

SMALL STREAM OUTFITTERS

A Serious Locavore

Living the Good Life

Story by Martha A. Solomon
Photography by Frank Barnett





Jesse Sampson is not a catch-and-release kind of guy. He's a catch-and-serve-it-up-with-a-nice-Pinot-noir kind of guy. He's also a serious locavore—someone who prefers to eat food that is locally produced or foraged. Photographer Frank Barnett and I made arrangements to spend time with Jesse on the water and in the kitchen, to appreciate his skills as both a fishing guide and chef.

Day One began on the Clackamas River, not far from Portland, Oregon, where San Franciscan Rachel Roll had booked a half-day of fly fishing lessons. We showed up about an hour before

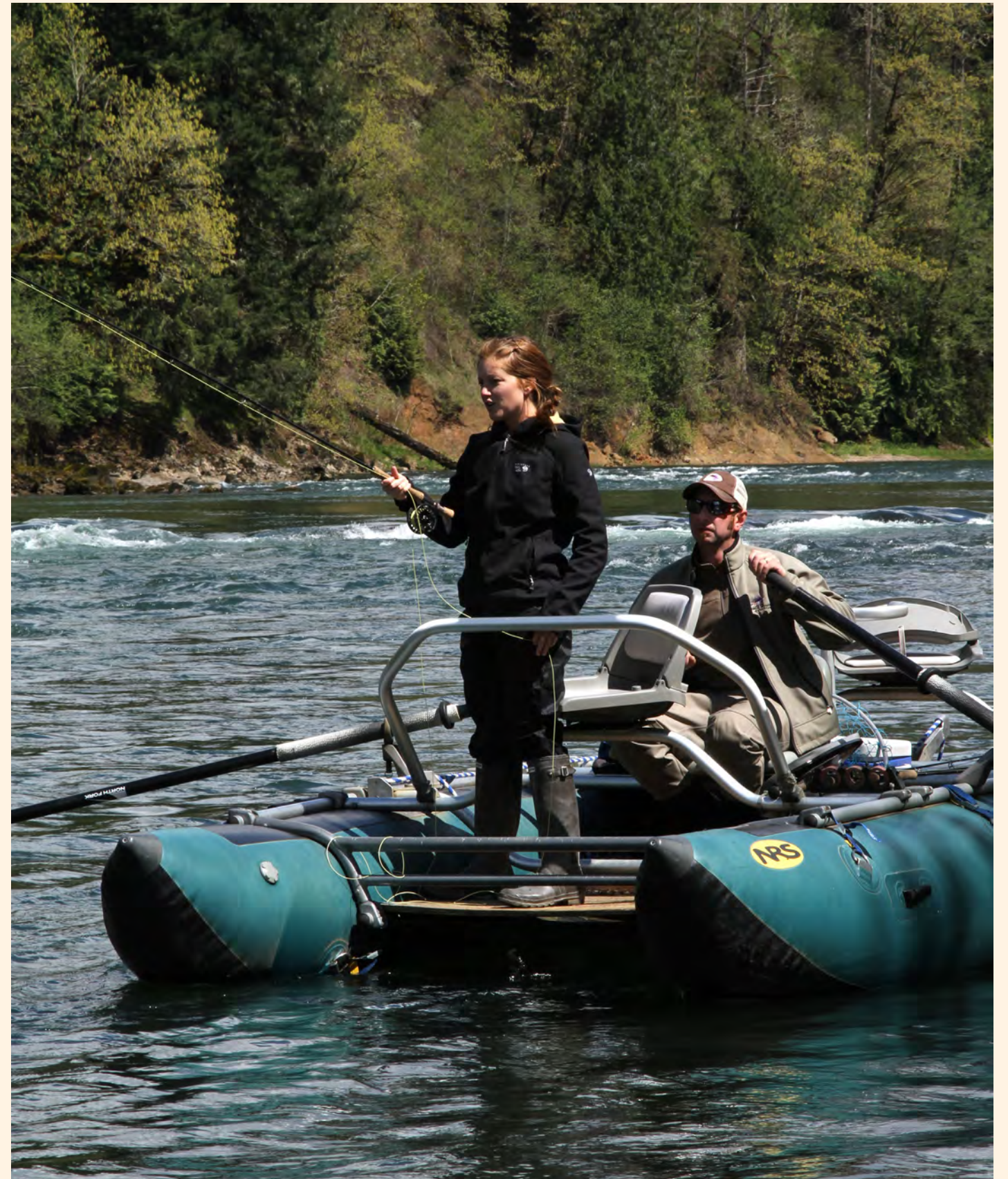
noon to get acquainted with Jesse and gather background information. After a brief and unexpected April shower of hail, he began readying his pontoon boat.

