

A Dogmusher's Secret

Staying fit with sheefish and other subsistence foods

STORY BY LESLIE HSU OH
PHOTOS BY LOREN HOLMES
FOR FIRST ALASKANS

While sheefish sizzles and crackles on the stove, Rose Lawless relaxes on her couch beneath a painting by the late artist Eric Deeter memorializing her 18 years as a dog musher. She counts on her hands the number of champions, such as Susan Butcher, who bought dogs she trained.

Turning 50 in a month, Lawless has held titles as diverse as traditional healer, berry picking queen, hunter, angler, truck driver, store owner, housekeeper, manager, handyman extraordinaire, and culinary cook.

What I admire most about Lawless is her ability to live largely on subsistence foods. Although she resides in the Anchorage area, Lawless tries to visit her birthplace, Noorvik on the Kobuk River east of Kotzebue, twice a year. In the fall, she hunts for caribou and picks berries. In the spring, she fishes, picks berries, and hunts for walrus or seal.

Tonight, she saws a heavy, frozen sheefish with a knife. After slicing the sheefish into steaks, Lawless rolls each steak in seasoned flour, and sears one side in a cast-iron pan on the stove. She then browns the other side, lays a strip of bacon on the seared side, and bakes the fish at 375 degrees for 30 minutes. The mouthwatering smell of bacon wafts from the stovetop where the baked fish receives finishing touches while we chat.

When her friends or relatives visit from up north, they bring her fresh subsistence foods such as sheefish. Her freezer is stocked with walrus, caribou, moose, muktuk, salmonberries, cranberries, blackberries and blueberries. "Would you like to try some dried bearded walrus meat?" she asks.

Lawless returns from the kitchen with plates of her fried sheefish, dressed with a strip of smoking bacon, and a few pieces of walrus meat.

A working mom, I want my two young kids to eat more subsistence foods, but I don't have much time to make this happen. I jot down her recipe immediately. "Can I use this recipe for any kind of fish?"

"Sure." Lawless winks at me.

Before Lawless even sets down my plate, my 6-year-old daughter swipes some of the bacon and walrus meat. "Yum," she says, nibbling from each hand.

"Has she ever had walrus?" Lawless asks as Kyra finishes off the walrus meat, then tackles the sheefish.

"She's never even had sheefish," I respond.

Kyra smacks her lips after devouring a sheefish steak about the size of her head, then looks shyly at Lawless and says, "Grandma Rose, can I have more? Pretty please?"

"Good girl," Lawless beams. It is the first time I see a glimmer of her role as grandmother to nine. With her 5-foot-11 frame sporting trendy jeans and a black Harley Davidson tank top, it's hard to tell her age.

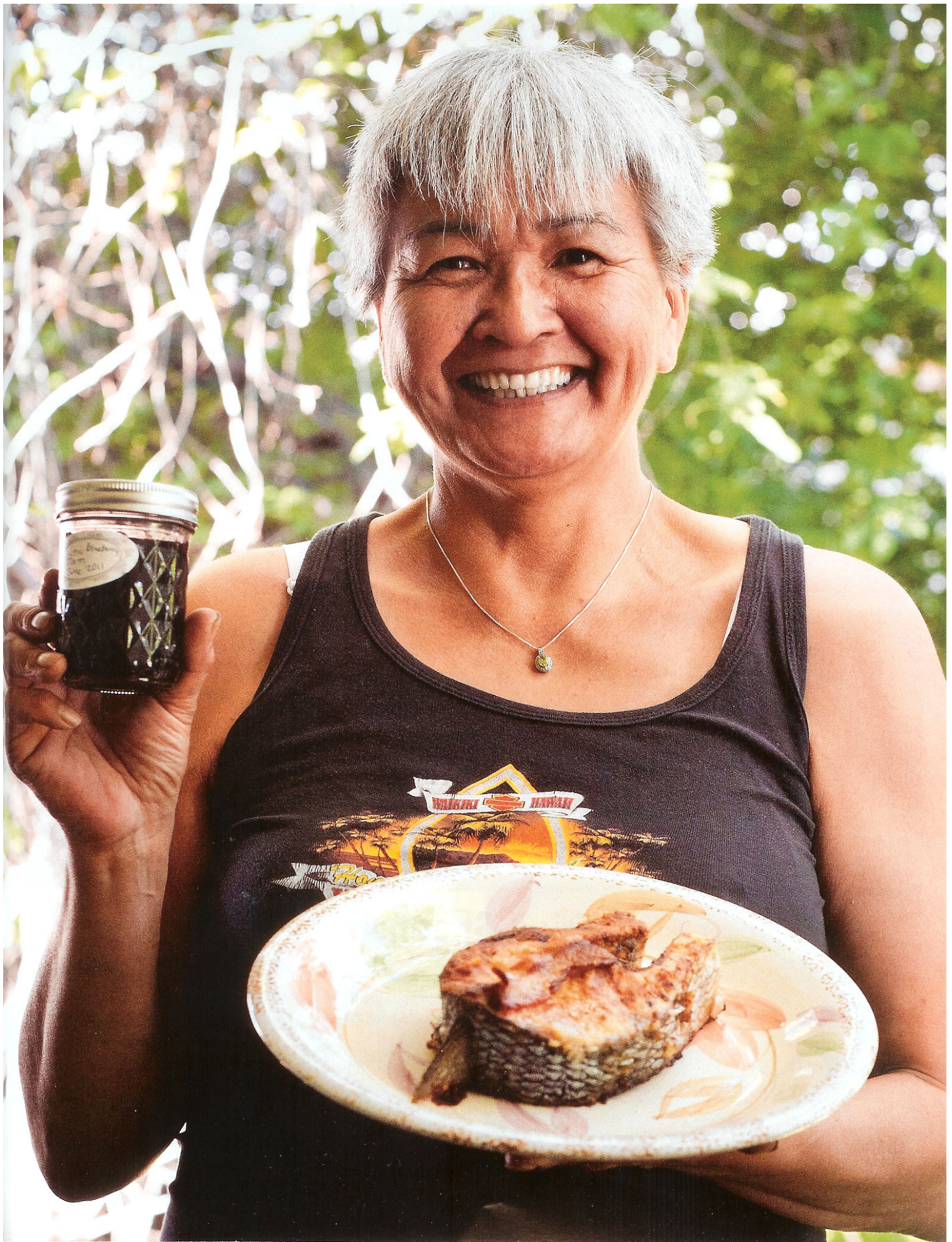
She serves Kyra another steak, garnished with a spoonful of her homemade Arctic blueberry jam. "The berries here in the Anchorage area are not as juicy. They are bland. Up north, they have 24 hours of sunlight, so the berries are real sweet and tart and they make your face pucker."

