

BY MARTIN SILVERSTONE

THE OLD-TIMERS'

LEAGUE



MARTIN SILVERSTONE (2)

Oldtimers from right to left include Richard Bernier, Gaétan Lavoie, Joe Verni and Faruk Ekich. Above, Elias Côté explains how high water has wiped out fishing at the falls on the Portage River.

ON THE RIVIÈRE DU PETIT SAGUENAY, LOCAL FLY FISHERS HAVE STEPPED UP TO PROTECT AND RESTORE A TREASURED RESOURCE.

ONLY NOW, AS I WAIT ON THE BRIDGE OVER THE RIVIÈRE DU Petit Saguenay, with the roar of the falls thundering in my ears, and the roadway vibrating beneath my feet, do I realize the folly of it all. The plan was for me to be dropped off (en route from the Gaspé to Montreal) at a cabin overlooking this pretty waterfall, then scout out the river with good friend Faruk Ekich. Finally, when Lawton and Belvedere arrived I would be ready to blow them away. Using Faruk's advice (after all he is pretty much to this river what Richard Adams was to the Matapedia) my two friends would catch fish and thus, I would reward them for driving five hours to give me a ride home. I would have another great story of wide-eyed first-timers discovering the wonders of Atlantic salmon angling, and maybe, just maybe, in the process, catch my first salmon ever.

As the Robert Burns poem goes: “The best laid schemes of mice and men oft go askew.” High water was the monkey wrench in the gears that set this plan awry.

“Not just high water,” Faruk told me earlier in the day, as we combed the banks for a recognizable pool. “But volumes approaching the great flood of 1996.” Back then the entire region was terrorized by the very rivers that sustained it. This spate wasn’t going to cause any lasting damage, but prime salmon holding areas, like the easy-to-fish Chutes Pool, would be completely wiped out for days, if not longer.

Rarely does a lack of fish stop me from coming home with a nice story, which makes me no different than almost every other salmon angler out there. Right now, though, I wasn’t so sure. What had I gotten my unsuspecting friends into? Standing on the bridge alone, the water seemed even more powerful and menacing in the dark.



MARTIN SILVERSTONE (3)



And of course they’re late. I know my instructions were good. Follow the 138 to Route 170 and watch for the mill in Sagard, then keep your eyes peeled for the Chemin des Chutes, and turn left. But these are city



Street names harken back to a bygone era of private ownership of the river. Today, improved access and comfortable cabins, one just out of sight (above, right) that overlooks a stunning waterfall, speak of a river association dedicated to involving the public in river conservation.

boys, born and bred, and I am convinced the complete blackness and absence of street and traffic lights is going to catch them off guard.

I suspect all hell will break loose when they hear the news about the fishing. I figure I’m bound to take a severe ribbing, but no. It takes me an hour to pull them away from ogling the waterfall and another two hours and many beer around a campfire (despite the rain), before anyone gets to bed. Fishing and fish have slipped into the background—la rivière du Petit Saguenay has taken centre stage.

If theatre is used as a metaphor for the story of Petit Saguenay, the river that slips through the town of the same name and flows out into the Saguenay Fjord, then it could well have been a tragedy. Following a long period of private ownership, the river was opened to the



public in 1967, almost 10 years before any other salmon river in Quebec. Under the hastily organized, government-led management regime, the river association couldn't afford enough staff to protect the river, or to maintain the buildings.

There were some rough years back then; resentment against being excluded from what many locals felt was theirs, led to rampant poaching and other abuses. Fish runs hit the skids. By the 1980s, even the buildings fell into serious disrepair.

Thankfully, there was a small group of local, keen fly fishers, influenced by old-timers like Xavier Lavoie and Faruk himself, who sold a hometown gang of younger anglers on the value a healthy salmon river could have for their community. They helped them organize a neighbourhood watch that relied on volunteers to put a halt to the worst of the illegal fishing practices. If it wasn't for this new generation of anglers, all who grew up within casting distance of the rivière du Petit Saguenay, the salmon and all it brings to this tiny village of 800, would have been lost forever.

