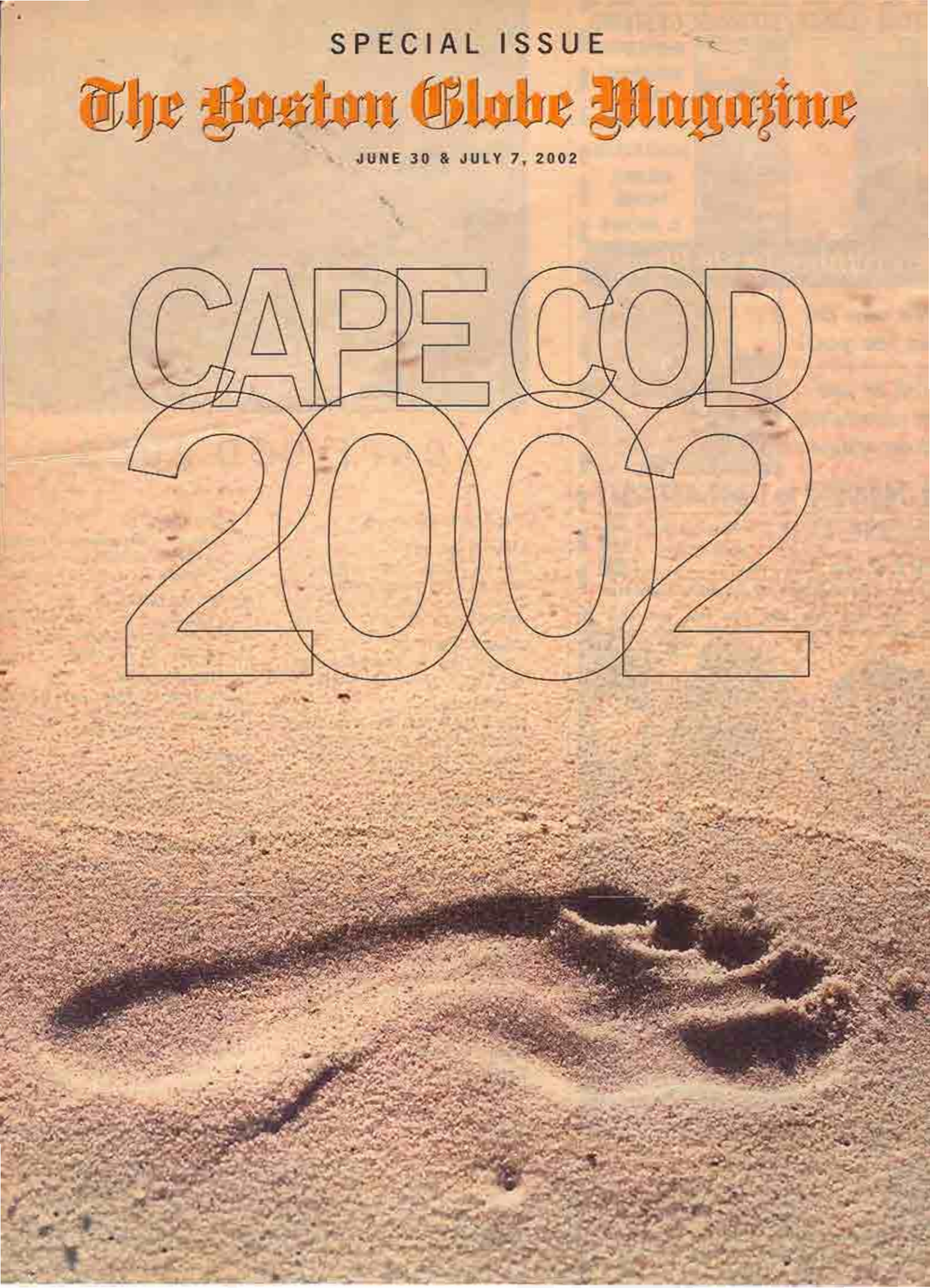


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EARNING HIS STRIPES



Ron Murphy, captain of the custom-built *Stray Cat*, and his 20-year-old son, Brendan, his first mate. Above, a striped bass being filleted.

When Ron Murphy isn't teaching high school art, he's teaching the art of catching stripers and blues.

HE MIGHT BE MR. MURPHY to his art students at Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School, but come summer, everyone else – especially the fishermen who hang around Hyannis Harbor – calls him Captain Ron. And even though Ron Murphy has been taking people out to catch striped bass and bluefish for 26 years, he says he still can't get enough of fishing. It's not so much the good eating he's after. It's the sport, figuring out where the fish are and teaching someone else how to catch them. "It's the science of fishing I like," he says. "This business puts you into contact with some of your primal feelings." Which means that, beyond watching the weather, Murphy looks for signs in nature. "The first Arctic terns are a good sign," he says. "Terns feed on small bait," like the

herring that swim north each spring. Stripers and blues feed on herring, so the birds are also an indication that "the bass are not too far behind."

A less scientific theory espoused by some anglers has the first dandelions signaling that the fish are here. "Or when you can smell the lilacs," says the 55-year-old Murphy. There are things no one wants to see. "Fishermen are superstitious." Some won't let anyone bring a banana on the boat, he says. "It means something bad's going to happen."

But Murphy seems to have good luck on *Stray Cat*, his 31-foot fiberglass sport fisherman. He insists that everyone he takes out have a "positive fishing attitude." If they "tell me, 'I'm not going to catch anything. I stink at this,' you know what? They do."

