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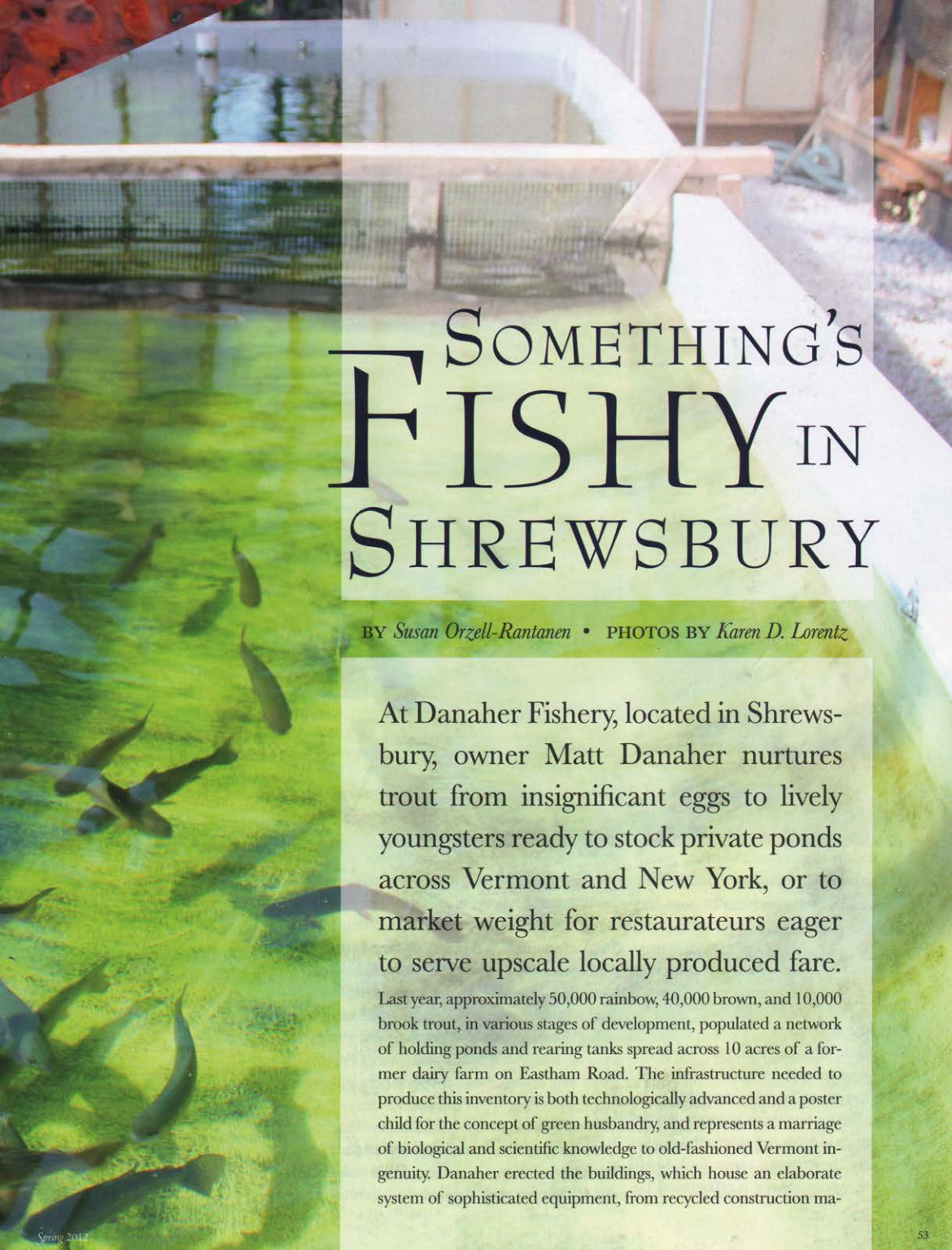
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MIKE AND LORI DANAHER



SOMETHING'S FISHY IN SHREWSBURY

BY *Susan Orzell-Rantanen* • PHOTOS BY *Karen D. Lorentz*

At Danaher Fishery, located in Shrewsbury, owner Matt Danaher nurtures trout from insignificant eggs to lively youngsters ready to stock private ponds across Vermont and New York, or to market weight for restaurateurs eager to serve upscale locally produced fare.

Last year, approximately 50,000 rainbow, 40,000 brown, and 10,000 brook trout, in various stages of development, populated a network of holding ponds and rearing tanks spread across 10 acres of a former dairy farm on Eastham Road. The infrastructure needed to produce this inventory is both technologically advanced and a poster child for the concept of green husbandry, and represents a marriage of biological and scientific knowledge to old-fashioned Vermont ingenuity. Danaher erected the buildings, which house an elaborate system of sophisticated equipment, from recycled construction ma-



materials gathered from such far-flung points in Vermont as Johnson State College and Spaulding High School in Barre. Underlining all of this is the understanding of how the pieces of an ecosystem fit, which Danaher shares by providing pond management consultation.