The next morning, with Faruk making the introductions, we meet the main characters over fresh coffee in the offices of the Association de la rivière du Petit Saguenay. It's like something right out of central casting: there is Elias Côté, president of the local river association. His grandfather, Arthur, was one of the last guides for the private camp—Camp Dumas or Le Club des Messieurs, as it was known in the village. Other members of his family were lucky enough to find employment as builders, cooks and wardens. Gaétan Lavoie is there too, the nephew of Xavier. He grew up in Petit Saguenay but had to move away for work; now, he parks his mobile home in the back of the ZEC office to fish all summer in the rejuvenated river. And finally, there is Richard Bernier, who is in charge of the day-to-day running of the ZEC. He, Gaétan, Elias and a few others involved with the river have known each other all their lives. This generation, now with their own grown children and even grandchildren, took matters into their own hands and formed the Association de la rivière du petit Saguenay, which now runs the Zone

d'Exploitation Contrôlée, or ZEC. In effect, they have become the old-timers.

As hands cradled fresh brewed coffee, stories filled the bright wooden building like bubbling ingredients of a simmering stew. Back in the 90s the association had brought broodstock to the hatchery in Tadoussac. An early form of satellite rearing and seeding of smolt helped the river bounce back. There were tales of some truly giant salmon. Most of them seem to involve our host, Faruk, in one way or another. The respect newer generations have for him is palpable. Even visiting anglers, who arrive at the association's office, eagerly seek out his advice.

There was one group from Trois Rivières, who were having a tough time understanding there wasn't going to be any fishing today. Their frustration turns to awe when they recognize Faruk from a faded photo on the wall. He holds the record for the biggest fish (see *ASJ* Winter, 2008), so the newcomers listen carefully as he points them to a river nearby, the Anse St Jean, where there may be a chance to hook a salmon.

Next, two teenagers stumble in. Sebastien Raphael and Martin Bernier can't stay away even with the high water and drizzle. They look pleadingly at Faruk and Richard for advice. They understand these kids can't afford to go to the Anse St. Jean so they explain that if they were to fish . . . And off the youngsters go, content to have the best of advice.

Richard suggests we head up to the cabin at Poussiere Pool. We follow a wide path along the river. Over a hundred years ago, travellers would follow this same route to move from the coast inland. The paths were reconstructed and are now carefully maintained. On the way, we pass an elderly couple walking in the rain.

"Not fishing today?" I ask, assuming we weren't the only frustrated anglers. "Fishing? We aren't here to fish," the man responds pleasantly. Up from Toronto, they were keen birders and hikers. "And besides," they call after us as we continue, "there's the cosy wood fire in our cabin to go back to."

At Poussiere, the old warden's cabin has been lovingly renovated to house a couple of anglers. Here, at the fork of the Portage River, Price Company employees would often stop for a meal before continuing on to the lumber camps further north.

