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COURTESY OF ALASKA SEAFOOD MARKETING INSTITUTE

Hoonah chef and restaurateur Kristi Skaflestad took third place in the Great Alaska Seafood Cook-Off last May 14, 2012, in Anchorage. Six professional chefs, preparing dishes featuring wild Alaska seafood, competed against each other at the Bill Sheffield Railroad Depot at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport.

Satisfyin' Grub

Southeast chef brings haute cuisine to Hoonah

BY PAULA DOBBYN
FOR FIRST ALASKANS

Anchorage resident Jeff Gorton works on the North Slope, pulling two-week-on and two-week-off shifts on Alaska's oil patch. When he's off duty in the summer Gorton flies south to Hoonah with his three sons, ages 14, 11 and 6. They live aboard a boat in Hoonah and spend their time sport fishing for salmon and exploring the forested islands and inlets of Southeast Alaska's Tongass National Forest.

As soon as the air taxi touches down in Hoonah, the Gorton family follows a routine.

"We get out of the plane and the first place we go is Chipper Fish, even before we unload our bags at the dock," said Gorton. "My kids would prefer to eat at Chipper Fish than do anything else in Southeast Alaska. They basically spend all winter in Anchorage looking forward to going to Hoonah, not to see their friends, not to fish, but to eat salmon bites at Kristi's place."

Owned by Aleut/Tlingit chef Kristi Skaflestad, Chipper Fish is a humble but top-notch restaurant located in downtown Hoonah, a mostly Tlingit community of 750 residents on isolated Chichagof Island, about a half-hour plane ride from Juneau. Adorned with a school of stainless-steel salmon swimming up the outside wall, Chipper Fish specializes in seafood – mostly wild silver and king salmon caught by Gus Skaflestad, the owner's father.

While it's not fancy as far as décor, the fresh, locally-caught wild seafood it offers makes the eatery a standout. Delectable items like salmon tacos, salmon-salad melt and salmon bites – lightly breaded salmon pieces quickly deep-fried and served with homemade tartar sauce – dominate the menu.

Open from May to September when the tourism and fishing seasons are in full swing, Skaflestad's customers are a mix of visitors and locals. But fishermen – both those based in Hoonah and others who come by port to offload their catch or do boat maintenance – are her mainstay. One of them is Tim Merriman, a regular customer.

"I'm a fish snob, OK? I'm a fisherman. You can't pull anything over on a fisherman when it comes to fish. I know what's good and what's not good. And I can't say enough good things about Kristi's food. She takes it to a whole new level," said Merriman, a Juneau troller who commercially fishes out of Hoonah. Besides the freshness of the seafood and knowing where it's caught, there's something else he likes about Chipper Fish.

"The portions are man-sized. You eat one of her breakfast burritos and you're basically good for the rest of the day," Merriman said.

An Unlikely Offering

Chipper Fish is housed in a simple blue building located on Front Street, the main drag in Hoonah. There's a take-out window, a deck with outdoor seating with some tables and bar stools inside. All told, it can accommodate up to 40 people.

Flower boxes and the metal fish sculpture are a pleasant touch. But without stopping in and sampling the menu, it would be easy to bypass Chipper Fish without realizing that the food is comparable to that of a fine-dining establishment.

Part of the surprise factor comes from Chipper Fish's location. A former logging town with a strong fishing tradition, Hoonah is like many Alaska villages: it's a bit rough-and-tumble in appearance. That was especially true when the economy fell on hard times in the late 1990s. But more recently, tourism has flourished in Hoonah with the 2004 development of a cruise ship port called Icy Strait Point. New businesses have popped up to serve the tens of thousands of cruise ship passengers that now come to Hoonah. At the same time, strong salmon prices and healthy returns have revitalized the town's fishing industry.

But the bottom line from a culinary



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— Tim Merriman

Juneau troller who commercially fishes out of Hoonah

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perspective is that Hoonah remains a blue-collar town in an off-the-beaten path area of Alaska, making Chipper Fish a refreshing if unlikely offering. The restaurant has several things going for it: Skaflestad's exacting standards, her culinary education and her access to high-quality seafood are all selling points.

Among her fans is the communications director of Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute.

"I took my boat over there last May and tried some of her food. I was blown away," said Tyson Fick.

Fick's group, which promotes Alaska seafood globally, put Skaflestad's cooking abilities to the test last summer during the Great Alaska Seafood Cook-Off in Anchorage. From a pool of 29 professional chefs, Skaflestad joined a group of six that competed in a cooking contest at the Bill Sheffield Railroad Depot at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport last May.

The goal was to use Alaska seafood and turn it into a winning dish within one hour's time. Skaflestad came in third place for her creation: Dungeness crab-stuffed king salmon with macadamia spot prawn cakes topped with curried-pineapple sauce.

"It's nice to see terrific new talent emerging. There's no better spokesmen for Alaska seafood than chefs and fishermen," Fick said.

A Blessed Product

While Skaflestad emphasizes seafood on her menu, she also offers hearty breakfast standards like biscuits with sausage gravy, and lunch items such as chicken wraps, beef burgers topped with pulled pork, nachos and hot wings. Main dishes are served with a choice of two sides, one of which is dubbed Mom's Potato Salad.

For every 3 pounds of potato Skaflestad uses in the salad, she adds 1 pound of bacon, along with sweet pickle, celery and hardboiled egg tossed with a tangy mayo dressing. It's not for anyone counting calories.

But heart-healthy seafood remains Skaflestad's main focus.

"Half of my menu is salmon," she said.

