

I could tell my friend Faruk was a bit miffed as we raced daybreak to our beat on Quebec's Sainte Marguerite River. Dawn had broken as we hurriedly rigged up and cast very large muddler/mouse patterns over the still-dark but rapidly brightening pool. Fifteen minutes of quietly frantic casting failed to bring up the 4- to 8-pound *fontinalis* we had observed here on the previous day's

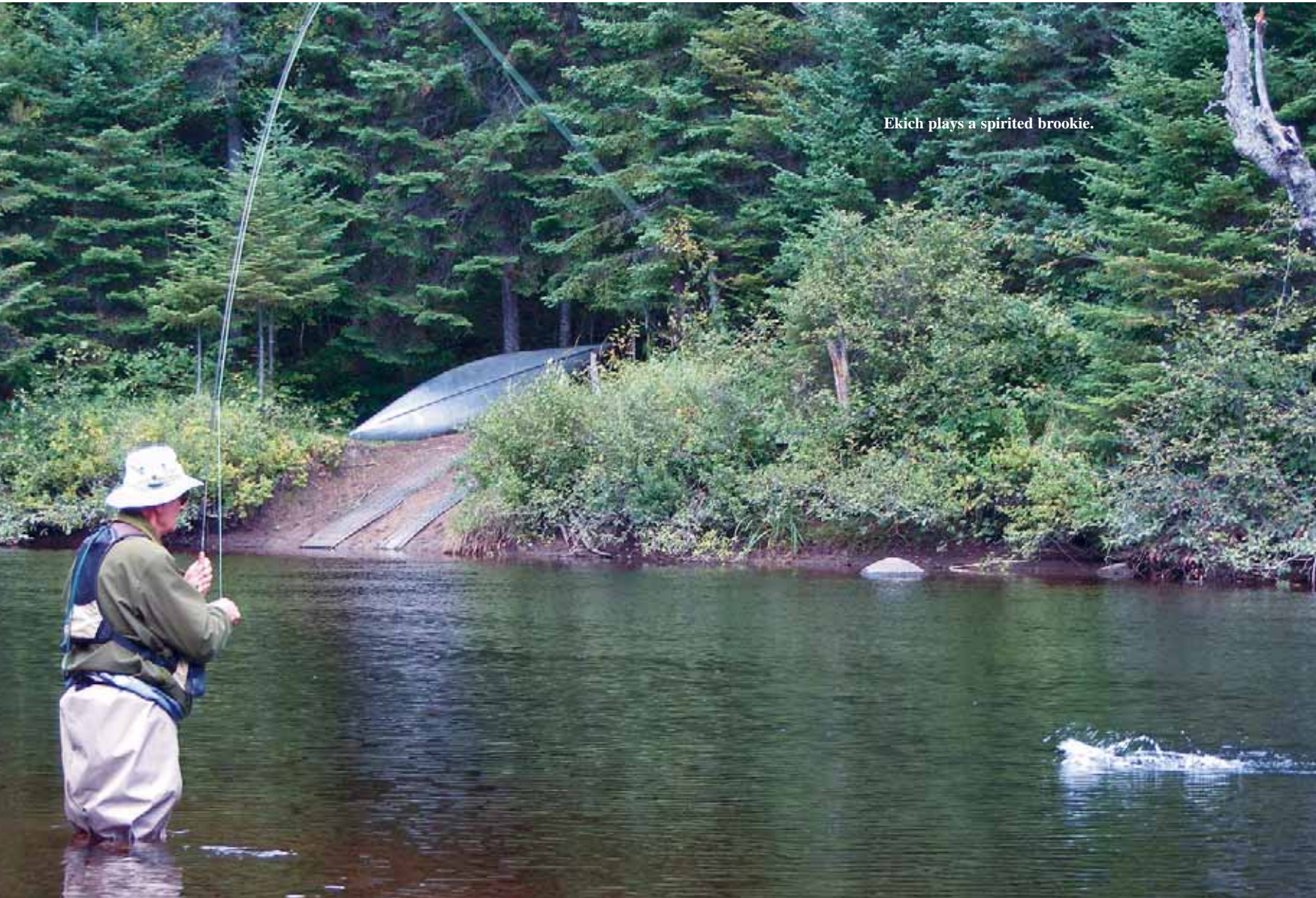
reconnaissance – but the rises we saw *and heard* still trouble my dreams three months later!

I found myself on this beautiful near-wilderness river in Northeast Quebec thanks to an invitation from my old friend, Faruk Ekich. Ekich is a remarkable man. A lifelong angler and fly tyer, he acquired these two passions as a lad in his native Bosnia angling for brown trout and

grayling. Now, after retiring as an engineer from the Husky Corporation, he spends the better part of his days pursuing the abundant Atlantic salmon, brook trout and arctic char of Canada. He not only designs and builds the state-of-the-art Ekich Automatic Bobbin, unique hand-crafted vises and other fly-tying tools, but also has a solid footing in the archaic origins of the sport; he ties graceful tiny

Brook Trout of the Saguenay

Story and Photos by Michael Simon



Ekich plays a spirited brookie.



The lovely Sainte-Margherite

My friend Mozart the Goldendoodle helps me land a brookie.



