



PUT IT IN THE BOX: Cod make great table fare, one reason they're such popular quarry.

BANK ON IT!

Bay State bottom bouncers head to Stellwagen for the season opener on cod.

— TEXT AND PHOTOS BY BARRY GIBSON —

“Ooh — there he is! He banged it. C'mon, take it — ah, got 'im!”

Stu Bristol cranks down hard and leans into his first fish of this bluebird April morning. He knows the drill and reels steadily, without any unnecessary pumping or TV fishing-show drama. Several minutes later a greenish glow appears a dozen feet below the boat, and Pete Santini pokes his head over the side for a look. “It’s a good one!” he announces before reaching for the gaff. He neatly sets the hook in the fish’s shoulder and swings it aboard. “About 10 pounds,” Santini estimates as he twists the jig free and deposits the plump white-bellied cod into a giant cooler. Bristol grins.



GROUNDFISH CENTRAL: Fishermen from Massachusetts and surrounding states benefit from vast bottom structure offshore, rich breeding ground for species including cod and haddock. Numerous banks and ledges hold these prized bottom dwellers, with Stellwagen Bank being one of the best-known spots.

CLOSE TO HOME: The action at Stellwagen begins as close as 20 miles from Boston.



And it's just the beginning. Next, Dick Pinney's rod arcs over, and the rod tip bounces as he winches the fish to the surface, a sign of a haddock. Santini swings a doubleheader — a glistening 6-pound haddock on the bottom hook and a short cod on the upper — into the cockpit. "Fresh haddock tonight!" says Pinney happily. Bristol's now hooked up again, as is Capt. Chuck DiStefano, and seconds later I lock into a doubleheader of keeper cod.

Bristol and Pinney, fishing guides and outdoors writers from Maine and New Hampshire, respectively, and I have joined Pete Santini, owner of Fishing Finatics, a popular tackle shop in Everett, Massachusetts, aboard DiStefano's 35-foot charter boat, *Skip-A-Dory*, for a day of bottom bouncing. Rounding out the crew are brothers Rob and Steve Antaya from Connecticut and Chuck's friend Mark Blowers of Quincy, Massachusetts, who was riding along as our unofficial deckhand. We had departed the dock in South Boston, Massachusetts, at 6 a.m. and had lines in the water by 7:30, with Bristol's cod coming at 7:35. No question it was going to be another day in paradise out on Stellwagen Bank.

TIP: Chum with pieces of clam and shell lowered to the bottom in a container to get the haddock fired up.

Take It to the Bank

SPRINGTIME OFF THE MASSACHUSETTS COAST is the holy grail for those who love to catch — and eat — cod and haddock. The fishing here for these popular deepwater bottom dwellers is arguably the best in North America, and most of the action takes place on Stellwagen Bank, an undersea plateau 25 miles east of Boston. Shaped like an elongated lamb chop, Stellwagen has depths that

range from 65 to over 300 feet and feature a host of different bottom types. These, combined with New England's strong tidal currents, provide ideal conditions for attracting and holding massive quantities of sand eels and herring, as well as whiting, mackerel, squid and shrimp at various times of the year. All this forage, along with extensive beds of scallops, mussels and clams on the seafloor, attracts predators ranging from striped bass to bottomfish to sharks

to giant bluefin tuna, plus whales and a wide variety of seabirds. Stellwagen Bank serves up the ultimate deep-sea smorgasbord, and there's no shortage of finned and feathered diners ready to dig in.

Trust in Cod

"IN APRIL, WHEN THE WATER'S STILL

COLD, I like to start out each trip by working the top of the bank in 90 to 120 feet of water," explains DiStefano, who has over 30 years of groundfishing under his belt.

"Most of the fish we take in this relatively shallow water are market-size cod running from 5 or 6 to 20 pounds, although you sometimes have to fish through a lot of shorts to come up with a limit of keepers," he continues. "The minimum size for cod is 24 inches, 10 fish per person, per day, so it's not hard to limit out."

Although the smaller cod are plentiful, especially when shoals of sand eels hold them on top of the bank, DiStefano specializes in "steakers" that can top 50 pounds. "On a lot of trips we'll catch a bunch of 'markets' on top and then work our way out to the eastern side of the bank and try depths of 150 to 200 feet," he says. "That's where we normally find the bigger ones this time of year."

Our crew aboard the *Skip-A-Dory* did just fine with market

cod on top of the bank, decking nearly 50 keepers by 11 a.m. Then DiStefano called for lines in, hit the starter button and swung the boat's bow to the east. "Let's see if we can find some more haddock out in the deeper water," he announced as he eyed the big Simrad LCD recorder overhead. Off we went.

Haddock Heaven

HADDOCK IN NEW ENGLAND waters have finally rebounded after decades of commercial overfishing. The Gulf of Maine stock is in pretty decent shape due to stringent conservation measures,

along with a couple of good year classes, and where haddock were a rarity for anglers 15 years ago, they now make up the bulk of the catch on many trips. Bag limits have been eliminated, and the minimum size has dropped to 18 inches, affording plenty of fillets to take home. And in my opinion, there's no finer fish on a dinner plate.