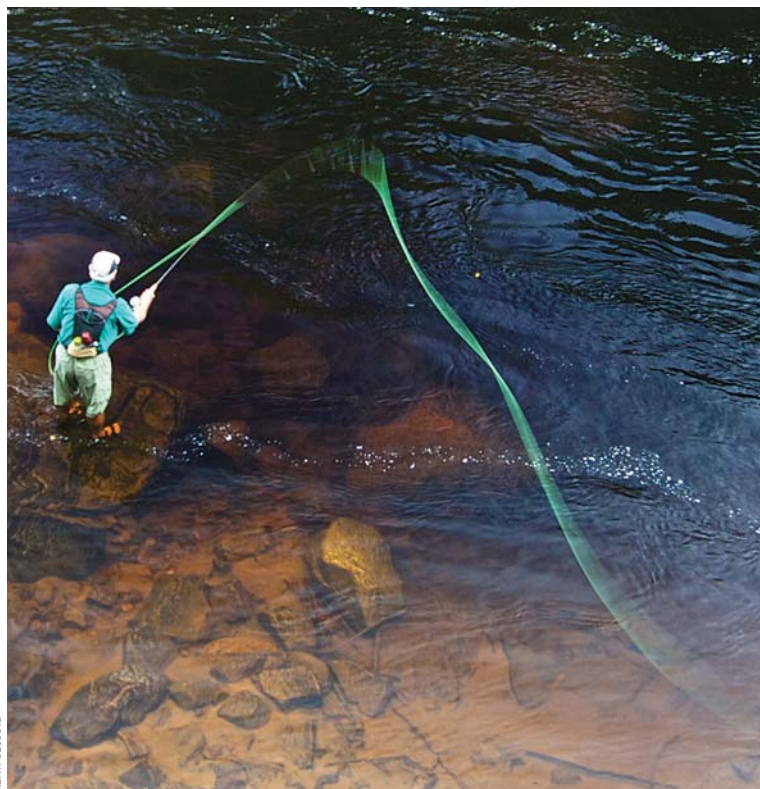
It's living history, all right, but is it enough to keep Lawton and Belvedere happy? Both Richard and Faruk agree that our best bet would be to go for sea trout. It's an amazing sight to see my friends clamber into the water, trying something for the first time. The rain finally stops and rays of sunshine break through the gloom illuminating the Fjord's steep walls, which stretch out to the horizon.

Another night in the cabin and another day on the flats going after sea trout draws no complaints from Lawton and Belvedere. Lawton, for example, seems genuinely excited when he discovers our cabin has an

outhouse with plumbing. And Belvedere can't pass by the town spring without stopping for a drink from the gurgling waters that bubble up from beneath an ancient birch tree. Were they putting me on? There is no time to worry about that, however, because we have been invited for a late lunch at the Club des



MARTIN SILVERSTONE



KEITH DECOSTE



Pere Ben's spring bubbles out from beneath an old birch tree in the village of Petit Saguenay. The pure, sweet water fuels anglers who hike to salmon pools further upstream, where they can spend the night in a low-tech, but comfortable cabin (above).

Messieurs. It's been carefully restored, as have the rest of the cabins that used to house the guests of the historic private club on the river.

The site now carries the designation *Site récréopatri-monial de la rivière Petit-Saguenay*. Anglers, families, nature lovers of all stripes fill the former private lodges the summer long, and well into autumn. When we arrive, our host, Joe Verni from Montreal, proudly tells us he has been renting the main cabin for almost 20 years.

A crackling blaze burns in a massive stone, double-sided fireplace. It might seem strange for a fire in July, but on this damp day it's appreciated. We relax comfortably in the building's remarkable screened-in porch, which also serves as a large dining room.

There is a constant stream of visitors. Anglers coming to check out the river—some of the best pools are just metres away. Everyone is welcomed in, offered wine, as if they are all members of a far-flung family back for Christmas.

Next door, a young couple with three children has rented a cabin. They've driven up from Ottawa every

Escaping the City

To book on the Petit Saguenay, call 418-272-1169 or toll-free 1-877-272-1169. Hint to Lawton and Belvedere: lines open on February 2nd, 2010.

July for the last eight years. The father sticks his head in and he and Joe discuss whether they'll light up one of the antique outdoor ovens to bake bread or maybe pizza.

There is talk of the high water, but mostly the discussion centers around flies, and how many they can get Faruk to distribute. Lawton listens closely as the old-timers dispense information on knots, flies, and salmon behaviour. Belvedere looks out through the large screened porch windows to the other quaint cabins where his gaze lingers on the oven. He is a keen chef.

Do I need to worry any more about whether Lawton and Belvedere have been sufficiently "blown away" here on the Petit Saguenay? I think not. But if I was Joe Verni, I would make sure he gets the main cabin booked early for next year, because by the look of it, Lawton and Belvedere are aching to break into the old-timers league.

Thanks to Saumon Quebec (www.saumonquebec.com) for their assistance in arranging the visit to the rivière du Petit Saguenay. 🐟