

WORLD

U.S.

N.Y. / REGION

BUSINESS

TECHNOLOGY

SCIENCE

HEALTH

SPORTS

OPINION

Search

Global

DealBook

Markets

Economy

Energy

Media

Persona

EXECUTIVE PURSUITS

Dinner, From Hook to Fork



Doug Kuntz for The New York Times

Harry Hurt and Matthew Miller on a fishing trip near Montauk Point, N.Y.

By [HARRY HURT III](#)

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I PLOPPED down at a corner table in the American Hotel and stuck a fork into a filet of a striped bass that I had seen thrashing in the sea barely four hours earlier. The bass was lightly dressed in a Provençal sauce. The first bite landed on my tongue, slightly firm and sweet-tasting. I devoured it with the hard-earned hunger of the whalers who once populated my adopted hometown, the noble fishing village of Sag Harbor, N.Y.

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I raised a glass of an acclaimed 2005 vintage Australian Chardonnay to my dining companions. They were the hotel's owner, Ted Conklin, and his buoyant, piano-playing girlfriend; a European visual artist in a designer minidress; and two avid bass fishermen. One, Arma Andon, is a former record company executive with devilish leer and an infectious laugh; the other, Matthew Miller, is a British-born guide and licensed charter boat captain with a ruddy complexion and a courtly manner.

I built my toast around a passage from [Herman Melville's](#)

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Doug Kuntz for The New York Times
Mr. Hurt holding a striped bass caught
on the trip.

“Moby-Dick” about Queequeg, the tattooed harpooner from the South Pacific. “Arrived at last in old Sag Harbor; and seeing what the sailors did there; and then going on to Nantucket, and seeing how they spent their wages in that place also, poor Queequeg gave it up for lost,” I quoted. “Thought he, it’s a wicked world in all meridians; I’ll die a pagan.”

If I, a 56-year-old lapsed Catholic, happen to die a happy man, it will be in no small part because of the serendipitous seafaring expedition I took with Arma and Matt on the afternoon of our feast at the American Hotel. A wizened friend once observed that I seem to live my life backward. I spent my early adulthood chasing dreams first and mammon second, rather than the reverse. I fathered my first and only son in my late 40s, and I strive to grow younger even as he matures.

Appropriately or not, it occurs to me to tell the tale of my introductory executive pursuit of saltwater fly fishing for striped bass that can be caught, cooked, and eaten in a backward sequence — starting here at the end, then flashing back to the beginning and finishing in the middle.

Arma, Matt and I set out from Sag Harbor at high noon on a potentially ominous early September day, steering an easterly course toward Montauk Point. We were aboard Arma’s boat, a 25-foot SeaCraft with a deep-vee hull and two 150-horsepower outboard motors capable of cruising at over 30 knots. Although the sky was virtually cloudless, the weather forecast warned that the remnants of Tropical Storm Hanna would soon rain down upon us.

“I figure we’ve got about a three-hour window,” Arma said. “Good thing my boat is fast.”

As we raced across 22 miles of water, I silently reviewed my due diligence on saltwater sport fishing, which may be defined as a recreational activity using various types of rods and reels as opposed to commercial fishing using nets. According to the National Sporting Goods Association, about 10.4 million people annually participate in saltwater fishing in the United States. The vast majority fish with live bait and relatively heavy equipment. Those who use artificial lures and so-called light tackle, consisting of graphite-shafted rods and test lines designed to withstand less than 14 pounds of stress, number only a few thousand.

Matt waxed eloquent about the ecological uniqueness of Montauk Point, which he described as a kind of Serengeti of the sea. “Montauk Point lies about 100 nautical miles into the ocean at the place where Long Island Sound intersects the Atlantic,” he said. “Fishermen come from all over the world to try their luck here, especially during the fall run when bluefish, false albacore and the striped bass we’re after are abundant.”

Unlike Matt and Arma, who had been fishing most of their lives, I was a rank novice with a decidedly ambivalent attitude. My sole previous experience consisted of a two-day course in freshwater fly fishing at an exclusive upstate resort that had left my head swimming with indigestible biological minutiae and my sought-after quarry swimming unscathed in their natural habitat. I didn’t merely aspire to go fishing this time around. I hoped to go catching, in both the literal and literary sense of the term.

“No good book has ever been written that has in it symbols arrived at beforehand and stuck in,” [Ernest Hemingway](#) once observed in a self-critique of his classic novella “The

Old Man and the Sea.” “I tried to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea, and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them good and true enough they would mean many things.”

In that spirit, I shall cut to the chase and what Arma, Matt and their fellow saltwater fly fishermen call “the blitz.”

We arrived off Montauk Point shortly after 1 p.m., and came upon a flock of seagulls hovering and squealing over a frothing patch of water about 30 yards square. That was the first blitz of the day. According to my erstwhile mentors, the blitz was created by a school of several hundred bluefish attacking a cluster of bay anchovies just below the surface.

Arma and Matt took up their rods, attacking the blitz with flies made of natural and synthetic bird feathers. They caught a handful of bluefish in the five-pound range and threw them back into the water. Then, they showed me how to cast with a more user-friendly spinning rod. To my amazement, I hooked a six-pound bluefish in less than a minute. I wanted to keep it as a trophy, but Arma insisted on releasing it as well.

“We’re after striped bass,” he reminded me.

We spent the next two hours cruising around Montauk Point, practicing rod- and reel-handling techniques and waiting for the tide to go out. “Right now, the bass are a few feet below the bluefish, most of them near the shore,” Matt informed me. “The idea is to wait for the outgoing tide to slow down. The fish will have been finning furiously just to hold position, and they’ll be ready to feed.”

As if on cue, another series of frothing blitzes commenced shortly before 4 p.m. By this time, there were a half-dozen other sport fishing boats trolling about. There was also a score of surf casters lining the rocky rim below the Montauk lighthouse, and they were shouting obscenities at we boaters, accusing us of encroaching upon their water.

Overcome with what they later described as “fish fever,” Arma and Matt grabbed their rods and cast into the blitzes. Their faces glowed, and their whole bodies shook with delighted excitement. I watched in awe, not wanting to cast for fear of disrupting them.

Almost immediately, Matt hooked a 17-pound striped bass. His rod bent into a U shape, then snapped apart just above the corked handle. But he somehow managed to snatch the line, and pull the fish into the boat, broken rod and all. Blood dripped from the mouth of the bass, and sheer joy oozed from Matt’s every pore.

“That’s one cast!” he shouted. “One cast!”

Moments later, Arma caught a second bass. It was a 13-pounder with dark blue eyes ringed by gold bands, a mother-of-pearl gill plate and a scaly white body with brown stripes. He leveled a tape measure against his bass and the bass Matt had caught. Both fish were over 28 inches long, which meant that they were legal to keep under New York State fishing regulations. Arma stuck them into a cooler, and washed the blood off the deck with a rubber hose.

“That’s dinner!” he exclaimed.

Arma turned the boat back to the west toward Sag Harbor, gunning both motors to full speed. We hurtled into a blinding white vortex of sunlight setting on the foaming sea in advance of the impending storm, salt spray drenching our shirts and the anticipated taste of fresh bass forming on our tongues.

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