PATIENCE, WADERS AND A REALLY FINE HAT. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

[HUMANS]

When the white gold's running

Little fish, little fish, swimming in the water.

"there's no such thing as a whitebaiter who's not full of shit"

IT'S DAWN ON A SMALL STREAM NEAR HAAST. THE STREAM CAN'T BE NAMED, THE RIVER IT LEADS US TO CAN'T BE NAMED. IT'S ALL VERY MYSTERIOUS, FOR REASONS THAT MAY SOON BECOME SLIGHTLY LESS MURKY. A HIGHLIGHTER-YELLOW KAYAK, NOSE JAMMED INTO THE MUDDY SHORE, TAIL BOBBING SOFTLY ON THE STREAM, SITS WAITING.

It's not raining but it's wet, everywhere. Gumboots plunge deep, the bush shakes like a soaking dog at the slightest touch. We unleash our steed and glide, into a silence pierced only by birdsong and the dip of the paddle.

I'm wedged in close enough to smell the trace of cigar smoke from my fisher guide's Swanni. We'll call him Jim, though that's not his real name because, again, this is all very mysterious. Anyway, whitebaiters never tell the truth, so you'd be wise to take all names in this story with a grain of salt. It's only a three-minute ride, then we tie her up and start trudging through the bush, Jim/not Jim blending right in at times. This is a place that makes hiding easy, where it doesn't take long for the bush to swallow you whole. Most 'round here like it that way.

We reach our destination, a tiny lopsided shed on the bank of the river. Jim springs into action with surprising grace and starts to loosen the ropes on a complicated-looking pulley system, lowering what looks like a jetty down over the water. The tide is right and there's not a minute to lose. The nets go down, the screens go in, and we are away. This is Jim's very own whitebait stand, his slice of paradise. Much like a miner's right, he explains. "We have a peg in the ground where we can bait, and nobody else can come within 40 metres each side."

The day-hut is a threadbare, but perfectly stocked, oasis. A winter bush carpentry project, it sports a fireplace, a sagging single bed in the corner and dusty shelves stacked with instant coffee, Bell tea bags, some well-thumbed Barry Crump books and a tower of Ginger Nut packets. Jim grabs a couple of biccies, fills a steaming mug and thumps out across the jetty into the weak October sun. He swats at a sandfly on his neck, turns to face the east and lets out a contented sigh. Behind him, the thundering surf of the West Coast. Ahead in the distance, Aoraki / Mt Cook. I wait for him to praise the serenity.

"Yep, so, this is about it. My happy place." Close enough. He is quietly giddy. This is whitebait season, and Jim is a coaster, for a couple months, anyway. For him, and for anyone with the infamous whitebait fever, this is the best time of year. Between September and November, fisherfolk flock to the rivermouths of the South Island's West Coast with the hope of filling their nets with tiny, translucent juvenile fish. Not many people live here year-round. They come from near and far – Timaru, Christchurch, Nelson. They're doctors, builders or engineers, but here, come spring, they're coasters, immersed in the weird world of whitebait.

Whitebait, for those who may know it only as the anonymous filler of the whitebait pattie, are the young of New Zealand's native fish. After drifting downstream to sea as wee larvae, they make their way back up a year later, 'running' specifically on the incoming tide when they'll meet the least resistance. Whitebait is a broad term for these babies, and nets are filled mostly with īnanga, kōaro, banded kōkopu, giant kōkopu and shortjaw kōkopu.

Whitebait are just tiny things, but they drive people mad. The dogged pursuit of a netful of wriggling silver slithers quickly develops into, as Jim puts it, an obsession, though a healthy one. Once cooked, their delicate white flesh causes a madness of its very own. Down here, it might go for $30 a kg. Get it up to the North Island, and people have been known to pay up to $140 for the same on the side of the road. Come the season (baiting is restricted to three months of the year), it's whitebait patties for breakfast, lunch and dinner 'round these ways.

