

# THE

# CROSSING

Accompanying one fish FROM RIVER TO PLATE, an angler wrestles with life, death, and her duty as part of the food chain.

STORY BY KIM CROSS PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUSTIN WALKER



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HEN I THINK OF MY FATHER, I think of his hands, weathered and already cold from the bait well, shaking me gently awake before dawn. “Time to go fishing,” he’d whisper. His hands always smelled of smoke and the sea.

I was raised on fishing and the fish we caught, together, in the Gulf of Mexico. We would troll for king mackerel, jig for snapper, and chum for mahimahi. In the brackish waters behind our house, we’d net blue crabs in the morning and cast for trout at dusk. Whatever we kept, my mother cooked, usually that night.

My father loved fishing, and I fished for him, for the hours and words that unspooled between the fishing and the catching. We unraveled our problems over tangled lines and reeled in meal after meal. After dinner, we’d scrape our plates off the dock, feeding tomorrow’s catch.

When cancer took my father, the pastor wore a fishing shirt and we gathered on our dock—a simple wake in a no-wake zone. We drove Dad’s Boston Whaler into the Gulf and watched his ashes vanish into the yawning blue. In his will, he left me rods and reels. For a long time, I avoided them. For seven dry years, I could not wet a line.

And then, one day, I was ready.

Almost.

My father had taught me how to catch a fish. My mother had showed me how to cook one. But I had never learned the thing that has to happen in between. Cleaning my catch was the missing link, a huge gap between water and plate. I had never been responsible for this necessary act. I had never felt blood on my hands.

If I wanted to be a true angler, I needed to reckon with death. Could I own my place in the food chain? Would it change how I felt about fishing? Could I take a life and look my dying supper in the eye?

I didn’t know if I could, or what it would mean.

But I knew I had to try.

I FLEW TO COLORADO ALONE, with a 5-weight rod and 10-weight questions. This was a personal milestone, a trip that wasn’t planned for the sake of my father, husband or son. Now, in a river I chose for myself, I would learn to fish for me.

Under the brim of Dad’s fishing hat, I stood in the liquid-gold afternoon light, watching the lonesome waters part and coalesce around me. Wary trout and memories darted in the shadows. I practiced my roll cast, mended my line, and asked myself: *Do I have what it takes to kill something pure and beautiful?*

Until now, this had been a moot question. Most fly-fishers and commercial guides are religiously catch-and-release. But I had found an elegant camp where guests are allowed to sustainably “harvest” a trout and help prepare it for dinner.

The Broadmoor Fishing Camp flanks Tarryall Creek, which originates in one of our country’s last true pristine watersheds, Colorado’s Lost Creek Wilderness. Wild trout thrive in its virgin waters, on a natural diet of bugs. Compared to trout bred and stocked in many rivers, wild trout are said to fight a little harder, taste a little brighter. I wanted to know.

That first day, the Tarryall gave me rainbows, brookies, and a magnificent brown I cradled gently, lowering it into the current, feeling it quicken and slip through my fingers. I love this ephemeral moment of letting go, of touching something beautiful and letting it swim away.

I asked my guide to teach me how to clean a fish and told him why this mattered. Scott Tarrant, an extraordinary angler, understood. He had lost his own father, at the age of 2, to an accident on the Eagle River. Those waters haunted him all his life. As a grown man, he walked that river with a rod and a reel many times before he could use them. One day, he was ready. He pulled out trout after beautiful trout and threw them all back, until he felt the waters had repaid him. He thanked the river, walked away, and never fished it again.

Scott coached me gently through the eddies and shoals, letting me tie my own knots, stepping back into silence when I needed it. In my bag, I carried my father’s fillet knife, its wooden handle bleached by sea and sun, its blade paper-thin from years of whetting on a stone by hand.

I was not ready to use it. That day, I threw everything back.

BY THE END OF MY SECOND day, I was ready to take a fish. But the river was not ready to give me one. As dusk approached, Scott borrowed my rod and landed me a trout in the day’s last light. It wasn’t my fish, but it would teach me.

Scott showed me how to kill it gently, by pressing on the gills. The fish grew still, and I felt a pang in my chest, something hard to define. I had taken many fish before, but always at a distance, hearing the flapping grow still in the fish well. Scott noticed my swell of emotion.

“This fish gave its life for us,” he said. “That’s a pretty amazing thing.”

I found a nice flat river rock and let him talk me through. I positioned Dad’s knife against the white belly, just under the gills, and pushed. It was harder than I thought to break the skin. When I pierced it, a crimson ribbon of blood unfurled over my fingers. I made a clean cut from sternum to tail and peered inside. The pieces fit together so

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The upper stretch of The Broadmoor Fishing Camp’s five miles of private water, which is a quiet length of Tarryall Creek snaking through the Colorado Rockies.

perfectly, the sum and substance of life.

“Insert your finger and pull it all out,” Scott said.

