

# FROM THE FRESH WATERS A GLIMPSE OF LIFE ON THE BAY

BY LAUREN CARTER

Two boats bob in the dredged harbour across the road from Andrew and Natasha Akiwenzie's home. From our position on the edge of the rocky Bruce Peninsula, the couple points out the misty, dark bodies of Hay Island and White Cloud Island in the distance. The silver waters of Georgian Bay churn under a cloudy sky.

The weather isn't the worst that Andrew's seen, but it's bad enough. We won't be heading out on the water, he tells me. Right now, laying nets is not a possibility.

Things work on a day-to-day, hour-by-hour basis at Akiwenzie's Fish & More, located on the Chippewas of Nawash (also known as Cape Croker) First Nation Reserve. Andrew and Natasha run the small fishery with occasional help from their three young sons. When the wind is strong, algal blooms swamp the nets, clogging the fine monofilament and rendering the nets useless unless they can be painstakingly cleaned. At \$180 for every hundred yards of net, Andrew doesn't want to risk it.

The unsettled weather does present a challenge. Two-hundred-and-fifty kilometres south of the rural landscape the Akiwenzies call home, an avid fan base of food connoisseurs has come to expect regular servings of the lake trout, whitefish, and

occasional salmon and rainbow trout that Andrew pulls straight out of Georgian Bay. This fish is not the sort that's been shipped from Winnipeg to sit for days in the grocer's freezer.

"The fish I sell, I get out of the water the day before," says Andrew. "The ones I take down to market, I hand pick to make sure the colour and the firmness is good. If it's not fresh, I'll smoke it, but I won't sell it as fresh."

As we talk, Andrew keeps his eyes focused up in the trees, watching the wind. Every now and then, he and Natasha break away from our conversation to plan. They are hoping the wind will die down in the evening so that Andrew can bring the nets out and catch some fresh fish for the market.

But they do have smoked fish for the next day. Seventy pounds of it will be loaded into the truck to disappear like "ice on a hot plate" at the Dufferin Grove Farmers' Market. While Andrew fills the family's small home with the smell of roasting coffee (from Toronto's Merchants of Green Coffee), Natasha takes me next door to show me how the smoking is done. We follow a narrow path to the building where she smokes fish and bones them every day except Sunday.

In the refrigerator, large tubs of rainbow trout and lake trout



Photographs: Lauran Carter

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have been marinating for a day in Natasha's own brine recipes. I can ask all I want, she tells me – she still won't share. "It took me so long to get it right," she says. "My husband was so sick of eating smoked fish. He'd say, 'This one's too salty, this one needs more sugar.'"

But she will give away the ingredients. The plain smoked fish soaks in a mixture of hot water, brown sugar and salt. Placed in a smoking oven over an electrically heated cast iron pan filled with maple- or apple-wood chips, the fish smokes for seven or eight hours and is basted with maple syrup a couple of hours before it's done. The Cajun-style fish, marinated in a spice mixture, is basted with Frank's Hot Sauce. The honey garlic flavour uses garlic, often purchased at the markets the Akiwenzies frequent, and honey from Bees Universe, an Ontario apiary that sells its products at several Toronto markets.

Using local and more healthful ingredients is a change that came when the company made the move from the Owen Sound Market to sell solely in Toronto, Andrew tells me later. "People gave us ideas. They didn't like the idea of iodized salt so we use sea salt. They didn't like the idea of garlic granules, so we use fresh garlic. A woman at the Brick Works who makes dehydrated organic spice mixes will be making a Cajun spice mix for us. Soon, nearly all our ingredients will be organic."

Times certainly have changed. Before roads lined the peninsula, aboriginal men would leave their families to fish, Andrew explains. "They'd take their boats and go to their fishing areas – there's one around the Cape Croker Lighthouse. There'd be a small 10-by-10 shack, made using tarpaper, and they'd have barrels of salt. They'd fish for four or five days until they filled the barrels up and they'd go back home and they'd have their fish for the winter."

Years later, in the early 1970s, Andrew started fishing with his uncles, heading out onto the bay in steel rowboats early in the morning before he caught the bus to school. Back then, before the rules changed in 1991, native fishermen were allowed to fish only for subsistence and not commercially. Still, he and his uncles would tour the peninsula, hawking their catch. "We'd go up to Red Bay and Barrow Bay and all these little places. My uncles knew the guys from being in the war with them. You'd stop at one place and the guy would say, 'Yeah, I'll buy a couple



of fish.' And you'd fillet them up or sell them the way he wants them, and then he'd say, 'Just wait, I think my brother-in-law or a guy down the road might want some, too,' and he'd go in and ring them and they'd all talk on the telephone and he'd say, 'Yeah, go down about five doors and he'll be waiting for you.' And then there's another one two doors down from there and we'd be able to sell our entire catch just driving door to door."

But Andrew's life hasn't always been a nostalgic walk along the beautiful shores of Georgian Bay. His grandmother had been sent as a young girl to a residential school in Spanish, Ontario, marking the beginnings of a chain of suffering that reached down through the generations to find Andrew. Neglected and abused as a child, he remembers surviving on discarded corn cobs and dog food. He came through his own dark night of the soul before finding the way back to himself. Part of this process involved returning to the waters where he had spent his early years, Natasha relates. "He's drawn to the water. When we lived in Midland for a year, he always talked about how nice the water looked and I knew it would eventually bring us back here."

Moving back to the peninsula also meant fishing. "It's what you do up here. If you don't work for the band, you fish. It's what I've always fallen back on," explains Andrew.

