



George Parr's office is anywhere he might be at any given moment, including on the waterfront during the day or in his truck before the crack of dawn on a buying trip. Portland's premier fishmonger, he supplies the best restaurants in the city with the fresh fish that makes them famous.

Fishmonger

Portland Fishmonger George Parr carries on an ancient and honorable trade—acting as the middle-man between the fisherman and the restaurateur.

BY SALLY NOBLE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF SCHER

ON MONDAYS and Thursdays, George Parr heads for Boston, hitting the road at 4:00 a.m., which in most seasons means his day kicks off with dark coldness and a bleak feeling that yesterday never ended. An intense, hardworking, charismatic man who has earned the respect of Portland's highly acclaimed chefs, Parr is, at age 57, at the top of his game in what many would consider to be a very strange occupation: fishmonger.

Casting aside a lifelong phobia about dead fish—it's

those creepy eyeballs—I joined Parr on one of those dawn road trips. Weaving down Portland's Commercial Street with the other early birds, we headed first for an Irving station, where Parr, general manager of Upstream Trucking, fueled his 18-foot truck and treated himself to a cup of black dark-roast coffee complemented by a freshly rolled cigarette. Breakfast would be in Boston. There were Poland Spring water bottles strewn about the cab of the truck and a straw hat on the dashboard that Parr wears in the summer months instead of his trademark beret.

I fought the urge to go back to sleep. I needed a flash-





light to write the word “harebrain” in my notebook, alongside several other reveries of self-degradation.

Dine in any number of the city’s fine restaurants and chances are high that George Parr chose the fish you will be eating. After all, Portland’s top eateries don’t buy their fish at the Hannaford supermarket. They buy from a fishmonger, their secret-weapon middleman who works between the fishing boat and the kitchen door.

On these buying trips, Parr has perfected his salesman’s routine. On the drive down, he uses his cell phone to find out what’s new that day: he must arrive early, before the freshest fish are sold, and he wants advance notice if anything unusual might particularly please one of the chefs he represents. These abrupt, 30-second conversations, which can’t really be heard by a companion over the sound of the roaring truck, are the confidential business of a trusted insider.

“I call my contacts at the markets on my way down,” Parr said, “because while I know what’s on my mind for what I plan to buy, good fish flies off the floors of the Boston warehouses before dawn.”

No interview with Parr goes more than a few minutes without the interruption of a phone call. “Okay, what do ya got and how much does it cost?” he rattled off, cutting to the chase as we drove down the highway.

Parr’s clients trust his expertise. On this buying trip to Boston, as he often does, he would make an on-the-spot decision: while the client wanted cod, the hake looked a lot

better and that’s what he would buy. He would explain his decision to the restaurant buyer later.

“I try to encourage my restaurateurs not to have a fixed menu,” explained Parr.

OUR FIRST STOP in Boston was the Pacific American Fish Company; 40 high-quality Caribbean tuna had just been offloaded and beheaded. A worker was hosing off the iced fish.

Getting out of the truck, I nearly lost my



It takes an expert to distinguish the best fish from the also-ran.

footing and just avoided falling. The word “harebrain” would be repeated in my notebook.

Parr hadn’t noticed that I was flailing away, hanging by one arm off the side of his truck. He was waiting for the tuna tech guy—a technician skilled in grading tuna on a scale of one to four—and was too focused on nabbing the freshest catch.

I caught a glimpse of tuna heads, eyeballs intact, in a nearby vat. Time to discuss other things, I thought, and quickly turned to Parr and asked about the grading of tuna

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fillets. He said that the top grade (a one) is sushi grade and that his clients typically demand a grade of two-plus or better.

After Pacific American, we made pre-arranged stops at Pangea Shellfish and Seafood Company, John Nagle & Co., and Freshwater, Inc. Parr was intrigued by the promise that there would be a delivery of royal dorado, bream, and sea bass caught in Cyprus just the day before. After going through customs in New York City, a truckload of these exotic fish was due in Boston any minute.

The sun rose. Men in white coveralls used forklifts to move wooden pallets. A sense of purpose and urgency prevailed. Rolling another cigarette, Parr decided to wait for the precious cargo to arrive. We would have a quick breakfast; we would also have time, with fewer distractions, for him to tell me the story of his career.

Like that of so many baby boomers, Parr's story is one of happenstance and a dash of drama. After working in a dead-end first job in a clay shop in Washington, D.C., Parr, knowing that he was good with his hands, went to work at a local supermarket, cutting up fish. In the early 1980s he went to work selling fish at the Fulton Fish Market in New York City. Later during the 1980s he began distributing caviar to gourmet stores for Iranians, who flew the highly tariffed delicacy to him directly. Then for several years he was a highly successful buyer in Maine of American sea urchins for the Japanese.

By 1988, Parr, and his wife Kathleen, had had enough of New York City and were ready to move on. Suison, a Japanese company, offered him a job in Maine, where he became a highly successful sea-urchin broker.

"Bought 60 million pounds over 10 years," Parr said. "I had set up buying stations in the state of Maine as well as brokering a deal with a small company in Iceland."

Harvesting sea urchins and selling them to the Japanese was a gold-rush industry in the state of Maine during that time. Parr made a fortune in the business, which eventually crashed when the very popular Japanese delicacy was over-fished, virtually wiped clean from the state's waters. The financial reality of that crash hit the Parr family (the couple has two sons) hard and fast.

"One year I was making \$150,000, and the next year I made \$20,000," Parr said. He had been caught off guard by the depletion of his cash cow, despite the warnings of others who had predicted the end of the bonanza.



