better, and I can't say for sure if it was that indelible dollop of wisdom or just the sweet smell of the salt air.

