

# GOLD

UNDER  
THE  
ICE

## Anglers and diners find wild treasure in a little Lake Champlain fish

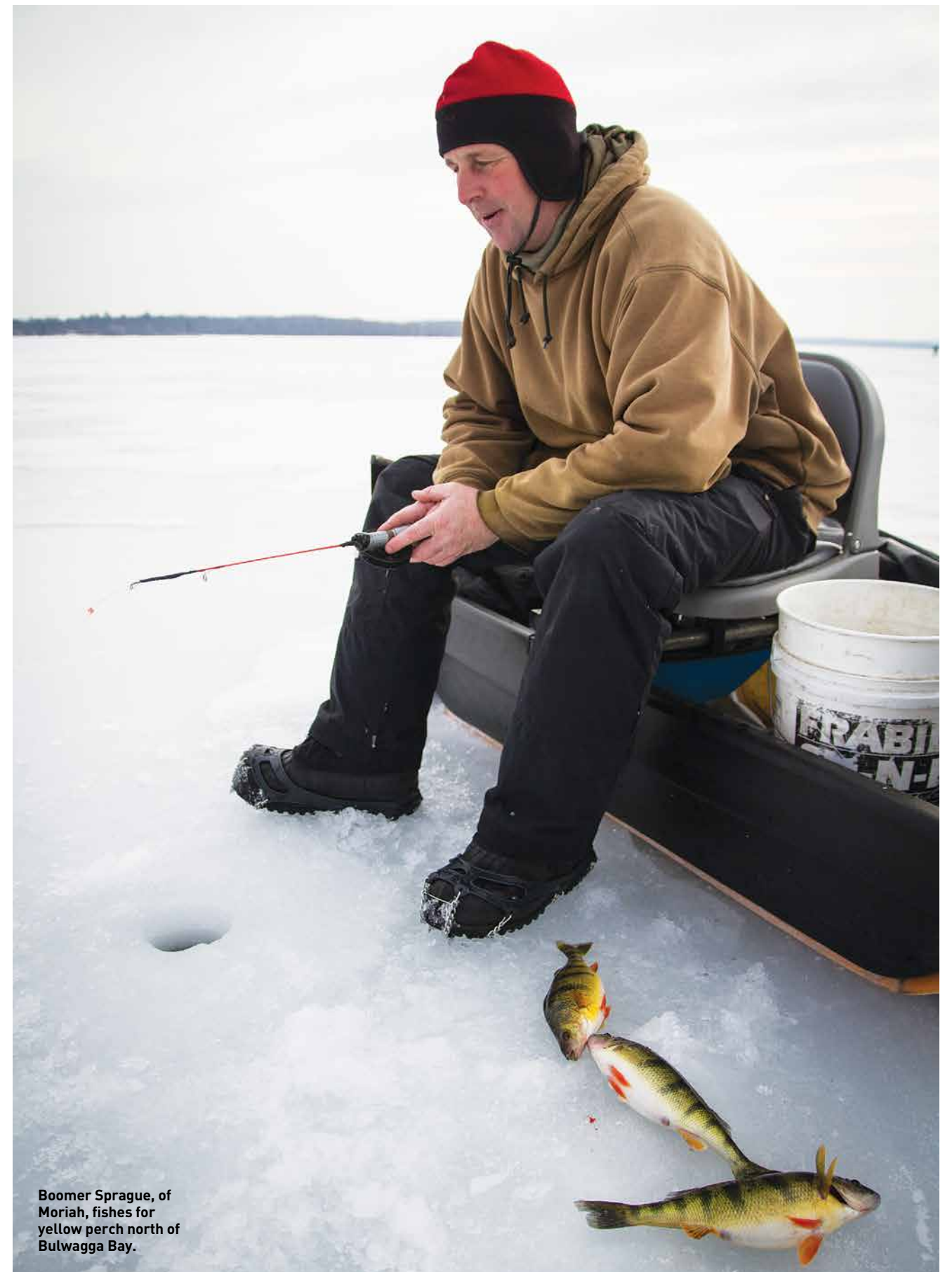
BY MARY THILL  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SETH LANG

**THE DAY BEFORE** the Super Bowl is as busy as it gets at Norm's Bait & Tackle, on Crown Point. In the back, beyond walls hung with spinners, shiners and crank baits, owner Norm St.

Pierre sits at a counter and uses a thin electric knife to slice the heads, tails and olive-striped skin off a pile of yellow perch. "We got close to 3,000 pounds this week," he says, flipping ribbons of pink fillets into a big bowl.

Ice fishermen have been stopping in all day, dressed in thick hoodies and insulated pants and boots. They set five-gallon buckets filled with cold fish, some still flopping, on a digital scale. Norm pays them \$1.25 for every pound of whole yellow perch over eight inches long. After the fish is cut up and bagged, he retails the meat for \$8.50 a pound. He calls it "gold in a paper bag."

