



So Fresh the Heart is Still Beating

Eating and hunting with the Kangiqsujaq

story and photos by JUSTIN NOBEL

“Eskimos eat everything raw....so there is no cuisine. To have cuisine you must cook.”

— Paul Bocuse, after a culinary expedition from France to Nunavik, an Inuit territory in Arctic Quebec

TIIVI WORE MUCK BOOTS, grease-stained pants, and a hunting cap. Lashed to his ATV were a rifle for caribou and a shotgun for geese. Qialak and Jimmy trailed us on

a second ATV. Ahead, on a ridge patterned with jackknifed rocks, Tiivi signaled a shiny outcrop where carvers come to harvest soapstone. Cumulus clouds spotted the sky,

and sunbursts lit mats of lichen red and orange. “There might be some gold particles,” said Tiivi, as we crossed a stream. “Our land is full of minerals.”

Tiivi Qumaaluk squeezes the final breaths from a snow goose he shot by crushing its lungs. Geese hunts, which occur in August and May, provide a much-anticipated opportunity for the Inuit of Nunavik to spend time in the wilderness. The birds are roasted but the stomach is eaten raw.

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Peter Qasiq, a resident of the community of Kangiqsujaq, carves a slice of skin and blubber from a 49-ton bowhead whale caught in Hudson Strait, the first bowhead landed in the region in more than a century. The skin, called *maktak*, is a delicacy and will be passed out to communities throughout Nunavik.

I had traveled to the Nunavik community of Kangiqsujaq in August 2008 to report on the region's first bowhead whale hunt in more than a century for a regional newspaper called the *Nunatsiaq News*. An elderly hunter named Naalak Nappaaluk was the only one who remembered tales of the last bowhead hunt. He became a good friend, as did his grandson, Tiivi Qumaaluk. Tiivi took me hunting with his aunt, Qialak, and her husband, Jimmy. I had shared meals of seal, whale, and caribou with the Inuit; this was my first hunting expedition.

Atop a ridge the men scanned

for caribou. Hills marched into the distance and lakes lay scattered like bullet holes. One faraway mountain still held snow. Tiivi gestured across the land, “I got a caribou here one time, two caribou there, another caribou there.”

In the next valley, with mud splattering from the tires, we descended a spongy slope and then looped around a lake where the Inuit had strung nets the week before. Tiivi and Qialak reeled them in — half a dozen flapping Arctic char. “So fresh the heart is still beating,” said Tiivi.

With a curved blade called an *ulu*, Qialak sliced into the bellies of the females and wailed — two had

eggs. I held a plastic sandwich bag open while she scooped in the long slimy packets. The men unsheathed their knives. We sat at the water's edge and slurped the bright orange flesh from flaps of skin. The meat was sticky with blood and chewy, like a fatty piece of steak. The wind lulled and the lake's ripples flattened. “When I was growing up, I never knew there was a lot more people in this world,” said Qialak between bites of fish.

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The Inuit have occupied northern Quebec for about eight centuries, and until the late 1800s, seasonal

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routines changed little. In winter, the Inuit dwelt in igloos along the coast, skewering seals and walrus at breathing holes in the ice with ivory-tipped harpoons. In summer, they tracked caribou into the interior, ambushing them at river crossings or chasing the animals toward hidden archers. Whales were corralled in shallow bays with kayaks made from sealskin stretched over bone. Polar bears were immobilized by dogs, then knifed.

Still, famine was common. Elderly people that slowed the group were left behind to die. Clans settled near Kangiqsujaq fared better than most. The large tides created caverns under the frozen sea that could be reached at low tide by chipping through the ice above. In times of hunger, hunters scavenged these caves for mussels and algae. “There are numerous indications that starvation and famines accompanied by infanticide and even cannibalism were not rare,” writes Bernard Saladin D'Anglure, a 20th-century anthropologist who worked in Kangiqsujaq.

By the late 1800s, the Hudson Bay Company had built several trading posts in Nunavik, and in 1910, Révillon Frères, a French fur company, opened one in Kangiqsujaq. Hunters began trapping fox, which they traded at posts for nets, guns, and metal needles — previously bone needles were used, with thread of beluga sinew or dried seagull esophagus cut into thin strips. Families began to settle near the stores rather than at hunting spots. They developed tastes for foods they had never eaten before: flour, biscuits, molasses, tea, and coffee. And from the trading posts also came disease and dependence. “About 15 families camped in the

settlement,” reads a log from a Hudson Bay store operator in the Central Arctic in 1928, “they have no inclination to hunt or exert themselves but are content to sit around in a state of destitution.”

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We drank tea from a thermos and ate packaged biscuits. Tiivi smoked two cigarettes; then we left. A muddy track led above the lake to the next ridge. Flowers with white shocks of fur bobbed in the breeze. Jimmy spotted snow geese.

“They're going to land because of the wind,” said Tiivi. We abandoned the ATVs and crouched low. Jimmy and I followed Tiivi along a sliver of wet land behind a low rock ridge. We crawled close on our bellies. When the geese took flight, the men bolted upright and fired. Two birds fell.

One goose lay sprawled in the tundra with wings still beating. Its

handsome white coat was ruined by a single red smear. Tiivi pinned the bird's chest with his arms. The long neck slowly lifted, and the head cocked sideways and gasped. “Now it's dying because I'm holding the lungs,” he said.

With a soft thud the head dropped. “Hurray!” Tiivi said and peeled a clementine.

He tossed the squiggled rind aside and gave me half. Qialak looked at me beaming, “You're probably getting the experience of a lifetime.”

At the end of a long lake, Jimmy spotted a person. “It's Alaku,” said Tiivi. “I can tell by his clothes and the way he moves.”