Knowing that Jesse was also a dedicated chef, we asked whether he was planning to open a restaurant. He replied, “I think my future is probably in some sort of a lodge atmosphere, with fly fishing, small numbers of clientele, keeping quality really high, maybe a lodge that housed eight. Probably on the Oregon coast, local, somewhere on a river,” he mused, “where I could cook dinner the night before, and guide them the next day. Once the kids get into school, down the road a little bit, I think that’s the direction I’m headed.”

Meanwhile, Jesse and his wife Sara, a senior director at Nike, were getting ready to move to a small suburban farm. “The new place is 15 minutes from Nike, and 20 minutes closer to the coast for fishing. It’s going to be guide headquarters, with a big garden, animals, and plenty of room for the kids to run.”

The “oldest son of east-coast hippie transplants,” Jesse grew up on five acres in a little valley nestled next to Hwy. 20, halfway between Corvallis and Newport, Oregon. “My parents grew or raised what our family could eat and traded the excess for goods and services we didn’t have. Dad has a classic story about trading a pig for a guided trip down the Deschutes and the 40 giant trout he caught that day—sometimes two redsides at a time. He swears it was worth every ounce of pork, and it probably was.”

“There was a creek across the road where I learned to fly



fish at about four, but I didn't get good enough to catch big trout on my own until twelve. By then I was hooked. At 16, I was teaching casting lessons for the local Parks & Recreation."

After earning degrees in both marketing and fine art from Gonzaga University, Jesse wanted an adventure before settling into the business world. One summer in southwest Alaska as a fishing guide became two, and then four, but by his mid-twenties, he was ready to return to city life and think about starting a family. He went into the field of commercial printing and didn't guide much, but when "...the company went belly-up, I took the opportunity to start my own business. I started a freelance design business, Small Stream Design, and a fly fishing company, Small Stream Outfitters, at the same time. I figured whichever worked out, that would be great. It went like that for 10 years. And then, a couple of years ago, I sold the design business, and now I just guide and look after kids. And cook!"

Rachel Roll, on an extended vacation from Williams Sonoma, quickly learned the basics of fly-casting, and soon she and Jesse were headed down the river.

The next day, we were looking forward to hearing all about Rachel's fishing trip, and dining on expertly prepared steelhead. Jesse reported they had seen three steelhead taken out of the river the day before, but Rachel hadn't caught one. She did, however, catch a nice trout.

The Sampson kitchen was fairly small, one of the reasons Jesse was looking forward to moving to larger quarters. A prep table was laden with fresh produce, some of it foraged that

afternoon, some of it picked only minutes before. Since Jesse doesn't use recipes, we can only describe the preparation of this incredible meal.