Yellow perch is sweet, flaky and unfishy. The flesh turns white and curls when it hits a hot pan, and fillets are called poor man's shrimp in some parts of the country. Jumbo fish (10-plus inches) become the winter special at diners and taverns up and down the hundred-mile length of Lake Champlain, served with coleslaw and french fries through Lent. On the Vermont side of the lake, some people like their perch hog-dressed (gutted whole and scaled). At the northern end of the New York shore, around Plattsburgh, restaurants deep-fry fillets with the skin still on them. At the south end, near Crown Point and Port Henry, the style is skin-off.



Boomer Sprague, of Moriah, fishes for yellow perch north of Bulwagga Bay.



The business of catching and selling fish from Lake Champlain is brisk, especially when the ice takes hold and provides easy access to the water beneath. It's hard to say how much yellow perch is caught and sold here annually; the last time wildlife agencies attempted a tally was 1991, when the closest they could estimate was between 200,000 and 745,000 pounds. But don't call this a commercial fishery. The people who catch these fish call themselves market fishermen. There are no nets, no trawlers. They use hooks, lines and grubs, and they buy the same recreational license as any New York or Vermont resident.

On the ice north of Bulwagga Bay, about two miles from Norm's as the crow flies, Keith Ross sits patiently in the wide open air, bobbing a short pole over a hole. He has been out since daybreak, and he will be one of the last people to take fish to Norm's later in the afternoon. Other solitary anglers and a few herring gulls space themselves across the snow-dusted surface. "There are only a dozen of us that fish steady," Ross says, then pulls up a little perch and tosses it onto the ice. The fish is so small he might put it back later, but right now he doesn't want to spook the school beneath him. "Yesterday was decent," he says. "I had a 70-pound day yesterday."

Some market fishermen work construction or other seasonal jobs that leave time on their hands in deep winter. Ross, who is in his 30s, is a full-time prison guard, but double shifts free up several days a week for fishing. It's not an easy paycheck. "Probably the best you can do is \$5,000 in a winter," he estimates. But some older guys talk of a period in the mid-1990s, when perch were fetching closer to \$2 a pound, and it was worth their while to go on unemployment in winter and collect an under-the-table check selling fish.

Yellow perch is a common, native, shallow-water resident of Lake Champlain, prized more for flavor than for fight. But it takes know-how to catch a lot of them by hook and line. "I think 10 percent of the fishermen catch 90 percent of the fish. You see most of these people?" Ross says, indicating four- or five-dozen Saturday anglers within view of the Crown Point Bridge. "They've never had a hundred-pound day in their life."

Yellow perch remained prolific here as Atlantic salmon and lake trout declined due to 19th-century dam-building and overfishing. And they're still holding strong, despite competition from introduced species such as white perch, which are actually more bass than perch.

"There's absolutely no way you can hurt a body of water this big by hook and line," says Boomer Sprague, sitting on a folded portable fishing tent 30 yards away from Ross. And fisheries biologists in Vermont and New York agree, at least when it comes to perch: there is no limit on how many you can take from Lake Champlain, any size, any time.

**PORT HENRY. JUST NORTH** of Crown Point, was once a leading seafood supplier. From the mid-1800s until the 1930s, Bulwagga Bay ice fishermen loaded as much as a ton of fresh smelt a night onto trains heading south. "The smelt is

Laurie Flurry breads perch filets at George's Italian-American Restaurant, in Port Henry.



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a table delicacy, the Lake Champlain smelt having established a reputation for excellence not only throughout the East but in the large cities as far west as Chicago," reported a 1929 New York Conservation Department biological survey of the Champlain watershed. Even in recent memory, smelt-fishing shanties were a common sight on the bay. But populations of the anchovy-like fish have crashed over the last decade, likely because of competition from introduced alewives, another silvery little baitfish.

The struggle of native salmon and lake trout to become self-sustaining again in Lake Champlain may contribute to the notion that heavy fishing must harm any species here. While Champlain Valley foodies embrace wild mushrooms and organic cheeses and grains, the local food movement seems to stop at water's edge. The bigger barrier is probably a perception that Lake Champlain is dirty. In one sense, it is: cornfields, dairy farms, lawns and sewage overflows rush fertilizers into the lake, feeding algae and choking oxygen



Above: Smelt were once the money fish around Bulwagga Bay. With their decline, yellow perch is the leading market catch. Below: Perch fry is a common winter special at diners and taverns along Lake Champlain.







Norm St. Pierre, of Norm's Bait & Tackle, in Crown Point, processes up to 3,000 pounds of yellow perch a week during peak ice-fishing season.