The mystery spilled into my hands. The liver, a polished amethyst. The intestines, a shimmering skein of yarn. The tiny stomach bulging with a kaleidoscope of nymphs. I never knew guts could be gorgeous.

“This is a healthy fish,” he said.

I had been scared by the prospect of what I might feel. Disgust? Regret? Guilt? I had worried that I might gag. Or freeze. Or flinch and cut myself. But it wasn't gross. Or sad. Or really all that strange.

What I felt surprised me. I felt viscerally connected to this fish, this life. I felt things I could never, ever feel about a shrink-wrapped trout fillet. I would eat this fish. Its molecules would become my molecules. Its memory, too, would be a part of me. It occurred to me then that aside from procreation, this is by far the most intimate act two living things can share. An act as old as life itself.

I took the entrails from the stone and placed them in the river. They would feed a bug, which could feed a fish, which might one day feed a man.

**O**N THE THIRD DAY, under a glittering sky, the river yielded itself to me. I chose my own bugs and let 60 feet of line sing through the air, above the sigh of moving water. Scott gave me a lucky caddis, tied from the fur of a dog he had loved. When he needed to step away, I felt confident fishing alone.

That's when it happened, of course.

In a shaded pool above a small cascade, a shadow rose. I set the hook and felt it dive and saw my fly rod genuflect. When a rod bends like that, you know the fish is a keeper—as long as you don't lose it.

We danced together, the fish and me. Rod tip high, tension on the line, I let it run, and brought it back, and let it run

In the eddy,  
I caught  
my own  
reflection,  
startled  
by what I saw.  
Rapture.  
I had never  
felt this raw  
before.

again, just like my father had taught me. When at last I felt the line grow quiet, I reached for the net. I scooped up a rainbow trout—*my* trout—backlit water dripping like diamonds.

It was the prettiest thing I have ever seen—olive flecked with gold and black, the rosy blush of a lateral line, white belly glinting like mica. I knelt upon the rocky shore and bowed over my fish, weeping, in what felt like a benediction.

I pressed the gills tenderly, willing death to hurry. It took longer than I hoped before I felt the muscles go limp in my hands. My father's knife glanced in the sun as I cut. Blood and wonder spilled onto the rocks, and I slowly removed the organs. This stomach was filled not with bugs but with plants.

As I scraped the backbone, I saw the heart. A tiny red bulb—*still beating!* I held it in my palm, reeling with awe, watching it pulse impossibly.

In a blinding flash of memory, I was back at my father's bedside, in the moments when we gathered close to watch his old heart winding down. I remembered hanging on every breath, waiting for the end. It was a gift, the chance to share with him this moment of terrible beauty.

“You were a great dad,” I whispered, then. “I love you. It's OK to go.”

This moment on the river was no less profound. Hot tears slid off my chin. My hands were too bloody to wipe them away. I watched them fall into my trout.

“Thank you, fish,” I said.

Truest prayer I've ever prayed.

**I** WASHED MY HANDS and my fish in the river, mesmerized by its iridescence in the water and the dying light. In the eddy, I caught my own reflection, startled by what I saw. Rapture. I had never felt this raw before. I would never be the same.

We anointed the fish with olive oil, trussed it, stuffed with lemons and thyme, and grilled it on a cherrywood plank. My memory may be seasoned with nostalgia, but I believe my trout did fight stronger, did taste brighter, than any fish I've ever known.

That night, in the glow of the fire pit, Scott handed me a cheap beer and a fine cigar, a Cuban he lit with a blowtorch. I don't smoke, but I relished that cigar.

“You're officially part of the club,” he said.

It was a cold night, and I cupped my fingers in front of my lips to warm them with hot breath. The scent of them left me breathless. For the very first time in my life, my own hands smelled of fish and smoke. *Continued on next page*

**Kim Cross** is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *What Stands in a Storm*. “The King of Tides,” another of her stories about fishing, love, and loss, is featured in *The Best American Sports Writing 2016*. Read more at [kimhcross.com](http://kimhcross.com).



The author, wearing her father's fishing hat, checks her line to see if her fly needs dressing.

I practiced my roll cast, mended my line, and asked myself:



Do I have what it takes to kill something pure and beautiful?



Scott Tarrant, head guide and manager of The Broadmoor Fishing Camp, enjoys helping guests experience the provenance of their food. (opposite page) A rainbow trout, top, and a cut-bow cleaned riverside.



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**THREE DAYS AT THE BROADMOOR FISHING CAMP**

(1) AUTHOR KIM CROSS uses her father's fillet knife. (2) GUIDE SCOTT TARRANT, his dog, Blue, and Cross. (3) "THIS GUY has pronounced spots, a clear lateral line (red stripe), and slightly larger fins," Tarrant says, "all good markers indicating a wild fish." (4) TARRANT coaches Cross on wading and casting. (5) CROSS with the rainbow trout—the first fish she ever caught, cleaned, and cooked.



