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EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

Following His Father Into the World of Fish

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

Leslie Barnes was not born in the Fulton Fish Market, but almost. As a sprat of 5, he accompanied his father on predawn forays to buy seafood for their restaurant, London Lennie's on Woodhaven Boulevard in Rego Park, Queens, founded in 1959. Leonard, the father, a cockney sailor who parlayed four fish and chips stands in London into his stake in the colonies, is gone, so Leslie Barnes, 54, the father of four daughters, is the big fish now.

Origins: My father had run away to sea. When he came to New York in '58, a cab driver told him about the new Rego Park apartments. We settled there. There was a fish store five blocks away. He could control his destiny.

Earliest memory: I'm 5 or 6 or 7. My father would get me up at 3. We'd have a cup of tea, and off to the market. My father would buy four tins of filet, 100 pounds of filet. He'd sit me on top and say, "Don't move." He was afraid they'd switch the tins with lesser quality.

Why Seaview Filet was his favorite pur-

veyor: They had Playboy posters on the wall, all the centerfolds.

Most unforgettable character: Artie Behrens only sold markers; you never saw the rats. [Translation from fish-market speak: He sold only the biggest and best fish, never throwaways.] Artie Behrens had knives this long, to cut through a swordfish. I wouldn't walk behind Artie Behrens. In the old days they used to harpoon the swordfish. Artie Behrens could rip a harpoon right out of the swordfish. One time he gave me the harpoon.

Worst moment: In 1967 there was a big fire on the block. The dry cleaner blew up. We were totaled. We leased a restaurant in Wildwood, N.J., for the summer, Ebb Tide. It was a wild town. My sister and me ran the coffee shop at night making hoagies. The go-go dancers in white boots and fishnet stockings would all come in. While we were away, they were rebuilding the restaurant. The kosher butcher didn't reopen. We took over that and expanded.

Father knew best: My dad's philosophy was "Only one captain to a ship." My mom was the first mate, but he was the captain.

We tried to work together one summer. It was a disaster. Three bosses. Me, my father and mother.

The mutiny: My father bought a 1930 Model A Ford truck, for deliveries. We had an argument over the color. I said black. You can get a Ford in any color so long as it's black. My father wanted it cream and brown. He threw me out, changed the locks. I didn't come back for a year and a half. In August 1977 he said, "O.K., time for you to be your own boss."

Secrets of an expert fish buyer: People ask: "Do you look at the eyes? The gills?" If I have to look at the gills and eyes, they're not good enough to buy. I tell by how it's glistening. It's plump, it just kind of stands out and says, "Buy me." If it's a piece, I feel the meat, feel the oil, the fatty content, the fatter the better.

Owner's choice: The best item out of the water? Nantucket bay scallops. Sautéed in flour, lemon, butter, in cracker meal, flash-fried. So delicate, so sweet.

When he finds time to go fishing: Never. There's never time for that kind of thing.