

## **View / Travel: Hooked on Anchovies**

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Port Alberni, British Columbia -- "I knew from the way that that anchovy rolled in the water that it would take a fish," said Helmut Schwarz, the captain of HS Charters, as he knelt over his bait box and hunted for another firm, fat anchovy. We had just pulled in a 20-pound chinook salmon, and Mr. Schwarz knew we could do it again.

It was a cool morning in September, and my husband, Christopher, and I were vacationing on British Columbia's Vancouver Island. The salmon were running through the local waters in force, and we had hired Mr. Schwarz and his 22-foot Grady-White for the day. A fisherman who has been baiting hooks for more than 40 years, Mr. Schwarz generously shared his tricks of the trade. While doing so, he also introduced us to some of the richest most diverse sport-fishing waters in the world.

The craggy mainland of Canada's westernmost province runs for more than 4,400 miles along the Pacific Ocean and boasts pristine coastlines and an impressively healthy ecosystem. Halibut, lingcod and five species of salmon swim in the cold, clean offshore waters. Killer, humpback and gray whales reside there as well. Bald eagles and black bears hunt the shores for oysters and salmon. And an intricate web of more than 1,500 freshwater rivers nurtures rainbow and cutthroat trout. Those rivers also feed into the Pacific and, early each fall, welcome the salmon back from the ocean as they miraculously return to their natal rivers where they spawn and then die.

When we arrived at the dock for our 6 a.m. departure, we were promptly handed life jackets and told to hold on for the ride through the Alberni Inlet. A fjord, the 18-mile inlet is graced by mountains on both sides and fed by dozens of streams throughout. Only the week before, Mr. Schwarz had pulled in a 32-pound chinook no more than 10 minutes from the marina. By the time we arrived that fishing hole had dried up and we needed to head out of the majestic inlet to San Mateo Bay. Closer to the ocean, the salmon were fat and feisty in anticipation of their anadromous journey.

Before we even dropped a line, our captain set the standard. He explained that it is a fisherman's ability to analyze detail that makes the difference between catching a fish or being empty-handed at the end of the day. As he checked his gear and prepped his downrigger, he said, "Watch everything like a hawk. Never think you know everything or that you've got the best gear."

Within minutes, Mr. Schwarz had prepared four lines. Three held artificial lures called hoochies, which resemble squid. The fourth was baited with an anchovy. Dropping them to various depths, he explained that salmon are fickle and one never knows what will strike their fancy. By offering a smorgasbord, we increased our chances of a hit early on. After we caught our first salmon, with an anchovy, Mr. Schwarz knew that was our clue for the day.

When live anchovies run through a school of salmon, getting swatted by tails and fins, they take a flip and momentary pause, making them easy prey for a hungry fish. Through years of observation and experience, Mr. Schwarz has learned to copy these movements with a baited fish. While we hovered over his bait box, he stroked and poked an anchovy and explained that he had frozen it in a brine solution the night before; that set the scales and firmed the fish, which would help the anchovy flip properly in the water. When baiting, he carefully put the hook through the blue-black stripe by the anchovy's dorsal fin and checked for a slight curve that would create the desired one or two rotations per second. Then he carefully put the line in the water, watched the way the anchovy rolled, counted the rotations, and looked for the pause. If it wasn't exactly right, he pulled up the line and tweaked the anchovy until it was.

One minute we were quietly admiring a bald eagle soaring overhead, and the next minute frenzy set in. There was a fish on the line with the anchovy, and time was crucial. Mr. Schwarz leaped off his

250-horsepower Yamaha motor. I dropped my Diet Seven-Up and abandoned my sausage sandwich. My husband grabbed the net.

Even before the fish had surfaced we knew it was a chinook. A slight pause after an initial tug of the line was a good clue. The intense fight was the sure sign. The fish decided to go for a run, and Mr. Schwarz coached me to release the line. Other boats trolling nearby quickly moved away to avoid getting snagged. After about 10 tense, arm-draining minutes and a deep sigh of relief on my part, the three of us hauled the king on board with a net and admired the gasping, gnashing, tooth-filled black mouth and gamely flapping silvery spotted tail -- 19 pounds of noble fighting fish.

At our beachside cottage, Sparky, as we called him, emerged from the ice chest with a clear, come-hither eye and a clean, nonfishy smell -- just what the chef ordered. Back home in Seattle, we had Sparky professionally cold-smoked and vacuum-packed. Now he's stashed in my freezer and makes a decadent Saturday-night treat.