

A Fish Story from Majuro

By Les on SY Surrender

Many prizes were given out to racing yachts that participated in the Coconut Cup back in April. This is the race where yachts race beside local outrigger canoes. As we were hauled out, we crewed on Karmaladen, our friend's boat. Fun race, big party weekend. And, we indirectly won a fish. One of the other skippers really won it, but then gave it to us at a party on his boat. However, it was just the coupon for it. I had to go to the fish department at Marine Resources for it.

A friend who works at the EPA here offered to make a big vegetarian meal for four of the boats. But, we felt that was too much for her, and that we should all cook some tuna dishes using this fish we had won. Great idea. I go to the fish place, and have to meet with two Chinese guys to get the fish. The boss has to sign my voucher, and then another guy takes me to the freezer. He had to bust the ice off the doors with a large pry bar before we could go in. As he was chipping ice away, I asked him if I got a choice of kind, and if so, I would like a Yellowfin rather than a skipjack. "Sure, sure, no problem, yellowfin."

We get the door loose and go into a large freezer room that has got to be zero degrees or below. The walls are solid ice, and there are frozen fish bodies everywhere, all gutted and beheaded. And large. This Chinese guy grabs an ice pick and starts to drag one over for me. It is almost as big as I am. I was really thinking that since it was a donated gift to the regatta, it would be a small fish like maybe 10 or 15 pounds. I thought I would just throw it in my bag and catch a cab back. "My goodness" I said, "how much does that weigh?" The Chinese guy told me, "Maybe 25 or 30 Kilos." Wow. And that was the fish.

This created a whole new logistics problem. It was a Thursday, and we were doing the dinner thing on Friday. What would I do with a 60-pound tuna frozen as hard as a tree? Couldn't just lay it on the aft deck to thaw, it would draw flies and bleed everywhere. None of us had a freezer big enough. No way to cut it while it is frozen. I asked them if they had a saw there. No. So, I left to go have a beer and plan this out, telling the guy I would have to come back in awhile. Hmmm... After a beer and some mulling over time, my first thought was to take my dinghy to the fish dock to get the big fish, but then, I still had the problem of cutting it. I found a friend with a car willing to help me go get it, in exchange for a steak or two. Ok, that solves one problem. Still going to have to figure how to cut it.

Well, the friend with the car takes me back, but now both the Chinese Managers are gone, and the local guys do not want to release the fish. Go

call the boss on his cell phone, and he says he will be right back to the plant in five. He shows up, but does not have the key to the freezer. The guy who has the key, is out swimming. Boss tells us to come back at 6:30pm. Well, I am not sure that will work, but no other choice.

So, back to where our boat is to get Ann and go to Pizza night at the local hangout. There, I ask the cook if there is anyway he could help us cut the fish. He talks to the butcher in the grocery store across the street, and we make arrangements to cut the fish on their big band saw. Great. Gobble some pizza, and then hop in a cab to go get the fish, because now my friend with the car is unavailable. Well, I have to go through some trouble twice at the gate of the fish plant because there is some fighting going on. A fleet of Chinese fishing boats has been impounded temporarily (with all their crews on board) at the fish dock while investigations go on concerning illegal shark fishing. They have caught one of these vessels red-handed, and on video, illegally fishing for sharks near one of the atolls.

Well, there is some animosity between locals and Chinese and there are two fights going on right at the gate I have to walk through. One drunken guy looking to fight with anyone almost hit me. He was really hammered. And to the credit of the Chinese, I must say it looked like they were trying to not fight. They were trying to walk away from it. But the one local was so drunk, when the Chinese walked away; he started fighting with another local guy. Which added to the drama and tension of this event as I realized I was now going to be carrying out in my arms, a \$300 piece of tuna, that these guys risk their lives to catch, working on really run down boats.

If I made it past the fishing crews, I had to again go through the fight scene at the gate and then flag down a taxi in the ensuing darkness. Well, the guy with the key finally came and I got the fish. I bagged it in one large garbage bag, but I don't think I was fooling anyone. The Chinese guys gave me some serious looks but nothing else. The drunks fighting at the gate, luckily had reached that stage of drunkenness where the mind is no longer able to take in the big picture, just the fuzzy narrow focus of the immediate, which for them, was kicking ass. One guy did stagger up to me and started asking where I got the fish. I just mumbled something and said I had to go, and kept walking. Got the fish back to the store and called the hotel/restaurant on my handheld VHF to send the cook over.

We took the fish back into the cutting room and in no time he had it all cut into 1-inch steaks that took up two large cardboard boxes.

I got some of the other yacht crews to help carry it, and we divided it up. The cook stored some in the restaurant freezer for us.

We did have the meal on Friday and made royal pigs of ourselves with three wonderful veggie dishes, and tuna cooked three different ways. Later, one of the local teachers showed up with ice cream. What decadence. And we are still eating tuna.