THE MENU

Cold-alder-smoked Arctic Char on bruschetta with tarragon crème fraiche

Pan-seared duck breast with a ginger-soy blood orange reduction, served alongside a kale salad with citrus Caesar dressing

Fresh shellfish in a tomato white wine sauce served over handmade fresh linguini

Pan-seared and wood grill finished steelhead, set atop a hearty yam polenta with a side of sautéed fiddlehead ferns and spring mushrooms topped with a Pinot noir chèvre cream sauce

Strawberry rhubarb tart with vanilla cream

Clearly, a lot of preparation had gone on before our arrival. Fish stock, which seems to be every chef's to-go ingredient, went into both the shellfish pasta and the yam polenta. Looking every inch the professional chef, Jesse explained, "It's one of the underlying things that you never see when you eat





something, but a lot of work went into creating something good. Some of the things that you might discard like fish heads and shrimp shells add unbelievable flavor.” The stock that afternoon had been made with a salmon carcass (“...you take the fillets off, and whatever is left over goes in the pot.”), shrimp heads and shells, carrots, celery, onion, an herb bundle (thyme, rosemary, and oregano fresh from the garden), salt and water. “Turn it up until it boils, turn it down until it simmers. My general rule

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is you cover all the ingredients with water at the beginning and you cook it until the liquid is reduced by half. That takes anywhere from an hour-and-a-half to two hours. By the time it's finished, all your vegetables and fish heads have broken down and the flavor is distributed throughout the broth. And then you take it off the heat and strain it, and you also skim off the fat. Now you wouldn't think there would be a lot of fat in there, but the salmon heads and the shrimp heads actually give off a lot of fat. So you end up with a clear or slightly cloudy broth that is full of flavor, and that becomes the base for a lot of other dishes.”



Jesse got started on the appetizer—cold-smoked Arctic Char on bruschetta with tarragon crème fraiche—while Frank set up his mobile photo studio in the Sampson’s dining room. Some people think that Arctic Char has a rich taste with a flavor profile somewhere between trout and salmon. Cold-smoking results in fish that remains especially moist and tender because it is not actually cooked in the smoking process.

The first course was a pan-seared duck breast in a ginger-soy blood orange reduction, served alongside a kale salad with a citrus Caesar dressing. Kale is a widely used local ingredient that also has deep roots in Alaskan homesteader lore, according to our chef. Garnished with sautéed slices of Meyer lemon and paired with Fort George 1811 Lager brewed in Astoria, Oregon, the duck was a fitting homage to our Asian influenced cuisine here in the Pacific Northwest.

The beautifully presented pasta dish benefitted not only from the fish stock, but also from the natural juices of the clams and mussels. The sauce began with garlic and shallots chopped so finely they were almost a paste, sautéed in a little bit of olive oil. Jesse added white wine and some tomato paste, cooked that down a little bit, and then added the fish stock. When he’d got just the right consistency, he added the clams, mussels, and shrimp. As the shells of the clams and mussels opened up, the juices were added to the sauce. At this point, I could no longer resist picking up a fork. Photographing food is difficult and time consuming, so Frank rarely eats what he shoots, at least not until everything has been photographed, but after hours of work, I succumbed. With gusto!



In his “dish notes,” Jesse described the main course as “...my Northwest version of Meat and Potatoes. It’s difficult to beat a fresh piece of line caught fish, together with locally grown or foraged veggies and a healthy starch.” Steelhead, the ocean-going rainbow trout, has a flavor profile that combines the delicacy of trout with the character of salmon, and Jesse Sampson prefers to cook it fairly simply. Ordinarily, I steer clear

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of fish skin, but the crunchy outer layer of this fillet was irresistible. When asked about his methods, Jesse explained, “...the most important thing is that (the fillets) are completely clean and completely dry. Pat ‘em down with a paper towel. Get all the moisture off the fish because you’re going to be putting it into hot oil and you don’t want that reaction between water and hot oil. About 15 minutes before cooking, I sprinkle all sides of the fish with kosher salt and fresh cracked black pepper. With really good ingredients, you don’t want to mess it up too much. I try to keep it as simple as possible.”