"Baiting is as much a source of income as it is a sport," Jim tells me, "And when things get heated, the centre of whitebait warfare." On a slow day, one might be counting the bait individually as they wriggle in, lucky to get a pound or a half to take home for patties, after cleaning through the silt. But on a good day, when they're running, you could be in for tons of white gold. The stakes are up, and the gloves are known to come off, at least for those who are in it more for the money than the joy. Tyre slashing and punch ups are not unheard of in river turf wars, but mostly, defence is carried out by coy secrecy. "There's no trusting a whitebaiter," Jim says, "especially on the topic of their last haul. They'll pull in 100 pounds, but all you'll get is a shrug, as they wheel their new Harley into the garage."

There are many ways to catch whitebait. For Māori, who were baiting for generations before European arrival, whitebait was dried out to eat when other fish was scarce. They dug pits into the riverbanks, netted by hand or dragged a net between a waka and a fisherman on the banks. When settlers arrived and, according to early records, encountered waters 'darkened and boiling' with bait, they quickly followed suit.

HAPPY PATTIES. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

"Whitebait are just tiny things, but they drive people mad"

These days, most whitebait are caught with hand-held scoop or drag nets, or varieties of set nets, like Jim's, which face downstream. They have screens bankside of the net to guide the whitebait in and are usually further back from the river mouth so as not to get swept away. This is the decidedly less energetic option, explains the Barry Crump books. Meanwhile, in Southland, they've come up with their own model, the 'Southland Sock', which is (contentiously) the target of potential banning.

Many of the rivers on the coast are democracies unto themselves, with their own sets of well-known rules and regulations. However, there have been concerns about declining catches since the 1890's, and DOC imposes its own restrictions to give some bait a fighting chance. Enforcements include what time you're allowed to bait (daylight hours) and how much of your stand can be screened. There are strict rules against using waggle sticks (waved around to encourage bait into the net), taking up more than a third of the river, and going more than ten metres from one's net.

While the general consensus is that much of the population decline is because of a lack of healthy rivers and streams for the whitebait to mature into adult fish, there have been strong calls for tighter monitoring and restrictions to slow the tons of whitebait being hauled out every year. It's a touchy subject, but suggestions from both baiters and non-baiters include de-commercialisation, shorter seasons and catch limits to try to get adult populations thriving once more.

According to Jim, there are no whitebait wars on this river, mostly just lighthearted banter. Mostly. "We're all friends, but there are enemies," he admits, "Usually being the people below you who cut you off." I quickly come to learn that we don't like Janet*, who stays the entire season and takes all our whitebait. This is especially when we're a bit slow off the mark in the morning. Donna* and Steve* upstream, however, are just lovely. (*Not their real names. Of course.)

Everyone on this side of the river bunkers down for the night along the same long gravel drive, in mostly homemade dwellings which reveal half-hidden limbs, driftwood signs and elaborate sandfly screens, but only if one drives slowly. At this time of year, smoke billows from woodburners and quad bikes wait at the ready. There's no cell phone reception, which suits Jim fine. Self-sufficiency reigns supreme, and for him, that's what it's all about. He's happy with a pound of bait for patties back at the hut, and the peace and quiet to start planning the outdoor bath, new lookout platform or gumboot rack. This life is not for everyone: it's for those who get quiet delight from days on end of solitude.

Tourists pass by on the main road, but they never stay long. The rain makes them crazy,

