

Smoked Trout on the Banks of the Umzimkulu River

A Memorable Riverside Lunch

These days of catch and release such subjects can go down dodgy roads. Today this policy, protocol and ethics is zealously and strictly advocated and on some rivers strictly enforced. I know this applies to the lovely streams of the Western Cape and such breach of this policy by a member would lead to suspension and barring of membership. And so it should be, if this delightful pursuit is to be protected and maintained. The pressure that has been put on our spotted and colourful friends and their delicate and beautiful environment is enormous. Anybody who has had the joy and privilege of fly-fishing in pristine mountain streams not only wants this maintained but wants to pass it on to the younger generations of tomorrow.

But it was not like that 30-40 years back. Fish were so numerous on the Umzimkulu River, especially at Glenside. The conditions for breeding were so ideal that the problem was over-breeding. The vast numbers of 6-9 inch trout that one caught without much skill or finesse was staggering if you compare it to our rivers today. Indeed there were the 2 and 3 pounders...you caught them if you took the trouble to find them. Going back even further my uncle told me 5 pounders came out every now and then, in fact a seven and a half was caught in the pool that bordered the farm.

So numerous were these lively little rainbows, that dare I say it, that we were instructed not to return any. That which was not consumed by humans was fed to Aunt Ivy's pigs. Often over the holidays there were other relatives staying at the farm, so my brother and I kept up a steady supply of tasty breakfast trout. I remember once my Uncle Maurice who was a city businessman from Durban asking Chris and I not to bring anymore trout back to the farm...although deliciously tasty (indeed those who have savoured Umzimkulu trout straight from the river will know this) Uncle Maurice was tired of this breakfast delight. So what happened to the surplus...they were thrown to the pigs.

One of my school buddies, Bruce Taylor used to invite me up on the odd holiday as well. His parents, Maurice and Wilmer Taylor ran a guest farm on the bottom end of Underberg, called Dunraven. The Umzimkulu bordered their farm as well. The fishing there was good, generally bigger trout but not as numerous and sometimes very tricky to catch because it was a popular venue with many a Natal fly-fisher.

Often it got a little too crowded for me. So one holiday when I and another school friend Glen were staying there we decided to change the venue for a day's fishing. We had befriended 2 elderly fly fishers, executives from Smith and Nephew in Pinetown, who had come up for a spot of fishing. I had suggested that we try my uncle's water. New water is always enticing...especially when holiday pressure invades the solitude and privacy of a trout river.

So I phoned my uncle and asked for permission to fish and bring guests. He wasn't too happy as the party of 4 was pushing my luck a bit but when I told him that the other 2 were elderly and real

gentlemen he said alright but he would like it if we would come to the house first and be introduced. I said of course, Uncle Dennis...this is the protocol that is strictly obeyed amongst fly fishers. Not only is it courteous but the farmer wants to know who is on his property. These 2 guys hit it off with my uncle and I am pleased to say when we returned to thank him for the lovely day on his waters, he said to Mr. Hansen and Mr. Johnson that they would always be welcome...just ring me if you guys want to fish.

Messrs Hansen and Johnson were the finest gentlemen I had ever fished with up to that stage...they were directors of a large company known for its Elastoplast but we were just out of school and knew nothing of corporate business. What impressed us was their fishing gear...Hardy rods and matching reels of course and beautifully made aluminium fly boxes and wicker creels and nets attached to their backs.

We had a memorable day fishing, the rainbows were rising and eager and feisty. The water was as clear as neat London gin and running well. The weather was warm and pleasant with a slight breeze that breathed over the pools every now and then rippling it and sending the odd grass-hopper on its surface only to be engulfed by a feeding trout. The guineafowl were bold and noisy, almost mocking us because they knew the hunting season was o'er. In far distance you could hear the distinct call of the francolin. Grass birds of many species were active in the new long grasses. The weavers were active building their nests in the willows. Lizards scurried over the hot rocks and we were warned to watch out for puff-adders and cobras.

We met for lunch. I had built a fire from drift wood in a crevice of a large rock. Mr. Johnson, or was it Mr. Hansen — cannot remember but it's not important — said he would like to try out his new Abu smoker and what better test is there than a freshly caught young rainbow straight from the river. Well that's what happened...oak dust was applied to the smoker...Glen and I cast our flies to feisty 8-9 inch rainbows and these were applied directly to the smoker after dispatching them. We did not bother to even gut them. When they were a golden brown they were removed. The freshly smoked flesh parted easily from the bones at a gentle stroke of a knife or fork. Never, and I'm serious, have fish tasted like this. We had caught fish earlier on but these were cleaned and in our bags and to be taken home. The demand was for instant fish. From the river straight into the smoker. It was easy to supply this demand; virtually every cast yielded a small rainbow, indeed the smaller the tastier.

The result was that the lamb chops were neglected and taken back for another day. Just shows how tasty these fish were...to beat lamb loin chops grilled over the wood coals in the open takes some beating.

Just to conclude the day. Mrs. Taylor asked me if we would pick a package of assorted meats from the Underberg butchery on our way back that she had ordered over the phone. This was a lot of meat, meant for the guests and it would be ready at 12 noon. The day was a Saturday. I replied that we were coming back from my uncle's farm probably late afternoon and the butchery would be shut.

She replied, no problem, the butcher will leave it in the shade on the stoop. I thought this is crazy...crumbs it will be whipped away by any passerby in 2 seconds flat. She said no, it doesn't happen here.

Sure enough when we arrived there at around 4pm in Mr. Johnson's car...there it was...a huge parcel of lamb, sausages and beef. Could you believe that today? How the world has changed! How is it possible to forget days like this? People asked me how do you remember the finer details...I think I do because of the uniqueness.