Murphy had *Stray Cat* custom-built for charter fishing, so it has lots of open deck space. It's capable of dealing with shoals, and it has less tendency to rock. He takes his customers to the shoals of Nantucket Sound and along Monomoy and Martha's Vineyard. His boat holds six passengers and one mate — his son, Brendan, 20, home from Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York. "We provide tackle and clean fish to take home," says Ron Murphy, who has cleaned everyone's fish for 25 years. This year, that task falls to the mate.

Outside his Barnstable house, Ron Murphy cleans a fish to show just how easy it is. His cleaning station is an old cooler with an orange rubber stair tread set on top. He uses the tread as his cutting board. When he's done, the bones on the bluefish he has just filleted look as if they were licked by a hungry cat.

He drops the fillets into a plastic zipper bag and hoses off his board.

Murphy was raised in Allston and fished with his father and a "quasi-uncle" off the Boston Harbor Islands. After graduating from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, he worked for the university's food service de-

partment, which got him free tuition. It meant "weaseling my way into graduate art classes." Murphy's paintings, many of the sea, are all over his house. In 1973, he started teaching at Dennis-Yarmouth High School to fill in for someone on sabbatical. He eventually became a permanent member of the faculty.

Being on the Cape, of course, meant being close to the sea. His wife, Jill, "is very supportive. Fishing is an addiction. You have to be careful. In my profession, marriages have gone sour."

In 1976, he bought his first boat, a 1959 wooden Parece with "beautiful mahogany and teak and loads of varnish work." It was, says Murphy, "like they say: 'a hole in the water into which you pour your money.'" But he's liked watching the business grow and seeing happy customers, many of whom return every year.

At the end of the day, his fishermen "have a hunk of fish in a plastic bag." He thinks they need something more to show off to their families. So he photographs them with their catch and posts the pictures on www.stray-catfishing.com. "I want them to have a fabulous day." But he also wants them to know they don't have to keep the fish and hopes some will release their catch.

In addition to bad-weather days, Murphy takes off most Mondays in summer. His younger son, Christian, 17, has cerebral palsy and needs constant care, so he wants to be home when he can. "Some days it's really nice, and I don't have a fishing trip," he says. "My wife says I'm moping around here."

So what does a man who spends most days fishing prefer to eat? "After all that fish," Murphy says, "what I really want is a steak."

STRIPED BASS SEVICHE

When Ron Murphy brings a striper home, he makes this lime-cured dish introduced to him by another sea captain. "After trying

it once," he says, "I was hooked." Freshly caught fish is best for sevice, which is served raw.

- 1 pound skinless, boneless striped bass, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 cup lime juice
- ½ red bell pepper, cored, seeded, and thinly sliced
- ½ green bell pepper, cored, seeded, and thinly sliced
- ½ red onion, thinly sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon coarse salt, or to taste
- 1 jalapeno pepper, cored, seeded, and finely chopped
- 12 large romaine lettuce leaves
- ½ avocado, cut into very thin slices
- ¼ cup coarsely chopped cilantro

In a bowl, combine the striped bass, lime juice, red and green bell peppers, onion, garlic, salt, and jalapeno pepper. Turn the fish in the marinade. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate the fish for 1 to 2 hours.

Arrange the lettuce on 6 salad plates. Use a slotted spoon to transfer the fish to the lettuce. Garnish with avocado and sprinkle with cilantro. Serve at once.

SERVES 6

FLUKE ROLL-UPS

Fluke, a type of flounder, is a delicate, sweet fish that is Murphy's favorite. You can substitute flounder or sole.

- Butter (for the dish)
- 1 cup cooked tiny shrimp
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh chives
- 2 tablespoons dry white bread crumbs
- ¼ pound fresh white mushrooms
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- Salt and pepper, to taste

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 small red onion, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1½ pounds skinless, boneless fluke, flounder, or sole
- ½ cup boiling water
- ¼ cup white wine
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- ¼ cup heavy cream

Set the oven at 400 degrees. Butter a 9-by-13-inch baking dish.

In a food processor, combine the shrimp, chives, bread crumbs, mushrooms, tomato paste, salt, and pepper. Pulse the mixture until it is finely chopped.

In a skillet, melt the butter and cook the onion over medium heat, stirring often, for 5 minutes or until the onion softens.

Add the garlic and cook, stirring, for 1 minute. Add the shrimp mixture and cook, stirring, for 1 minute more.

Remove the filling from the heat and set it aside to cool.

To stuff the fish: On a board, place a fish fillet in front of you, skinned side up. Spread the filling in a thin layer over the fish. Roll the fish up and secure the seam with a toothpick.

Place the fish in the baking dish and continue stuffing and rolling the remaining fillets. Make only one layer in the dish.

In a bowl, combine the water, wine, and lemon juice. Pour the mixture over the fish, sprinkle the fish with salt and pepper, and transfer the dish to the hot oven.

Bake the fish for 25 to 30 minutes, basting halfway through cooking, or until the fish flakes easily and is cooked through.

Remove the dish from the oven, tip the juices into a small saucepan, and set the fish aside in a warm place. Set the saucepan over medium heat. Whisk in the cream and bring it to a boil. Simmer the sauce over medium-low heat for 5 minutes.

Serve at once, spooning sauce over each piece of the fish.

SERVES 4