

OUTDOORS

A WEEKLY SPECIAL REPORT

Gyotaku

The ancient Japanese art of "fish rubbing" comes back to colorful life in Tampa Bay.



GYOTAKU (ghio ta koo): *Gyo* means fish, *taku* means rubbing. Fish printing originated in Japan in the early 1800s. *Gyotaku* is used by Japanese anglers to make a record of their catch.

Greg Aragon was rummaging through an art store in the Florida Keys several years ago when he came across an unusual piece of work. "It was a fish print," recalled Aragon, an avid angler. "I was amazed at the detail. I thought to myself, 'How did they get those scales so perfect?'" Aragon went home and did a little research. The art piece was Japanese in origin. "It was called *Gyotaku*, which literally means *fish rubbing*," he said. "Apparently, the practice began with fishermen who wanted to keep a record of their catch."



TERRY TOMALIN
OUTDOORS EDITOR

Long before there were cameras, Japanese sport fishermen discovered an ingenious way to record fish that had been caught and released. "They would take some ink and rice paper out on the boat," Aragon said. "When they caught a fish that was noteworthy, they would rub it with ink, then cover it with paper which would leave an image." "Then when they would return to the dock, they would hold up the print and say it was this big." So Aragon, a house painter by trade, began experimenting with his own catches. "I would bring a fish home, and before I filleted it, I would do a rubbing," he said. "Before I knew it, all my friends wanted pieces for their houses

and offices." Word travelled quickly through the tight-knit fishing community. Soon, other anglers were calling Aragon to capture their catch on paper. "People were tired of the same old skin or fiberglass mounts," Aragon said. "They wanted to capture the spirit of the fish, but they also wanted something different." No fish was too big or too small for Aragon's ink and rice paper. "I did tarpon, grouper, snook, you name it," he said. "Guys started coming to me with fish of every size." The *Gyotaku* art soon became popular with tournament fishermen who wanted to preserve a memory of their winning catch. "I have done the winners from kingfish tournaments and the St. Pete Open Spearfishing Tournament," he said. "I just need to get the fish while it is still fresh." "It has to be packed on ice to preserve it. I don't like to work with a fish if it has been out of the water for more than 24 hours." Most of Aragon's pieces are done with natural colors. "Occasionally, I'll get a woman who wants a purple snook to match the bathroom," he said. Aragon said many of his customers are women whose husbands have brought home one too many stuffed fish to hang on the living room wall.



Special to the Times

Fish etching is Greg Aragon's passion. He often catches his own fish, then uses inks to transfer the image to paper, ending up with a finished product such as the queen triggerfish, shown above.

"Gyotaku satisfies both people," he said. "You have a record of the catch and a piece of art." Business has been booming for Aragon in recent years. His work is on display at Salt Rock Grill in Indian Shores. Aragon's etchings appear inlaid on many tabletops, and there are framed prints on the walls. Just last week, the Largo artist learned that some of his work will soon appear on serving platters that will be available on television and through a cooking catalog. "Things are happening so fast," Aragon said. "The hardest part is trying to get a handle on the business end of things." Success, however, has a down side. Aragon, who learned to fish on the old Indian Rocks Pier with his father "Captain Jack," a former catcher with the New York Giants baseball team, said he doesn't get to hit that water as often as he would like to. "It seems like I never get a chance to fish anymore," he said. "Everybody is coming to me with fish. . . it is getting hard to keep up. I would like things to slow down so I can go out and catch a few fish of my own for a change."

— For more information on Gyotaku art by Greg Aragon, call (727) 595-6314, or visit the Salt Rock Grill on Gulf Boulevard in Indian Shores.