## STREAM TO TABLE RECIPES

WHILE AT THE BROADMOOR FISHING CAMP, Kim Cross enjoyed simple cooking that celebrated the beauty and delicate flavor of the fish. Here, two easy recipes you can make at home to capture the spirit of the camp. To learn more about The Broadmoor Fishing Camp, visit [broadmoor.com/the-wilderness-experiences/the-fishing-camp/](http://broadmoor.com/the-wilderness-experiences/the-fishing-camp/).

### GRILLED TROUT WITH CHERRY COMPOTE

**Active: 35 min. Total: 35 min.** If you can't find whole trout, use fillets; they'll only need to grill for about 4 minutes. You can also use 20 ounces frozen, thawed cherries; use the liquid (don't drain them); simmer in step 1 until the liquid almost fully evaporates before stirring in the port and honey.

- 3 Tbsp. olive oil, divided
- 2 Tbsp. minced shallots
- 1 Tbsp. minced fresh garlic
- 2½ cups fresh Bing cherries, pitted and halved
- ⅓ cup chopped walnuts, toasted
- 1 tsp. minced fresh sage
- 1 tsp. minced fresh thyme
- ¼ cup port wine
- 1 Tbsp. honey

- 1 tsp. kosher salt, divided
- ¾ tsp. freshly ground black pepper, divided
- 2 (3- to 4-lb.) whole trout (with heads and tails)
- Thyme sprigs
- Cooking spray
- Lemon wedges

1. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a medium saucepan over medium. Add shallots and garlic; cook 3 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in cherries, walnuts, sage, and minced thyme; cook 2 minutes. Add port and honey, scraping pan. Bring to a simmer; cook 3 minutes or until syrupy. Stir in ¼ teaspoon salt and ¼ teaspoon pepper. Cool slightly.
2. Preheat grill to high.

3. Debone trout (optional), removing spine and ribs with a fillet knife; leave head, tail, and skin intact. Brush fish, inside and out, with remaining 2 tablespoons oil; season with remaining ¾ teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon pepper. Stuff cavities with thyme sprigs.
4. Place trout, skin side down, on grill grates coated

with cooking spray. Cover and grill for 6 to 8 minutes or until flesh flakes easily when tested with a fork. Serve with cherry compote and lemon wedges.

**✓ SERVES 4** (serving size: about 4½ oz. fish and ¼ cup compote)  
**CALORIES** 446; **FAT** 24.3g (sat 4.1g, mono 10.7g, poly 8.1g); **PROTEIN** 32g; **CARB** 25g; **FIBER** 3g; **SUGARS** 18g (est. added sugars 5g); **CHOL** 88mg; **IRON** 1mg; **SODIUM** 554mg; **CALC** 146mg



(above, left to right) Grilled Trout with Cherry Compote. Cross practices her casting technique. (left) Cross fishes with her father, April 2006, Clinch River, Tennessee.

FOOD STYLING: ANNA HAMPTON; PROP STYLING: KAITLYN DUROSS WALKER; PHOTOGRAPHY: (BOTTOM) ART MERIPOL

### FISH HOUSE SWEET POTATO HASH

**Active: 20 min. Total: 1 hr. 40 min.**

We absolutely love this simple, comforting hash. It pairs well with almost anything—the trout recipe featured at left, of course, as well as roast chicken, pork chops, steak, and even sunny-side-up eggs. If you would like to get a head start on the recipe, you can bake the sweet potatoes a day or two ahead; then you'll only need about 15 minutes to pull the dish together.

- 2 (8-oz.) sweet potatoes
- 2½ Tbsp. canola oil, divided
- ¾ cup chopped white onion
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tsp. chopped fresh thyme
- 1½ tsp. chopped fresh sage
- 1 tsp. butter, softened
- ½ tsp. kosher salt
- ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

1. Preheat oven to 400°F.
2. Bake potatoes for 1 hour or until tender but still firm. Cool 20 minutes. Remove

peels from potatoes. Cut potatoes in half lengthwise; cut crosswise into ¼-inch-thick slices.

3. Heat a large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add 1 tablespoon oil to pan; swirl to coat. Add onion to pan; cook 4 minutes or until lightly browned, stirring occasionally. Add garlic; cook 2 minutes, stirring frequently. Remove onion mixture from pan. Add remaining 1½ tablespoons

oil to pan. Add sweet potatoes; cook 5 minutes or until potatoes start to caramelize. Gently stir in onion mixture, thyme, sage, and butter. Sprinkle with salt and pepper.

**✓ SERVES 4** (serving size: about ½ cup)  
**CALORIES** 199; **FAT** 9.8g (sat 1.3g, mono 5.8g, poly 2.5g); **PROTEIN** 2g; **CARB** 26g; **FIBER** 4g; **SUGARS** 6g (est. added sugars 0g); **CHOL** 3mg; **IRON** 1mg; **SODIUM** 312mg; **CALC** 48mg

—Recipes printed with permission from The Broadmoor Fishing Camp