The fishing business was only supposed to get them through one summer, but the products of Akiwenzie's Fish & More are now in such demand at the Toronto farmers' markets – including Dufferin Grove, Riverdale Farm and the Brick Works – that they can hardly keep up. And the desire for local catch keeps on growing. "There are restaurants that are crying out for fish," Andrew says, adding that he is now looking for an investor to help them bring the business to the next level.

By the time Andrew drives me off of the reserve and back

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into the town of Wiarton, no decision has been made about laying the nets. The wind is still blowing and the waiting game continues. But despite the need to get fresh fish to the market so their trip will bring in some money above the break-even point, Andrew doesn't resent this natural process. Instead, he tells me, he gives thanks every day.

"I lay tobacco down at the water's edge and I pray and thank the Creator for the fish who give up their lives to feed my family and for the safe passage on the water and for the gentle wind."

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*When this magazine's editor asked me to write an article about the Akiwenzies, I knew I couldn't do so without visiting them at their home and, weather permitting, accompanying Andrew out on the water. My own ancestors homesteaded on the Bruce Peninsula, and any story about people making a living from the wild waves of Georgian Bay cannot be told without witnessing their relationship with the lake. The Akiwenzies took me in for the day, served me hot coffee in their home, and we talked as if we'd known each other a very long time. It was a privilege to meet them – and so close to where my own grandmother once canned pears from her backyard trees.*

- Lauren Carter

*Lauren Carter is a freelance writer who lives in Orillia, Ontario. Read her blog at [www.laurencarter.ca](http://www.laurencarter.ca).*



Photograph: Laura Berman

Andrew and Natasha Akiwenzie with their sons Nodin, M'kade-Miingan and Christopher.

# ANCESTRAL TRADITIONS KEPT ALIVE

BY ANDREW AKIWENZIE

Akiwenzie's Fish & More is our family business, which we started five years ago out of necessity: to earn more from our commercial fishing company. We have a tradition of fishing in our community and we are applying our grandfathers' and grandmothers' teachings of only using what we need. Our ancestors would find the best way to use the resources without taking more than they needed to survive.

My family is involved in all aspects of our company. I am the fisherman and my wife and boys help me on the 23-foot open steel boat when the weather permits. My wife smokes and pin-bones the fresh and smoked fish. Our boys, who are eleven, ten and eight, help with most aspects of the business, and watch my wife and me to learn and be our quality control. They sure do learn fast. The boys have helped us at the markets for the first four years – we've home-schooled them and they've become our salesmen and barkers. We put our hearts into all we do, and we take care in all we do – as if we were feeding our family. Our fish is yesterday's catch and our smoked fish is cured with the care of our family values.

I have fished with a number of family members since I was 10-years-old and fell in love with the waters of Georgian Bay. I fish alone most of the time now, lifting the nets by hand as my family has done for as long as I remember. It is a great feeling being out on the bay and being able to help so many people with great fish. I fish in the same way as our elders have for years and with their long-silent voices still in my heart. Upon occasion I have the great opportunity to feed one of our cultural dodems (clans), the bald eagle.

The water is a precious workplace for me as I have had many jobs in the past that were not as pristine. I was a high-pressure water blaster in Sarnia for a number of years, working in the "chemical valley" with a surreal environment of dangerous equipment and toxic materials. A few years later, I was in a different type of dangerous and toxic career in nuclear mechanical maintenance at Bruce Nuclear Power Development, but now I find my work environment to be a fragile and unpredictable partner; I now watch more carefully the work area I utilize, for it is our most precious resource.

I am on the water from early spring – about the first week in April – till late January, early February. For the greater part of the year I am pretty much alone on the wa-

ter except for my fellow fishermen. It isn't till the warm weather sets in that I see the first of the sailboats start to silently sail by while I lift and set my nets. A little later and the anglers and recreational boaters start to make me feel crowded on our waterway.

I have seen so many wonderful events out on the water it is hard to do justice to Mother Earth in so few words. It's so peaceful to be alone with only your thoughts and nature. I have seen water so still you couldn't tell where the water ends and the sky begins. Some days there are multiple rainbows, fog so thick you could taste it. The sky is a canvas and the Creator toys with our hearts as He makes one beautiful creation after another. I see the seasons change day by day from the "capsule" of my boat that insulates me like an ultra high-definition television with all my senses being subjected to almost sensory overload.

I have often hastened up to our house to drag my wife and kids down to witness some spectacular event of nature coming to life up close and personal. Nature in all her glory is wondrous to behold, but she also has an alter ego that can be as dangerous as it is beautiful. In winter, I enjoy listening to the large snowflakes landing on the sides of my boat with a whisper. And to the large cumulous nimbus clouds that bring the summer lightning shows in the distance – transfixing you as they approach and in awe as they envelop you, and then leaving you feeling insignificant and fragile while all the while exciting all the cells of your being. Making you feel so alive while being so close to demise.

If I had a dream job in mind for everyone to try at least once in their life, it would be my wish that you all could accompany me on my daily commute and toil a hard day's work in my paradise.

*Andrew Akiwenzie resides on the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation Reserve on the beautiful Bruce Peninsula, near Warton, Ontario. He is a commercial fisherman on Georgian Bay, where he catches some of the best whitefish from Ontario's cold, deep waters. He is also continuing a family tradition by respectfully harvesting his daily catch and preserving his cultural traditions. His practices of good living and love for Mother Earth's bounty are setting examples for his three boys by showing them their cultural responsibilities as caretakers and children of the land.*