A richly colored Sainte-Margherite brook trout



flies, braids horsehair lines and leaders, then attaches them to a 10-foot wand of seasoned hazelwood. Ekich then proceeds to fish this totally self-produced ensemble and with great result!

With the shadows now off the water, Ekich and I persevered with more

modest presentations for the next few hours and were rewarded with a good number of richly colored, hard-fighting brook trout ranging from 12 to 18 inches. They were gorgeous fish, recently arrived from the cold, salt waters of the Saguenay Fjord.

Taking a break around noon,

Ekich served a nice camp lunch of good Quebecois bread, cheese, and “smoke meat” – sort of a North Canadian pastrami, and very tasty indeed. Between mouthfuls, I attempted to apologize to my host for my sluggish departure that morning, basically my inability to shake off the effects of the

1,500-mile solo trip from Richmond, Virginia, to Ekich's beautiful cottage overlooking the Saguenay Fjord at Anse Pelletier. I assume Ekich must have accepted my lame excuse for missing the "golden hour" since he began to educate me on the history and the unique qualities of this special part of the world, the Saguenay.

Evidently this immense river system was created during the last several periods of glaciations, and the rivers and mountains are unlike any others in the world. The Saguenay River itself forms dramatically at the Grand Discharge, where its immense volume erupts from massive Lac St. Jean. These are the waters immortalized by the great American painter Winslow Homer, who depicted anglers dwarfed by the tannin-stained rapids and casting for the wild fighting *ouananiche*, Quebec's landlocked salmon. Homer made three trips to the area between 1895 and 1902, and in addition to the many angling and hunting scenes he also painted an equal number of powerful landscapes recording the almost fantastic geologic formations of the Saguenay Fjord: ancient, sculpted mountain peaks and sheer cliffs plunging vertically into the Saguenay. This noble river was also the inspiration for an exquisite and highly collectible salmon reel, The Saguenay, created by Otto Zwarg, heir to the most famous American reel-maker, Edward vom Hofe.

One evening while walking down the pathway from the cottage to the fjord, Ekich told me about the amazing fauna of the area. Just 20-some miles downriver from the town of Chicoutimi, where the river is of "normal" size — 200 to 300 yards across—the Saguenay is now a fjord four kilometers wide. Not only that, but at Ekich's home the Saguenay is 900 feet deep and host to varieties of fauna found elsewhere only in the Arctic. Among these are seals and four species of whales, including the rare white Beluga.

The fishing for *truite bleue* (the fresh-run brook trout still in their silvery sea

coloration) was a delightful change of pace from my stealthful stalking of brookies on Virginia's Rapidan and Rose rivers. Here I was able to utilize a six-foot cane rod and cast as far as I was able. Ekich told me the *truite bleue* make their way up-current in pods and could be seen occasionally rising. On one afternoon the surface was covered with a film of flying ants, and the occasional trout rose to them. This did not prevent us from matching the hatch with small muddlers and doing quite well. I frequently missed strikes when my attention was distracted by the sight of a seal or the call of a loon. On

one occasion we witnessed a pair of loons drive off a group of perhaps 20 mergansers.

Meanwhile, back on the lovely Sainte-Marguerite, Ekich took me to the river warden's cabin to meet the river keeper, Magella DuFour. Magella was a generous and pleasant fellow who willingly shared his intimate knowledge of his river and filled our hands with his own ties of killing patterns: varieties of muddler minnows, Mickey Finns and the pattern that worked best for me, the Picket Pin. The good river keeper then led us to the observation platform overlooking a prime pool. The pool

Granger rod, Dingley reel and salmon patterns the Saguenay brook trout found enticing



Ekich casts a long line to a rising brook trout.





Evening low tide on the Saguenay Fjord

was named Onesime and it looked like a well-stocked aquarium. Ekich inquired about the unusual name, and Magella explained that Onesime was a notorious poacher from days gone by who plied his trade here for obvious reasons!

Immediately we spotted dozens of Atlantic salmon ranging from eight to perhaps 25 pounds. As if this were not enough, Magella pointed out the monstrous brook trout lurking under the salmon and only barely visible by spotting their white edged fins. To calm our pounding hearts, Magella took us on a short excursion to a nearby meadow to view a colony of pitcher plants, an other-worldly carnivorous plant found nowhere else in Canada.

Over the course of five gorgeous days in early September, Ekich and I failed to catch the old sockdollager we lusted after, but the opportunity to catch and

release large numbers of pure-strain, wild brook trout in the most beautiful of surroundings left little to be desired. I even availed myself of the chance to fry up one small brookie for lunch, literally minutes from the chilly salt water of the Saguenay. Delicious!

It has been nearly 25 years since my last trip to Quebec, la belle Province, and I can barely wait for my next. Perhaps Ekich will take me to try for the famed salmon, the *ouananiche* of the Upper Saguenay. One can only hope.

Michael Simon is a writer, watercolorist and a lover of trout, trout streams as well as the literature and tackle associated with them. His writings have appeared in *Art of Angling Journal* and

Atlantic Salmon Journal. Simon's art has been shown at Crossroads of Sport, Madison Square Garden, Museum of the Rockies and the Catskill Museum of Fly Fishing. Please see more of Michael Simon's art: www.michaelsimonanglingart.com.

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