The fish was cooked skin-side-down in a blend of olive and vegetable oils at about 350-375° for five minutes or so. Jesse spooned the hot oil over the fillets to seal in moisture; he didn’t flip them over. Our chef prefers to finish the fish in a Trae-

ger wood pellet grill to impart an alder smoked flavor to the fish, but a preheated 350° oven does a fine job, too. He reminded us, “You want the inside just barely cooked through the middle. You don’t ever want to dry out fish.” The sauce started out with sautéed garlic and shallots again, a little Pinot noir, a couple of tablespoons of heavy cream, a couple tablespoons of fresh goat cheese, salt and pepper. If I had more space, I could tell you how it was done, but I’m leaving room for dessert. Suffice to say, it was heavenly.

Rhubarb for the tart came from the backyard. In a month, we could have had strawberries from the backyard, too. The tart shell tasted like an oatmeal cookie, and I soon found out why. “I really like to mix my flours. When I’m doing something, I might use half white, half whole wheat or half oat flour and half buckwheat. I like to mix it up, change the flavors a little bit.” This delightful dessert incorporated white flour and oatmeal chopped in a blender until it was not quite the consistency of flour, retaining a few little chunks of flavor. The shells were baked in a muffin tin for about 10 minutes and then allowed to cool completely. The filling was cooked separately, then spooned into the shells and returned to the oven.


A self-described “west-of-the-Rockies, north-of-California guy,” Jesse Sampson arranges food on a plate as carefully as he places a well cast fly in a pool. And it tasted as good as, no make that better than, it looked.

Five months later, after the Sampson family had begun to settle into suburban farm life, we drove out for another visit.



Donnie the llama grazed in the fenced pasture that will soon hold a 30X60 greenhouse, a few rows of grapes, and a larger vegetable garden. Apple and pear trees were dropping fruit that either fed the llama or was pressed into cider. The bountiful garden held eggplant, peas, beans, pumpkins, watermelon, tomatoes, peppers and carrots. Chickens roamed freely. A couple of months earlier Jesse had planted raspberries, blueberries, marionberries, and two more fig trees. The original fruit trees were probably planted at the same time the house was built, around 1969.

His parents had owned a nineteenth-century cider press, and Jesse built one that should last a century, too. Fallen apples and pears were chopped and then pressed into dark golden juice. Noah and Henry, the Sampson's two sons, were enthusiastic helpers as well as tasters, although tasting was limited to a few sips before the juice was pasteurized.

Sara and Jesse Sampson envision a sustainable, self-sufficient lifestyle—making beer, wine, cheese, growing 50 varieties of edibles, and as Jesse describes it, “finding happiness in family, farming, fishing, food and friends.” 





Above the fireplace in the Sampson home hangs a painting of brook trout in a spawning bed, done in 1997 when Jesse was an art student. His wife, Sara, shared her insight with us, “Because he’s an artist and designer, his passion translates to his cooking.” Indeed, Jesse seems to use the color and texture of various ingredients to create dishes that are not only delicious, but a feast for the eye as well. The deftness with which he sliced the Arctic Char, the delicate positioning of pink-cooked duck breast on a bed of blood orange reduction, and the selection of fiddlehead ferns as an accompaniment to bright orange yam polenta all revealed the heart of an artist.

No recipes were followed in the creation of our memorable dinner, but we can tell you what went into each dish. With a little experimentation, you can create a dish that is uniquely your own.

APPETIZER

Alder-smoked Arctic Char, a baguette, olive oil, chives, tarragon, crème fraiche

FIRST COURSE

(2) Duck breasts, kale, blood oranges, ginger, garlic, soy sauce, Meyer lemon, blood orange-infused olive oil, honey, aioli

SECOND COURSE

Pasta dough, mussels, clams, shrimp, white wine, tomato paste, red chili, garden herbs (chives, oregano, thyme), garlic, fish stock

MAIN COURSE

Small Stream Outfitters stream-caught steelhead, fiddlehead ferns, local spring mushrooms, yams, polenta, fish stock, Pinot noir, chévre, shallots, cream, garden herbs (chives, oregano, rosemary and thyme)

DESSERT

Oats, flour, butter (although Jesse actually prefers Crisco), backyard rhubarb, strawberries, heavy cream, vanilla