



# OLD WAYS

THIS ANCIENT FORM OF BEACH-SEINING STILL PRACTICED IN PARTS OF PORTUGAL HAS CHANGED LITTLE IN 500 YEARS

# A

*Arte Xávega* is a very old fishery, a precisely orchestrated harvest, a merging of time, tide, place, the sun's angle and the rest of Mother Nature's inscrutable clockwork.

For more than two weeks I studied these gallery-quality photos of beach-seining before writing a word. It was like gazing into a celluloid looking glass.

The fish, the beach launchings, the large crews and camaraderie are tied to something older and more durable than bottom-line economics. Perhaps this can only be found today in coastal towns such as Costa Caparica in Portugal — a nation and a people with salt water pulsing through their veins.

Here in our Land of Boneless Chicken, this 500-year-old fishery might well be relegated to a tidy column under the heading "quaint," along with other food production that exists on a scale that has never warranted conveyor belts or lobbyists. But these men and women are not props arranged on the long slope of beach among net, tractors and work skiffs, and their fishing art, *Xávega*, is not a carnival attraction to sell the authenticity of their seaside town.

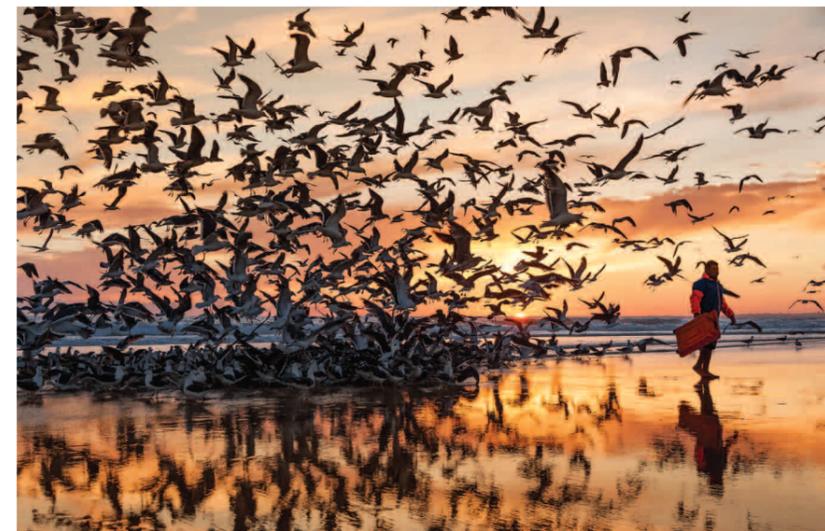
They are drawn to the sea for the reasons all of us are; it's our shared humanity. And it's what one does when there are dollars to be made and protein to be harvested in the form of sardines and mackerel, put up for leaner times ahead.

*Launching small boats into heavy shore break takes experience, timing and nerve.*





*Teamwork is essential in this old fishery that still relies so heavily on handwork. Once you're past a certain age, you pick your battles, timing your toil to take advantage of the roll of the boat, the force of the wind. You work smart.*



X

*Xávega* is foreign, a novelty for those of us accustomed to the electronic bells and whistles of the 21st century wheelhouse — plotters, seafloor mapping chips, high-definition fishfinders, side- and forward-scanning sonar, cellphones, VHF scramblers.

It took time to see through the background of these powerful images and to zero in on the human detail. Suddenly I recognized them — their expressions, gestures, body language. These are watermen, people I've known for years engaged in serious and often dangerous work and doing everything in their collective power to make the work bearable — even meaningful, perhaps?

Like most fishing that unfolds between mean high water and the drop-off beyond the outermost bar, *Arte Xávega* is “run” fishing. Its success is dependent on large concentrations of life in a very specific ecosystem, in this case open beach, along a shelf of high, even ground with small cuts, sloughs and deep pockets. Just as

surf fishermen in my home waters plug into networks of people to track developments, I imagine all hands in perpetual recon mode, eyeing the known migratory highways for cues that their plot of sand is about to come alive.

Weeks out, the endless strings of gear are hauled, hand over hand, from tarped hillocks of mesh in barns, the younger guys flaking out any desiccated remnants of last season's sets — juvenile sardines like jerky, bits of weed rotted into the fine twine. After their once-over, they hang the nets to open the meshes from top float line to bottom lead line.

In a town with fishing roots anchored in the Roman Empire, I'd wager it's the oldest, most seasoned hands who go through the gear. Eyes sharpened by 40-plus years of twinecraft, they pick out the smallest holes or patches of dry rot, cut back the tears or runs or suspect bits with stone-sharpened twine knives. Then they mend them good as new, restoring the seamless web of

sheet bends, clove hitches and seizings, gauging mesh size against finger lengths, free-handing with inconceivable speed and precision. And bitching all the while about how these kids can't do anything right.

You don't set and haul gear past age 60 without learning to pick your battles. Watching a veteran crew is a chance to learn the finer points of working smart — aiming force carefully, knowing when “snap” velocity beats marathon pulling, timing toil to make use of any force generated by wind, boat, sea or momentum (anything other than the lower back) to compound one's flagging dead-lift power.

And launching heavy craft into the shore break when it's barreling in at one and a half times head height, and blasting far enough up the beach to stall out your assist tractor, is done only when there's a full-blown charge of fish riding the long-shore current on a moon tide. It's not a maneuver to attempt over some little squirt of fish.



*A little whimsy  
after a long day of  
fishing makes hard  
work a bit lighter.*



Portuguese photographer António Leão de Sousa strives to capture moments that are unrepeatable, to create something with his images that is lasting and has the power to change the way we feel.

It remains almost inconceivable in 2016 that these men and women are fishing with a method that has marched through the better part of six centuries on the backs of two or three technological breakthroughs: the ox, the tractor, the outboard. The longer I gawk at these characters — oiler-clad and barefoot, laying back on nets under obvious strain, leaning into a skiff's transom with every ounce of force they can muster — the more it all comes into focus.

The popular understanding of a fishing life is that it's backbreaking and dangerous — the hardest kind of living. On one level, the beach in these photos is a planet where an H.R. department is part of some farcical alternate reality. This beach is where special feelings go to die violently as fishermen pull beyond the point where the powers of the tractor can

help. The drag of sodden twine alone is horrific, especially when combined with the weight of undertow and current. Add to that a jittery, struggling silver mass, and the work of fishing truly is backbreaking.

Then there's the uncertainty of eking out a viable living along the gently sloping beach. Part of me struggles to see anything but futility in that direction. On the other hand, in an increasingly virtual world — where bad news flows relentlessly, where mergers wipe out entire divisions of corporations producing a theoretical commodity — there's much to be said for the gratification in a day's toil with a yield you can tote, weigh and send to auction, or use to feed the better part of your hometown.

There's a case to be made that hauling a load of fins and scales ashore might well be the less burdensome undertaking. 🐟

