

## Mary Lu on hunt for prime catch; albacore

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One of the last remaining commercial fishing boats in Crescent City recently left the harbor, heading for warmer waters in search of albacore tuna.

Built in 1968, the fishing vessel Mary Lu was purchased in 1983 by Crescent City resident John Brunsing.

For the past 21 years, the boat has called Crescent City home.

Captain Brett Fahning, 31, said that he and his crew were eager to get out and find the fish.

"Last year, we went as far south as Santa Cruz and as far north as the Canadian border," Fahning said. "We spend most of our time off the coasts of Oregon and Washington mainly because the weather is better up there during the summer months."

In addition to Fahning, the Mary Lu's crew is comprised of Ross Turlington, 30, of New Orleans and Danny Gardner, 24, of Brookings. During the beginning of the season, Fahning said the boat uses a trolling method, which means Fahning controls the boat while Turlington and Gardner pull fish off the troll gear and put them into the hold.

Later in the season, the crew will make the transition to catching the fish with poles.

"We just wait until the fish show up, or, actually until the warm water shows up about 50-200 miles offshore, which the albacore travel in," he said. "They migrate to our coast to feed on the productive, upwelled water."

Fahning said that the most common question he is often asked is how long the boat will stay out fishing.

"There's lots of variables, but generally until the boat is full or the weather gets too bad," he said. "Usually our trips average about 10 to 14 days each."

Last year, Fahning said that the crew's longest stint lasted 22 consecutive days offshore.



**The Mary Lu, one of the last commercial boats operating out of Crescent City, heads out to sea in search of tuna.**

Photo courtesy of Andre Carpenter

"That means slow fishing and good weather," he said.

Due to the migratory nature of albacore, there are usually no predictions on whether a specific year is expected to be good or bad.

"So many factors are involved, like weather and ocean currents," Fahning said. "These fish travel all over the Pacific Ocean, from the coast of Japan to the United States. We are only just beginning to figure out their life cycles and migratory patterns."

Capable of holding between 25 to 26 tons of albacore, the Mary Lu underwent some fairly involved work during the off-season.

"We rebuilt engines and installed a new refrigeration system," said the captain, a Wisconsin native. "Usually it's just basic maintenance like rigging the lines, putting the bait tank on, painting and changing the oil."

This year, the Mary Lu's freezer was switched from a blast to a brine system.

"Our new brine system freezes the fish with very cold (about five degrees fahrenheit) water," Fahning said. "It's more efficient and allows us to freeze more fish quicker."

Despite concerns from some groups that albacore contains dangerous amounts of mercury, Fahning said he thinks albacore consumption is actually up due to its high levels of Omega 3 acids, protein and affordability.

"What most people don't realize is that our fish are generally much smaller — between 12 and 25 pounds — than the long-line caught albacore, which are 50 to 60 pounds," Fahning said. "The larger and older a fish is, the more mercury they accumulate in their bodies. Therefore, the West Coast troll caught fish contain much less mercury."

The troll/pole methods used by the Mary Lu and most other West Coast tuna fishing vessels have been endorsed by the Monterey Bay Aquarium and the Audubon Society as a "best choice" fishery.

"The troll/poll method results in a very focused fishery, meaning we have essentially no bycatch," Fahning said.

In the effort to avoid disappointment, Fahning said he refrains from making predictions on this year's potential yield.

However, he keeps in mind something that Brunsing once told him:

"If you don't go, you don't get."

"We just try to live by that and do the best we can," Fahning said.