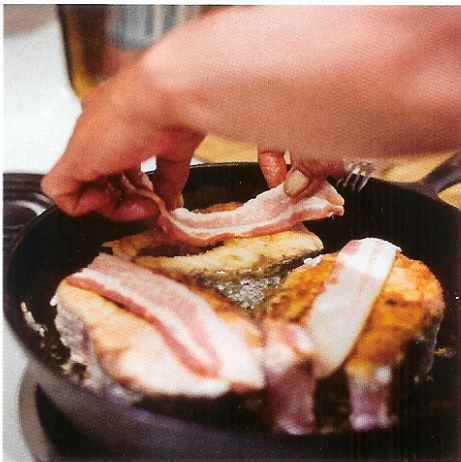
Lawless tells me she could pick five gallons of berries in an hour, make birch baskets at age 10, cook, weave subsistence nets and shoot ducks by age 12, and dog mush by 14. Meanwhile, my daughter consumes four servings of sheefish, the most I've ever seen her eat. I confess that I only knew one way to prepare salmon and that is was the only subsistence food I could harvest.

"Bring her over anytime. I'll feed her," Lawless says. ■

Leslie Hsu Oh (www.lesliehsuoh.com) received a MFA in creative nonfiction. Her essays and stories have appeared in Cirque, KidsTheseDays.org, Rosebud Magazine, and Under the Sun ("Between the Lines" was listed as a Notable Essay in The Best American Essays 2010).

RECIPES ON NEXT PAGE.





Fried Sheefish

- 4 one-inch-thick sheefish steaks (or any fish)
- 2 tsp olive oil
- 1 cup flour
- 1 tsp salt
- Dash of garlic salt
- 1 tsp pepper
- Bacon

1. Wash and clean the sheefish.

2. Snip off the fins.
3. Slice vertically through the body just behind the gill plate to create one-inch-thick steaks.
4. Roll each steak in flour seasoned with salt and pepper.
5. Sear one side of steak in a cast-iron pan with high heat.
6. Sear the other side of steak.
7. Place one strip of bacon on each steak.
8. Bake the whole pan at 375° for 30 minutes or until fish is cooked through.
9. Optional: Return pan to stove and brown steaks some more.
10. Garnish with jam or barbecue sauce or onions and mayonnaise or tartar sauce, or mango salsa.

Arctic Blueberry Jam



- 6 cups of prepared blueberries
- ½ cup water
- 7 cups of sugar
- 1 package of pectin
- Squeeze of lemon
- Jars and lids for storing jam

1. Harvest Arctic blueberries, remove stems and leaves and mushy berries. Rinse thoroughly.
2. Measure 6 cups of prepared blueberries for making jam. Jam won't set if batch is too large. Freeze the unused berries.
3. Wash and sanitize jars and lids. If using dishwasher, wash jars with "sanitize" cycle then leave jars in dishwasher on "heated dry" until ready to fill. Place lids in hot water, not boiling, for 5 minutes.
4. Decide what type of jam you are making and use the following guideline for amount of sugar and pectin.

TYPE OF JAM	TYPE OF PECTIN TO BUY	SWEETENER
regular	no-sugar or regular	7 cups of sugar
low sugar	no-sugar	4.5 cups of sugar
lower sugar	no-sugar	2 cups sugar and 2 cups of Splenda
no sugar	no-sugar	4 cups of Splenda
natural	no-sugar	3 cups fruit juice (grape, peach, apple or mixed)

5. Mix pectin with ¼ cup of sweetener.
6. Boil blueberries in a pot and mix with pectin mixture and lemon juice and water. Keep stirring to prevent burning.
7. Add remaining sweetener and bring back to boil for about a minute.
8. Test jam consistency by letting a half spoon of the jam cool on a frozen spoon or one that has been sitting in ice water. If the jam is not thick enough, add more pectin.
9. Fill the jars and place in boiling water canner.
10. Keep jars covered by at least two inches of water.
11. Boil for 5 minutes. This step is important to prevent spoiling.
12. Cool jars in a draft-free location so they don't get bumped.
13. Make sure all the jars have sealed properly. If the lid pops up and down, the jar is not sealed and you can either discard or place in the refrigerator immediately.
14. Eat within six months for best flavor.

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