A decade ago, the State of Vermont touted aquaculture as a viable method of diversification as farmers struggled with the ever-fluctuating dairy industry. A tour of Danaher Fishery enlightens the visitor as to why the concept never took hold. Danaher, whose fishery is recognized by

the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department as its largest State-certified, State-regulated private fishery, lists a number of limiting factors for fish farming. A seemingly endless supply of water, which on his operation is provided by a system of wells and natural springs, is first. Space is another. Electricity is needed to power the crucial integrated valve and pump systems regulating industry-specific equipment including water recyclers, aerators and oxygen purification machinery. That leads to another necessity: redundant back-up systems, including generators. All of this represents capital, and another

such outlay is needed to transport the fish, alive and happy, to the ponds of customers. Danaher accomplishes this with two trucks and a hauling trailer set up with oxygen tanks. This peripheral equipment allows him to ship up to 1,200 trout at a time. Even if all goes well with labor, management and monetary resources, the return on investment is estimated at six to ten years.

The learning curve for such an endeavor is steep, Danaher readily admits. This is one of the reasons why evaluating ponds and providing consultation to residential pond owners on balancing the ecosystems with everything from bacteria to plants to crayfish to fodder fish to mechanical intervention is one of the more satisfying aspects of his business.

While operating and maintaining the infrastructure is an encompassing job, it is, of course, all about the fish. At Danaher Fishery, a small hatchery building holds 12 incubator trays with biological filters that mimic the environment of a streambed. It is here that up to 100,000 trout eggs begin their journey through the



water that is pumped back to the rest of the tanks. Baffles, filters and vegetation recreate the natural cleansing of the water.” The abbreviated “stream,” which consists of a long narrow vat doubling back on itself, holds an intensely concentrated ecosystem. Insurgent vegetation, which turns out to be watercress that Danaher sells to restaurateurs, provides a thicket of roots as part of the process which helps return the water to a usable state. Pads resembling dish-scrubbers catch micro-organisms from the used water as it is pumped in. Clouds of insects hover

system. Next to the hatchery are several brooder ponds holding fish from which Danaher harvests a certain amount of eggs. Most of the eggs, however, are purchased from the fisheries run by the State of Vermont.

Freshly hatched babies are called “sac fry”; they live off a sac attached to their bodies for about a month. The growing fry are then transferred to holding tanks and ponds where, fed a mash of regulated percentages of fat and protein, they grow in controlled atmospheres. As the young trout put on weight and inches, they are regularly graded by size in preparation for harvest for various markets.

A number of buildings shelter holding tanks where fish of escalating sizes thrive in the aerated water that is constantly recycled through the set up. One pivotal tent, however, holds no fish, and an unprepared visitor entering through the door may well compare the ecosystem therein to the Garden of Eden run amok. “This is devoted just to the recycling of water,” explains Danaher. “It mimics a natural streambed. It does what the wild would do to purify the

over the water. It is an integral and fascinating part of the fish farm, but not one that the average customer can imagine, regardless how much natural methods of aquaculture are appreciated.

“My customer base is mostly the pond hobbyist,” Danaher states, noting that he also sells pond supplies such as bacteria and aerators. While many people investigating hobby ponds think that food and game fish are available from the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department, the agency does not sell to private pond owners. (On the other hand, Danaher Fishery is licensed to stock wild waterways.) Three-inch fish are the minimum size sold to stock private ponds. The most commonly requested size for pond stock is from six to eight inches. The larger the fish, the more expensive they are per unit.

The largest trout, purchased at from 12” to 14” in length, take up to two years to raise. They supply the smaller, but expanding, market of upscale restaurants. Chefs demand an unwavering product: three-quarter to one-pound fish for consistent presentation. Along with their



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reputation as a delicacy, the trout fit nicely not only into the localvore movement prevalent at food co-ops and even some customer-sensitive area supermarkets, but trickle down to the fine-dining experience as well. Danaher relates that although this market has “come into its own during the past five years, it has been in development for the last twenty.” Eating locally-raised fish provides not only the epitome of freshness and supports the state’s economy but guarantees that the conscientious customer knows what she or he is getting. A “Health & Science” factoid in the September 5, 2011 issue of *Time* magazine snagged readers with this lead-in sentence: “Not all Chilean sea bass labeled as originating from eco-friendly fisheries are what they claimed to be” and went on with a short but unsettling exposé of the sourcing of certain food species.

Danaher’s wife Lori Danaher operates Danaher Floor Restoration, Inc. from the same address. She is also co-owner and bookkeeper for Danaher Fishery and is, according to him, an expert fish grader.

Maintaining trout in one’s private pond provides natural control of leeches and insects, and, if the hobbyist is so inclined, the opportunity for sport and a source of fresh fish on the table. However, 20 years of experience in, and exposure to, the hatchery business has convinced Matt and Lori Danaher that most people who buy trout to stock small ponds use the watery ecosystems as a route to relaxation. This is similar to the way in which some physicians keep thriving aquariums in their offices to ease the nervousness of waiting patients. The Danahers sum up this enigmatic phenomenon in two words as they say, in unison, “pond therapy!”

Susan Orzell-Rantanen has worked as an editor and freelance writer in the Rutland area for the past 23 years. A seventh generation Vermonter, she holds degrees in animal husbandry and journalism. She lives in Rutland with her husband, one badly spoiled dog and an opinionated cat.

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