

Through the generations

The making of an Alaska angler

Over the past three decades, Pete Anastasi and I developed a close friendship through fishing and hunting Alaska, and sharing our ancestral Italian heritage. His superb angling skills are on par with his homemade pasta sauce, which he claims is partly responsible for his reaching 92 years of age. I believed that sauce would keep him fishing Alaska indefinitely, until I received an email from him last March.

He asked if he could fish Alaska with me one last time.

This trip, however, wasn't entirely for Pete. He wanted to introduce Alaska fishing to his grandson, 14-year-old Andrew Patterson, or as Pete likes to call him, "The Kid."

Pete asked for guidance in planning his trip.

"Might need some help showing 'The Kid' some good Alaska fishing," he said. "Only problem is, I just don't move as fast as I used to. I am also trying to get him comfortable with a fly rod, but he is still hot on the spinning stuff."

Pete's daughter and Andrew's mother, Ellen Patterson, supported the idea, and knew the two would help look out for each other.

Andrew was eager to fish Alaska. Pete soon had him outfitted with boots, waders, tackle, and a fishing vest, and soon booked them for a week at a lodge in eastern Prince William Sound.

They arrived in mid-August, and wanted to fish the same day. Stream trout and char offered the easiest, break-the-ice opportunity.

An angler reveals much when facing new water for the first time. I stood back and watched if "The Kid" had the right stuff to handle a week of intense fishing.

After making sure his grandfather was comfortable and had all he needed to start fishing, Andrew made his first cast. He had potential. Compassion and respect are core elements for any successful angler.

Despite numerous pointers, however, Andrew made all the beginner fly-casting mistakes. He quickly mastered the roll cast, yet switched between fly and spinning gear. I changed the lesson plan. Catching fish comes first. Method mastery would evolve as he became comfortable with it.

It didn't take long. Andrew exuded excitement with his first few fish. Pete made a few casts, but mostly watched his grandson catch cutthroats and Dollies. When both posed for a photo, their smiles were equally radiant.

Pink salmon were next and easy to reach with roll casts. Andrew listened to talk of drifts, current lines, fish behavior, and setting the hook. Pete would reinforce with a few casting tips.

A current line a few feet from the bank holding thousands of pinks that mostly ignore a fly can frustrate any angler. Andrew persevered, and slowly perfected his cross-current retrieve that soon triggered strike after strike.

"These fish fight really hard," he grunted, strong-arming a pink out of the current. Later that evening, he was praising pink salmon as the best fighting fish he ever caught.

But Pete knew better.

"When will the lodge have the remote silver camp operational?" Pete asked.

"Tomorrow we fly out," I replied.

Andrew was wide-eyed at his first Bush plane flight. Once on the river,



Chris Batin



we surprised a huge brown bear walking the riverbank. We later examined bear tracks and discussed bear awareness and safety. Andrew learned about pepper spray and how to use it. An everyday precaution for us was high adventure for Andrew.

The guide chose a long pool with little current. Silvers clung tight to the far bank. Andrew's roll casts were sufficient for catching pinks, but inadequate for reaching the silvers. He compensated by wading closer, but succeeded only in spooking the fish. The guide offered fly-casting refreshers. Andrew throttled his excitement. When he made a bad cast, I saw him hunker down and focus on loading his rod and straightening his backcast.

Soon the boy, the instruction and the timing clicked. His cast shot out effortlessly across the stream. A 13-pound buck silver slammed his fly and jumped repeatedly. Andrew hung on like an eagle clutching a salmon. He stumbled and reeled. He learned why a single-action fly reel is called a "knuckle buster" and how to palm a spool for added drag. In the shallows, the wildly thrashing fish drenched his face and caused him to gasp, but his focus never wavered until he landed the fish. He held it up for all to see. Pete's smile could get no larger. Pinks were history. Andrew was now a silver salmon fan.

Several days of rain blew out the rivers and fly-fishing opportunities. The guides suggested fishing roe for silvers. Pete enjoyed this type of fishing because he could occasionally sit in the lawn chair we brought along, and have a front-row seat watching his grandson.

For the first few hours, Andrew snagged bottom repeatedly, lost tackle and learned the basics of the drift. Conditions were tough, but Andrew was tougher, outlasting even the guide. He endured long hours of repeated casting with few or no fish to show for his efforts. He was the first one in the river, and the last one out. Pete and Andrew would discuss fishing at lunch, take photos together, but by now, were serious competitors and would playfully jeer the other throughout the day.

Pete is a good angler, and didn't give "The Kid" a break, for good reason. The competitiveness caused Andrew to focus on the details that spelled the difference between hookups and misses.

His stimulus proved effective.

By week's end, Andrew was catching and landing fish without help, and at times, he outfished his grandfather.

I eventually discovered the bragging rights were but a smoke screen. True feelings soon emerged.

When we packed our rods after fishing the last day, Andrew talked about wanting to move to Alaska when he was older, perhaps while attending college, spending his summer months here working as a fishing guide. I knew the kid was hooked, but in a way far better than I realized. He explained it best in a recent email:

"My favorite thing about the trip to Alaska was the memories. I think about the trip, the people, and of course the fish, every day. Many times, when class gets boring I will sit back and think about everything we



Pete Anastasi and grandson Andrew Patterson search the area for fishing opportunities and bears. CHRIS BATIN

did. Another great thing is in Alaska, people always greet you and be so friendly unlike Northern Virginia where people are always in a hurry and won't shake your hand. But the highlight of the trip for me was stream fishing for salmon. Although, there weren't any silvers on that one stream, there were those schooling pinks and the gorgeous view of the mountains around us. It was truly amazing being around tons of wildlife and hiking through the bear-infested forest to catch my first salmon. When I am hunting out in my area, there are some beer cans, bottles and trash scattered around but that area had an untouched and natural feeling.

"When I got home, I found a National Geographic magazine and it couldn't compare to the sights on that salmon stream. My grandfather and I are very close and I had never seen him light up the way that our trip did. After every fish that one of us caught I would look over at him and he was either casting in the water trying to get me back or he had an

enormous smile on his face looking at how much I had inherited his love for fishing."

I soon received a surprising email from Pete. I recalled him saying that last August was his last Alaska trip. Now he wrote that he wanted Andrew to enjoy big Alaska king salmon like the 39-pounder he caught many years ago. He was wondering how he and Andrew could experience it in 2015.

It was Alaska fishing magic.

Pete found that the challenges of age disappear when he indulged in the invigorating tonic of teaching his grandson how to fish Alaska. Alaska gave Andrew what he needed at this time in his life: time with his grandfather, personal discovery and the hero archetype of possibly being an Alaska guide. I watched Andrew handle adversities that challenged him, turning "The Kid" into a young man.

Pete said he had cashed in a few investments to make the trip happen. I predict his reinvestment in Andrew will be paying dividends for a lifetime, not only for himself, his family, but perhaps all of Alaska if Andrew becomes a guide. Pete's desire to share his passion for Alaska fishing made a difference in his grandson's life.

The traditional ways of our sporting culture offer the keys to coping with life's challenges. One usually uses a compass to find the wilderness. But Pete's example proves that wilderness fishing can be a compass for finding meaning and purpose in life.

If you are making plans to follow Pete's example, don't forget to add his pasta sauce recipe to the mix. I'm betting that it will help ensure that you, too, will be taking your grandkids fishing at age 92.

Christopher Batin is editor of The Alaska Angler and author of numerous books and DVDs on Alaska fishing available at www.AlaskaAngler.com.

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