The chef is passionate about protecting the Southeast Alaska rivers and ocean that produce the fish she serves. Her menu and business card include the slogan, "Thank you for supporting wild, sustainable, eco-friendly salmon fisheries." With out-of-state customers, she'll often talk about the ocean and freshwater conditions that give rise to Alaska's healthy wild salmon.

"It's such a blessed product that we have," said Skaflestad.

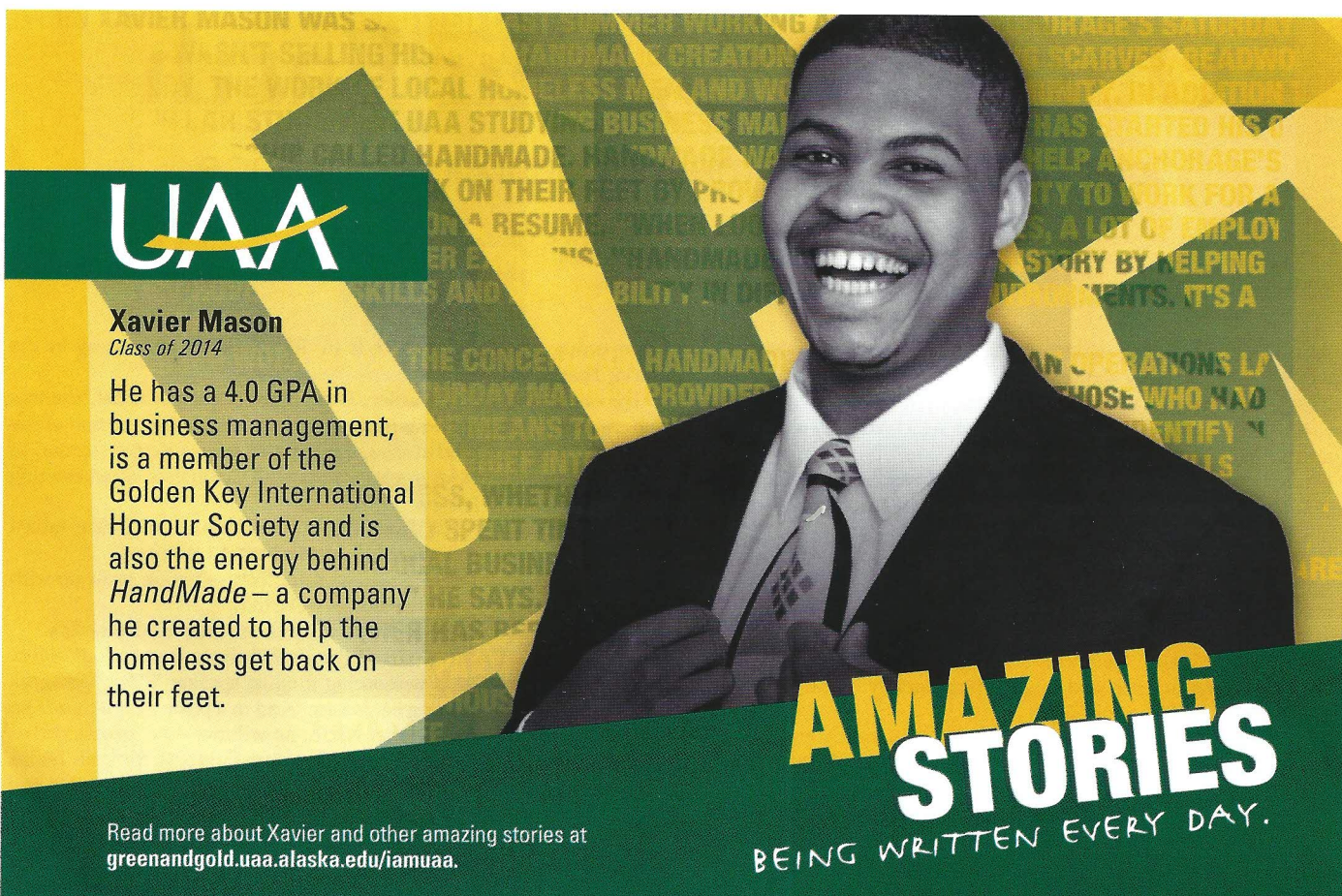
Two of her great-grandfathers were Norwegian fishermen who came to Alaska to harvest seafood and ended up marrying Alaska Native women.

Chipper Fish opened in May 2011. Skaflestad, who was raised in Hoonah and now lives in Anchorage during the winter, decided to open the business after graduating from Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Portland, Ore. She bought the building that houses Chipper Fish in part with a loan from Haa Aaní Community Development Fund. Haa Aaní, a subsidiary of Sealaska Corp., is a nonprofit financial institution that works to stimulate and support economic growth in Southeast Alaska's rural communities.

Last year Chipper Fish expanded seating and added an espresso bar. Her family has been instrumental in making the business a success, Skaflestad said. Her parents and extended family in Hoonah helped her fix up the building where Chipper Fish is located, and her father continues to supply her with more than 1,000 pounds of salmon every year. He pressure bleeds and flash freezes every salmon he catches on his power troller, locking in the freshness.

"It's the quality that sells the product. This fish is the finest-quality product on Earth," said Gus Skaflestad. ■

Freelance writer Paula Dobbryn lives in Anchorage.



UAA

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Class of 2014

He has a 4.0 GPA in business management, is a member of the Golden Key International Honour Society and is also the energy behind *HandMade* – a company he created to help the homeless get back on their feet.

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