## Most of the smaller panfish go to Ottawa and from there to “Belgium, Sweden, Denmark—everywhere.”

out of some bays and basins. This deprives fish of habitat, but apparently it doesn't make them less tasty. Vermont's Fish & Wildlife Department—on a Web page titled “Eat More Vermont Fish!”—maintains that the types of pollution that affect water quality “don't typically make properly cooked fish unsafe or unpalatable.”

But what about toxins? They still loom large if vague, in particular mercury blown in for more than a century from coal-fired power plants, and PCBs that persist a long time in the muck. There is improvement on both fronts. Federal regulation recently reduced mercury emissions, and the Biodiversity Research Institute has collected tissue samples that show mercury declining in Lake Champlain sport fish; average concentrations in yellow perch were 0.1 parts per million in 2011, about a third of the level that triggers Environmental Protection Agency concern. Sludge dumped by paper mills prior to the 1970s was a major source of PCBs and other dangerous chlorinated compounds. A PCB bed was dredged out of Cumberland Bay, near Plattsburgh, in 1999. The level of the carcinogen in Lake Champlain fish is declining significantly. In 2012 New York State lifted a warning against eating perch caught in Cumberland Bay.

Fish-consumption advisories tend to be unsatisfying, one-size-fits-all generalizations. To be cautious, women of childbearing age and children should avoid eating any fish they're unsure of. The rest of us can freely fry up Lake Champlain yellow perch—New York's Department of Health advises up to four meals a month, the default amount for any body of water in the state—with little apparent cause for worry. And, the smaller the fish the cleaner.

If that doesn't sound terribly reassuring, consider how little you really know about the seafood alternatives in your supermarket, most of them salmon, tuna or shrimp. Paul Greenberg, author of the new book *American Catch: The Fight for Our Local Seafood*, reports that about 90 percent of the fish

Americans eat is imported, and much of it is farmed, with considerable pollution costs. Some of it is illegally caught, or not what it's labeled to be.

“We can have no more intimate relationship with our environment than to eat from it,” Greenberg writes. Most of the people eating yellow perch out of Lake Champlain have a connection to the old-timers who once jigged for smelt; many of them are their kids and grandkids and grew up spending winters on the ice. Still, there are few signs of a budding lake-to-table movement, on the Adirondack side of the lake anyhow. Even Lake Champlain processors export more panfish than they sell locally. Jim Jeffries, owner of Lake Champlain Fish Company, in Rouses Point, ships most of his bluegills, rock bass and crappies to Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Canada. White perch go mainly to big fish markets in Boston and New York, where, he says, they're popular with Chinese buyers. Norm St. Pierre's perch are all sold locally, but he says most of the smaller panfish go to Ottawa and from there to “Belgium, Sweden, Denmark—everywhere.”

It is a refreshingly simple and rare pleasure to sit at a lakeside restaurant and to crunch into a bite of fried perch dipped in tartar sauce. The process that pulled the fish through a hole in the ice and delivered it to a sturdy white plate within view of that ice is transparent, especially contrasted with the inscrutability of the international seafood industry. The people catching, cutting, selling and cooking it are our neighbors. If the catch were large enough to merit a ranking by the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch, wild-caught yellow perch from Lake Champlain would rate a “best choice.” 🌿

### WHERE TO BUY PERCH

You can walk into **Lake Champlain Fish Company** (518-297-3105), in Rouses Point, and get a two-pound bag of frozen skin-on fillets for about \$13.

**Norm's Bait & Tackle** (518-597-3645), in Crown Point, sells fresh and frozen skinless fillets. The price last winter was \$8.50 per pound, but it fluctuates with the market.

### WHERE TO FIND A PERCH FRY

**The Bridge Restaurant** (802-759-2152, [www.thebridgerestaurantvt.com](http://www.thebridgerestaurantvt.com)), on Chimney Point, Vermont, cooks perch for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

**DeBro's On the Way Café** (518-597-3545, [www.debrosonthewaycafe.com](http://www.debrosonthewaycafe.com)), Crown Point

**Hot Biscuit Diner** (518-585-3483, [www.hotbiscuitdiner.com](http://www.hotbiscuitdiner.com)), Ticonderoga

**George's Italian-American Restaurant** (518-546-3026), Port Henry

**Kings Corner** (518-546-3151), Moriah

**The Dry Dock** (518-561-9993), Plattsburgh

**Gus' Red Hots** (518-561-3711), Plattsburgh

**Peabody's** (518-561-0158), in Plattsburgh, offers perch during Lent.

**Eat'n'Meet Grill & Larder** (518-891-3149, [www.eatnmeet.com](http://www.eatnmeet.com)), in Saranac Lake, is one of the only farm-to-table places doing a Champlain yellow-perch fry.