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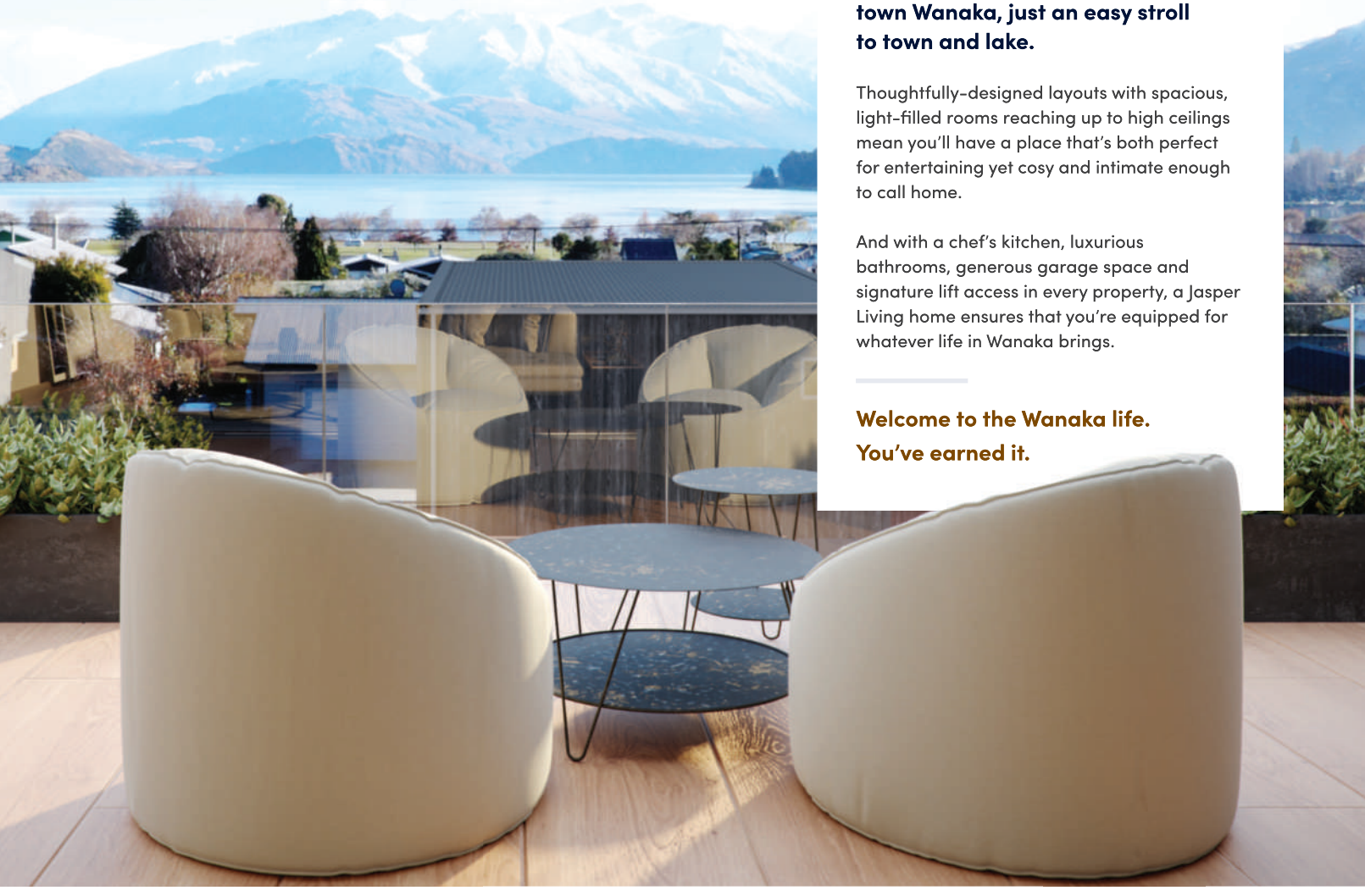

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KEEPING IT ANONYMOUS ON THE RIVER. PHOTO: GEORGIA MERTON

and if that doesn't get them, the sandflies will. Some don't even stop to get an Insta snap by the beach, and they certainly aren't aware of the fever raging deep in the bush.

Meanwhile, 350 kilometres up the coast, a man dressed as a giant whitebait skips joyfully through Westport. A woman drags a huge net through the air. It's the annual Whitebait Festival and the streets are alive. The whitebait carving contest is in full swing (remember, they are 5 centimetres long), and competition is fierce. The street is closed to cars and lined instead with stalls commandeered by grinning, apron-clad women flipping patties, chopping lemons and buttering bread.