"Haddock action can be outstanding in April," says DiStefano, "especially on the northwest corner of Stellwagen in 180 to 200 feet. The fish move in from deeper water to spawn and mix in with the cod. Often, though, we'll come up on bottom that just holds haddock, and we've caught as many as 150 in a single spot. They

SWS TACKLE BOX

Stellwagen Bank

Cod tackle: A 6- to 7-foot jigging rod that handles up to 16 ounces, a 3/0 revolving-spool reel with 36- to 50-pound Dacron or 50- to 80-pound superbraid and a 10-foot shot of 50-pound mono.

Santini ties 4-foot leaders of 80-pound fluorocarbon. One end goes directly to a 12- to 16-ounce stainless jig, and a 7/0 Mustad O'Shaughnessy 3407SSD on a dropper loop 18 inches above the jig. A perfection loop at the other end snaps to the top shot.

Santini swears by a soft-plastic teaser, a 4-inch paddle-tail hooked so the point protrudes from the center of the belly. Use glitter chartreuse with black bars. "It looks like a tiny mackerel," he says.

When the cod are feeding on sand eels, a Norwegian-style or diamond jig worked vertically just off the bottom is the ticket. Other times, strips of fresh sea clam on a **high-low rig** with an 8- to 16-ounce bank sinker are more effective. Haddock, which run 3 to 10 pounds, call for a lighter rod with a sensitive tip, 50-pound superbraid,



high-low terminal rigs tied with 50- or 60-pound mono or fluoro, and 6/0 hooks. Circle hooks (such as an 8/0 Mustad Demon Circle) are often substituted for J hooks. **Strips or chunks of fresh clam** produce, but both DiStefano and Santini believe in the "seafood combo platter": whole shrimp, mackerel chunks and some Berkley Gulp! In addition, Santini is a proponent of BioEdge attractor scents (bioedgefishing.com). "Don't be afraid to squirt on a good dose of clam, herring, shrimp or squid juice," he advises. "And if you don't get a bite in 10 minutes or so, reel up and put on fresh bait."

Rods: 6- to 7-foot jigging sticks beefy enough to handle 16 ounces of weight.

Reels: Revolving spool matched to rods, size 3/0 or equivalent.

Lines: 36- to 50-pound Dacron or 50- to 80-pound superbraid with 10 feet of 50-pound mono top shot.

Lures: Variety of soft-plastic teasers on the dropper loop above a 12- to 16-ounce jig. Diamond jigs when sand eels are predominant.

Other: Fresh clams on a high-low rig are the choice in natural baits.

seem to like smooth clay, gravel or sand. We don't find as many over mud or where it's real rocky."

After a 20-minute run and a bit of searching, DiStefano stopped on what appeared to be a rather unremarkable tract of flat bottom in 185 feet of water on the eastern side of the bank and set the anchor. He then lowered a weighted, plastic gallon-size container filled with pieces of clam and shells to the bottom. One-inch holes allowed the scent and bits of clam to drift down-current, and it wasn't long before Blowers swung the first haddock over the rail. Then came another, and another, then a doubleheader for Rob. "Haddock really respond to chumming," explained DiStefano. "They can sometimes be spread out over quite a distance, but chumming draws them in and gets them interested in feeding."

By 2 p.m., the bite had slowed and it was time to rack the rods and head in, as we had several hundred pounds of cod and haddock, plus a handful of cusk and wolffish, in the coolers. Blowers went to work converting our catch into fillets as we cruised westward toward the Boston skyline.

"Fishing on Stellwagen just seems to get better every year," remarked Santini, who makes several dozen trips annually on the *Skip-A-Dory*. "You can catch some type of fish 12 months a year, but you can't beat springtime for groundfish. It's as close to a sure bet as you'll find off the New England coast."

None of us on the *Skip-A-Dory* could disagree with that! ~



HADDOCK TOO: Tasty haddock, a bonus for cod anglers, also populate Stellwagen.

■ SWS PLANNER

Stellwagen Bank

COD AND HADDOCK ACTION can be outstanding in April and May.

- Start out each cod trip by working the top of the bank in 90 to 120 feet of water; in this relatively shallow water are market-size cod running from 5 to 20 pounds.
- Catch a bunch of markets on top, and then work out to the eastern side of the bank and try depths of 150 to 200 feet to find the bigger ones up to 50 pounds.
- Look for haddock in 180-200 feet of water on the northwest corner of the bank.

Stellwagen Bank, 20 to 25 miles east of Boston, is accessible to anglers in seaworthy center consoles during periods of good weather (for launch facilities, visit mass.gov/dfwele/pab/pab_fa

[cilities.htm](#)). Some 19 miles long, the bank runs from seven miles southeast of Gloucester at the northern end (2½ miles wide) to just above Provincetown on the tip of Cape Cod at the southern end (some 6 miles wide). Seasonally, the bank holds cod, pollock, haddock, flounder, sand eels, mackerel, striped bass, bluefish, bluefin tuna and sharks. The bank itself is located within the 842-square-mile Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary. For more information, visit stellwagen.noaa.gov.

Be advised of the prohibition on the retention of recreationally caught cod in federal waters (beyond the state three-mile limit) from Nov. 1 through April 15, expected to extend into 2011. There is no closed season for haddock, pollock or cusk.

What: Cod and haddock.

When: Cod opens April 15.

Where: Stellwagen Bank, 25 miles east of Boston.

Who: CHARTER FISHING

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CONDITIONS AND TACKLE:

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