According to Parr, the freshest fish are the last 200 caught on any fishing trip.



Buying

FRESH FISH according to George Parr

- **Always smell the fish.** "If it smells fishy, it will stink up your kitchen even when cooked. All fish have some distinct odor of their own, but there should never be a hint of ammonia odor. The smell of scallops is sometimes sweet but should never be cloyingly sweet. Haddock has a distinctive odor. I like the smell of fresh haddock, but it should never smell fishy."
- **Fillets should have almost a translucent quality.** "There should be no cloudy or yellow tinge. Some fish, however, have a natural yellow tint."
- **Some fillets and scallops are processed.** "Some fish is treated with sodium tripolyphosphate, a preservative that is outlawed in Canada. Scallops that have been soaked in this solution will retain as much as 25 percent water. The water is released when they are cooked. Fillets can retain as much as five percent water."
- **Whole fish should have bright eyes.** "They should have clear translucent slime, red gills, and no odor. There should be no yellowness around the gill plate or stomach cavity."

Parr's optimism might have blindsided him, but it also served him well—he simply picked himself up and returned to his roots as a fishmonger. In 2001, he convinced Dana Street, owner of Street & Co. and co-owner of Fore Street, Portland's two gold-standard seafood restaurants, that Street needed a personal fishmonger to buy and distribute fish to his two establishments. Parr promised to supply Street with a fresh, hand-picked, quality product. Convinced, Street invested in a new venture named Upstream Trucking and rented space on Maine Pier for offloading fish.

"Quite simply, economically it was a good idea," said Street, "plus I'd have more control over the quality of my fish."

FISHMONGERING suits Parr just fine. There are some, however, who believe that the trade will soon be obsolete. There are more economical, industrial ways of distributing and packaging food, which is why supermarkets frequently use cheaper alternatives to highly skilled professionals like Parr.

But Portland's finest restaurants do not buy their fish from supermarkets. They buy from a fishmonger, and if Parr isn't their fishmonger of the day, Browne Trading or Harbor Fish, two other local players, are. Still, George Parr enjoys an indisputable reputation as the ultimate

he said, "but I'll only pay 10 percent more for quality, which is more important than the type of fish."

Fresh is another Parr insistence. The only seafood he deigns to buy frozen is shrimp.

"On the two-hour ride back, I'm on

On the subject of fresh fish, Parr becomes impassioned. He's forever trying to buy the "top of the trip," the last fish caught and therefore the freshest.

salesman who knows his business and delivers the goods.

Parr's clients trust him to look out for their interests. If he thinks a fish is overpriced or not up to the high standards of his top chef clients, he simply adjusts his beret, smiles his Cheshire grin, and hits the cell phone for another source, buying, selling, and schmoozing.

"Within reason I buy the better fish,"

the phone selling to clients," he said. "I pretty much know everyone's menus and everyone wants a special, so I'll say 'Okay I found some halibut—who wants some?'"

"I look at my phone bill at the end of the month, and the more than 100 calls are no longer than a minute long each."

PARR TOOK a late-morning break on the way home and rolled another ciga-

rette. As he did I couldn't help noticing the large scar on his left thumb, a testimony to the riskier part of his profession—loining (cutting up) fish.

Cutting fish properly requires the precision of a good surgeon. Tuna, for example, is cut into four tidy pieces—two from the top of the fish, two from the bottom—with each piece shaped like a triangle, keeping the fin intact. A 60-pound tuna takes Parr from five to ten minutes to cut, no matter whether the tuna is blue, big eye, yellow fin, albacore, or bonita. He does have an assistant to help with this chore, but hand George Parr a knife and he cuts fish with the swiftness of Zorro with a sword.

Parr works seven days a week, trying to buy primarily Maine fish. Several winters ago, Parr enjoyed the first and fresh pick of groundfish when a company called November Gale offloaded their boats regularly at the Maine Pier in Portland, where Upstream Trucking is based. But many customers at the restaurants for which he is buying demand that certain fish always appear on the menu, so

Parr is always on the prowl for fish that is not necessarily from Maine, such as tuna.

"I try to always have tuna on board," said Dana Street, "while also trying not to serve tuna caught where fishing isn't regulated."

Parr, as a high-end supplier to demanding chefs, must do more than check wave heights on the Internet for a clue about what fish might be the freshest and best catch on a given day. He must also carefully walk a fine line to deliver politically correct fish. While the chefs of Portland's star restaurants mull over a dish that's new and deliciously different with a particular fish, Parr and his company's owner, Dana Street, work to buy fresh and buy local; they seek to accommodate eco-conscious consumers, the type who bring their own bags to the supermarket.

"If a chef is considering monkfish one week, for example," said Street, "then we discuss not only what he wants to do with it, but whether it's available as a seasonal, local catch."

On the subject of fresh fish, Parr

becomes impassioned. He's forever trying to buy the "top of the trip." These are the last fish that were caught and are therefore the freshest. Parr explained that while a fishing boat might be equipped to catch tens of thousands of fish, it takes days to catch that many. So the first few days' catch, even though it is kept cold, is on the bottom, and has to wait days before being offloaded.

A GENTLEMAN who tries to contain his expletives, George Parr is a true Renaissance man. He is a truck driver who takes his family to Paris for Thanksgiving, excels on a potter's wheel, rubs shoulders with dockworkers, reads the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and the *Guardian* daily, talks with fishermen, has memorized the menus of Portland's best seafood restaurants, and can speak volumes about international treaties relating to the use of the world's oceans. And he knows his fish. 

Sally Noble is a freelance writer who is based in Portland, as is photographer Jeff Scher.