Outside one of these stalls, a debate ensues. It's an ancient one, dusted off every year, not truly meant to be settled but simply disputed with joy. It's about the patties. Jim is of the school of thought that the best way to eat whitebait is as is, fried in a bit of butter. They're eaten by the masses in patties, though, and it's almost unanimous that the recipe for these should be nothing more than egg, a little bit of flour and salt, and butter for frying. Patties should be served atop a slice of buttered white bread, then finished off with a squeeze of lemon. This argument, however, is about topping a pattie with mint sauce: a divisive issue. I'm leaning towards the lemon. Such a delicate taste is easily overpowered.

Taking in the wooden whitebait carvings for sale and the woman with the net who dances past again, it becomes obvious that this is about so much more than patties. This wriggling little creature and its annual devoted pilgrimage represent a passionate cuisine, a pastime, a livelihood and a well-grooved way of life.

Twenty-four hours later, further still up the coast in Little Wanganui, the fever rages strong. It's the 65th annual Whitebait Ball. The tiny dairy farming town, set on the Little Wanganui river, is close to where the road ends and the Kahurangi National Park takes over. The whole community is crammed into the town hall, drinks are $5, and everyone is dressed to the nines. It's the night of the season, and legend has it one year the afterball consisted of someone's backyard army tanker being taken for a spin down to the beach for kick-ons.

There's a live band and a long-winded meat pack raffle, but the whitebait pattie competition is what everyone's talking about. Entries are lined up proudly on the trestle tables, where we pile our plates. There are platters stacked with golden patties and wedges of lemon, bait fried simply on its own, and a towering whitebait cake, carved up and served with cream. This is West Coast decadence at its best.

"legend has it one year the afterball consisted of someone's backyard army tanker being taken for a spin down to the beach for kick-ons"

It's at the buffet table that I meet Tom, runner-up in the pattie competition, who gruffly denies his reputation as best whitebaiter on the river. He lets me use his real name, though, and I manage to get a date: 7am the following morning. Come drizzling dawn, Tom's been there a while, set net in and waders on. I sink into a well-placed riverside sofa under a homemade lean-to. His walkie talkie promptly starts growling: fellow baiters across the river. Visibility's shit over there, too.

"I've been 54 years fishing on the Little Wanganui river," says Tom, who lives most of the year in Nelson. "I started when I was nine and pretty much taught myself. No one really wants to teach you how to whitebait." He confirms, once again, that there's no such thing as a whitebaiter who's not full of shit. Tom also seems a good authority on the irresistible lure of baiting. "I'm a hyperactive person, everything I do is at 100 miles an hour. But, I can stand on the river for hours and hours and hours. I just love it. And you don't have to catch whitebait either, you just stand."

Mind you, it doesn't hurt to catch some bait. As he says, it's part of their income. What Tom makes baiting, after he's given it away to the kids and fellow hunters in the backcountry, is enough to pay the rates for their crib on the river, and some years, like the famous 980-pound year, a little cream on top. "But it's about catching them, it's an addiction, just like gambling or alcohol. Honestly, people's personalities completely

FISH BUCKET, WEST COAST STYLES.
PHOTO: SUPPLIED

change. My wife thinks I'm nuts for 10 weeks." And it's not just him; Tom reckons a good 20 or 30 people on this river have whitebait fever.

Of course, it's not just this river. A tattered book in Jim's day hut swims back to mind. *The Whitebaiter*, by Tom Hennessy. It's an ode to the fever.

His eyes are crazed,
His eyebrows raised ,
His clothes are green,
Neoprene.
He doesn't sleep,
Or eat, either.
The man has whitebait fever.

He huddles in his car,
The door ajar,
He can't abide,
To miss the tide.
He's not here for the scenery,
The beauty, the stillness,
This fellow has that whitebait illness.

Tom's getting ready to call it a day. It's been a slow morning. Back down the coast, Jim's just lowered the net. Steam curls from his mug and he sighs a deep sigh. Another day in paradise.

GEORGIA MERTON

Georgia Merton is under the spell of the mountains and calls Wānaka home. Happiest writing about eccentric folk, interesting food and our environment. Currently attempting to master the art of compost.
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THE BEST WHITEBAITER ON THE RIVER? TOM TAKES A BREAK WITH A COUPLE OF MATES. PHOTO: GEORGIA MERTON