Alaku's ATV was in the lee of a large boulder near the water. A tarp lashed to the vehicle formed a shelter, and beneath it water was heating in a kettle fired by a Coleman stove. Qialak began a brush fire

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This skin was apparently from the same polar bear that wrestled a grandmother to the ground after she shooed it away from a group of boys playing street hockey in Ivujivik, the most northerly community in Nunavik. This man strung it up to sell to tourists who had just arrived for the morning on a cruise ship. His price was \$1,000.



A family in Salluit plays cards while they wait for a leg of caribou to thaw. The meat will be eaten raw, and dipped in seal oil.

behind stones she lined with fillets of char. Tiivi lay a goose with the ground and thrust his hand into its downy belly. “So soft you don't even need a knife,” he said.

He flung aside intestines, pale blue coils, and pulled out the stomach, an oversized walnut delicately ribboned with veins that he saved for his kids. He shook the goose upside down and dark red clots fell to the earth.

Jimmy diced his goose stomach and gave me a slice. “Soft,” he reassured me, “sweet.” It was squishy, like a stress ball, and had the metallic taste of licking an aluminum pie shell.

Qialak laid the charred fish on

a Tupperware top. We thanked God and ate. Had been and lichen from the store. Two had been cooked into the char. The smoky crunch they gave was delicious. The soft meat dissolved in my mouth like ice cream.

“Food has different tastes when we're out here than eating in the house,” said Qialak. “Here it's better.”

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Naalak was born in an igloo. In the past half-century, the Canadian and Quebec governments have moved Inuit families into heated homes, constructed nursing clinics in even the tiniest villages, and established Inuit-run municipal governments. Inuit families travel to Montreal on

trips sponsored by a development organization — funded with money from a 1975 settlement with the Quebec government — and return with dirt bikes, televisions, and Xboxes. Bulkier items such as SUVs and motorized canoes arrive on infrequent cargo ships.

Tiivi got his first job at the age of eight, sorting goods brought by these ships. He killed his first caribou a year later, a buck he spotted while looking for bird eggs with his five-year-old brother. Unable to cut the carcass themselves, the boys rushed back to tell their mother. “She was so excited,” said Tiivi, “she was like shouting of joy.” In his teens, Naalak taught him how to shoot beluga.

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He worked as a garbage man, and at 21, he took a job pulverizing rock at a nickel mine in a barren tract of wilderness called the Ungava Trough.

Tiivi earned \$2,500 a paycheck. On days off, he hawked 375-milliliter flasks of vodka nicknamed Mickies, cases of beer, and pot he smuggled in via mail plane. Miners were his primary clientele. Pot went for \$50 a gram and payday of miners sold for about \$80. On payday, beer returned home flush with cash, and prices inflated. Tiivi once turned \$5,000 in two minutes.

“I was drunk for two weeks,” he told me. “I used to just piss away my money.”

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On a ridge above a river, under a sunset the color of skinned knees, Qialak spotted a large buck. Tiivi slowly extended his arms above his head, bent his elbows out, and pointed his fingers skyward, imitating antlers. The buck stared at us intently, then resumed foraging. A smaller buck beside it followed suit.

We splashed across the river and sped, sheltered by the lee of a ridge, toward the buck. Its impressive rack was just visible above the hill's crest in the grainy light.

“Stay low,” said Tiivi. He crept up the ridge, rested on a rock, and fired several shots. The buck rushed forward frantically, then halted. It seemed to not know where next to step. Tiivi fired again and it wayed. Its massive head lowered to the ground, eyes still open. The body slumped. Labored, spastic breaths rose from the fallen buck. The younger buck remained for a moment, then darted.

Everyone produced knives; Tiivi held one in each hand. The buck lay on its side, its chest heaving. Tiivi approached from behind and the buck kicked the air violently. He jabbed a knife into its neck, then jostled the blade back and forth.

As darkness fell, the three Inuit dismembered the carcass. Everything was taken but the head and intestines. Tiivi tied his hands in a bundle: heart, hindquarters, filet, stomach, ribs. Recrossing the river, we washed our hands and drank cold river water from our palms.

“I'm all clean,” said Tiivi.

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One week later, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra visited Kangiqsujaq, an unprecedented event. Many Inuit would hear Mozart for the first time in their lives, in a new gymnasium funded partially with revenue from the mine. The day of the concert, Qialak invited me to join Jimmy and Naalak for a lunch of Tiivi's caribou.

She had sliced some of the meat and was a day into drying it for jerky. Flattened cardboard boxes covered the kitchen floor to sop dripping blood, and on several wooden racks hung strips of caribou, slightly purplish. In a day, the meat would be

a stiff mat, but now it was still moist and soft like half-cooked cookie dough. In the oven was the buck's lower spine, with strips of bacon atop it — “to keep in the moisture,” Qialak told me.

She placed the spinal hunk on an orange plate and set beside it seal oil for dipping, along with a bowl of powdered mashed potatoes. We sat Indian style on the floor. Qialak used an *ulu*, customary for women, and Naalak, Jimmy, and I used sharp, squat knives. The meat was tender and gamey, delicious. Naalak cut his meat into tiny bits — he has just a few teeth — and gummed each mouthful slowly. He spoke to me in Inuktitut and Qialak translated.

“I have never been to your place,” he said, “but I have been to Paris.” Shafts of sunlight poured through the kitchen windows, and the room heated up.

“Many people were homeless,” said Naalak.

“You could never be homeless here,” added Qialak, “too cold.” Naalak wanted to say one more thing about Paris but couldn't recall. We suckled bits of meat off of bone in silence. Then he remembered.

“The pillows were round in Paris,” he said excitedly. “I'll never forget those round pillows.”

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