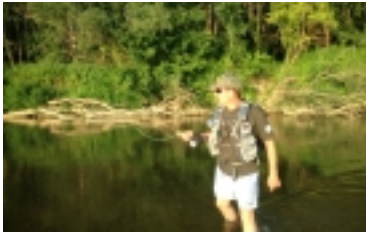




## Fishing Friends



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**The memories of people who taught you to fish, or with whom you shared great fishing experiences, stay with you forever. As I get older and more successful, I try to choose people with whom I fish or collaborate with in the angling media as individual human beings. Back in the 1990s, after working in angling TV for a while, I was at a creative crossroad and considered shooting a fishing pilot. No, I wasn't going to point a gun at a floatplane; I was considering filming a sample episode for a potential cable TV fishing show. I thought I should keep my eyes open for a talented young fly fisherman to test on camera as host. Nothing personal, just business.**

It was winter in New York State and I was following runs of steelhead and Browns in the tributaries of Lake Ontario. I made hundreds of trips up there from my house in New Jersey and stayed in various places but found I liked one in particular lodging situated above a fly shop called, Orleans Outdoors. The owner, Ron Bierstein and I became friends and we fished together when he could get someone to run the shop. Ron always gave me the best room he called the honeymoon suite. The lodging has a common area with a kitchen and living room and an immense, long, heavy wooden table for fly tying and eating-in. Ron calls the living room, the Licorice Lounge, after the fragrance left from the time when guests stayed-up tying licorice scented spawn sacks and drinking beer on the big table. They would often kill brown trout that weighed ten pound just for their eggs! Since the Eighties, most of

the area's anglers are fly fishermen of different sorts.

On one of my trips, two separate strangers and I stayed at Ron's and I was quickly introduced to them on our way to fish; one was a tall, athletic looking angler in his twenties, the other a paunchy middle aged man with bad hair and affected sounding speech. I had a short conversation with the younger one and he seemed friendly and knowledgeable. The three of us had good fishing with a run of fish, fresh from the lake. I saw the young angler on the water and he did a good job fishing. I was into my own fishing and didn't put two and two together until I drove the two hundred miles home.

After it dawned on me that the young angler at Ron's might be suitable as a host for my pilot, I called Ron and asked, Ron, remember the guy I was talking to at the shop the other day? Would you please send his contact info to me so I can discuss a project I'm thinking of? Ron hesitated as if he was choosing between two flies in his patch and said, I'll send you Joe Madura's email address and you can ask him.

I emailed Joe and asked if he was interested in meeting at Ron's to fish on the next sign of rising water but didn't mention the project, in case I changed my mind after getting to know him better. Either way, it promised to be more good steelhead fishing with a fellow angler who could brave the midwinter temperatures. We set a meeting time at the fly shop and I drove my truck seven hours as if it knew the way.

I walked into Orlean's Outdoors to meet Joe and Ron re-introduced us. The only problem was, Joe was the other angler on the last trip, not the one I was interested in auditioning! I intuitively knew I had to react positively or I would hurt this man's pride! Ron made an innocent mistake and it was all my fault for not remembering who I'd met and I had to fish with this guy for a couple days to make things right. I acted as if everything was great and I was enthusiastic to get to the Archers Pool with my new fishing companion to see if fish were present.

We had fun catching a few steelhead each, getting to know each other on the water, checking other streams for browns and steelhead and seeking-out the scarce good restaurant fare in this farm county. It was nice just fishing with someone who wasn't trying to out fish me. Joe was an attorney and a trained chef with an ailing father he was caring for, part time. He had a great sense of self-deprecating humor, a very sharp mind and was a gourmand,

bordering on glutton. His passion for food was endearing. He told me a story of a famous French vineyard that flew some 1927 wine over on the Concord as an ingredient for a dessert he was asked to prepare for an event. He told me he decided using it to cook with was a sin and ordered an assistant to procure a suitable non-vintage replacement so the chefs could drink the original bottles of wine. The critics loved the dessert and the kitchen had its ironic pleasure. Fishing with Joe was a good change from the usual fishhead conversations I'd been used to. On this trip, we even found an Italian restaurant that cooked tripe and served fresh cannolis for dessert. He was a fan of good cannolis. When that trip was over, I invited Joe to come down in the spring to fish with me on my boat for striped bass. I had discarded the fishing show idea and was working for one the biggest commercial photo studios in NYC.

We stayed at a farmhouse my family owned about 50 minutes from the shore. We ate well and found more cannolis! We decided we were on a hunt to find the best cannolis among the Italian kitchens of the tri-state area. The next morning we launched my Maverick Master Angler, a flats skiff, in Raritan Bay. The striped bass congregate there to warm-up and ripen their eggs in preparation to run the Hudson River to spawn. Then after the spawn, they gorge on their way out of the rivers and head up the coast. We could relate to the gorging. The big female stripers feed heavily during this period on Menhaden and Herring. Joe and I hit some school sized fish feeding on Spearing, a smaller baitfish and caught quite a few. Even though he couldn't cast very far, he caught fish and had a riot. When we were done that afternoon, I thought of an Italian bakery I knew near a fly shop in Shewsbury, New Jersey. We visited the shop so I could buy some fly-hooks and I could show Joe the school of baby striped bass in the owner's 300 gallon aquarium behind the counter. Then we went down the block for coffee and an assortment of mini-cannolis. Joe said they were the best he ever had and if Tyra Banks would feed them to him, he would die a happy man.

Well I don't know if his father had any such last wishes granted, but that summer, Joe lost his father who had lived a long life. Joe spent a few months getting his father's estate and affairs settled and decided to move to California with a lady-friend to start a celebrity catering business in Los Angeles. We kept in touch and he was enjoying his new digs and business. I borrowed a photo of Tyra Banks from the Internet, inserted an image of a cannoli in her hand and emailed it to him as a reminder of how sweet life is.

One day he called me with some totally unexpected news. Out of the blue, he had some disconcerting symptoms and was diagnosed with throat cancer. He said he wasn't sure of his prognosis and was having more tests. After a week he called, sounding defeated and asked me if I wanted all his fly outfits, including an anniversary G.Loomis rod with gold guides, I think. I said back, don't even think that way, you're going to need them when we go fishing again! He said he'd be in-touch.

That was the last time I heard from him and after three weeks I feared the worst and searched online for an obituary. Unfortunately, I found it. He was in his fifties, as I am now. Besides losing a friend, I also knew upon missing him, you can never judge a book by its cover.