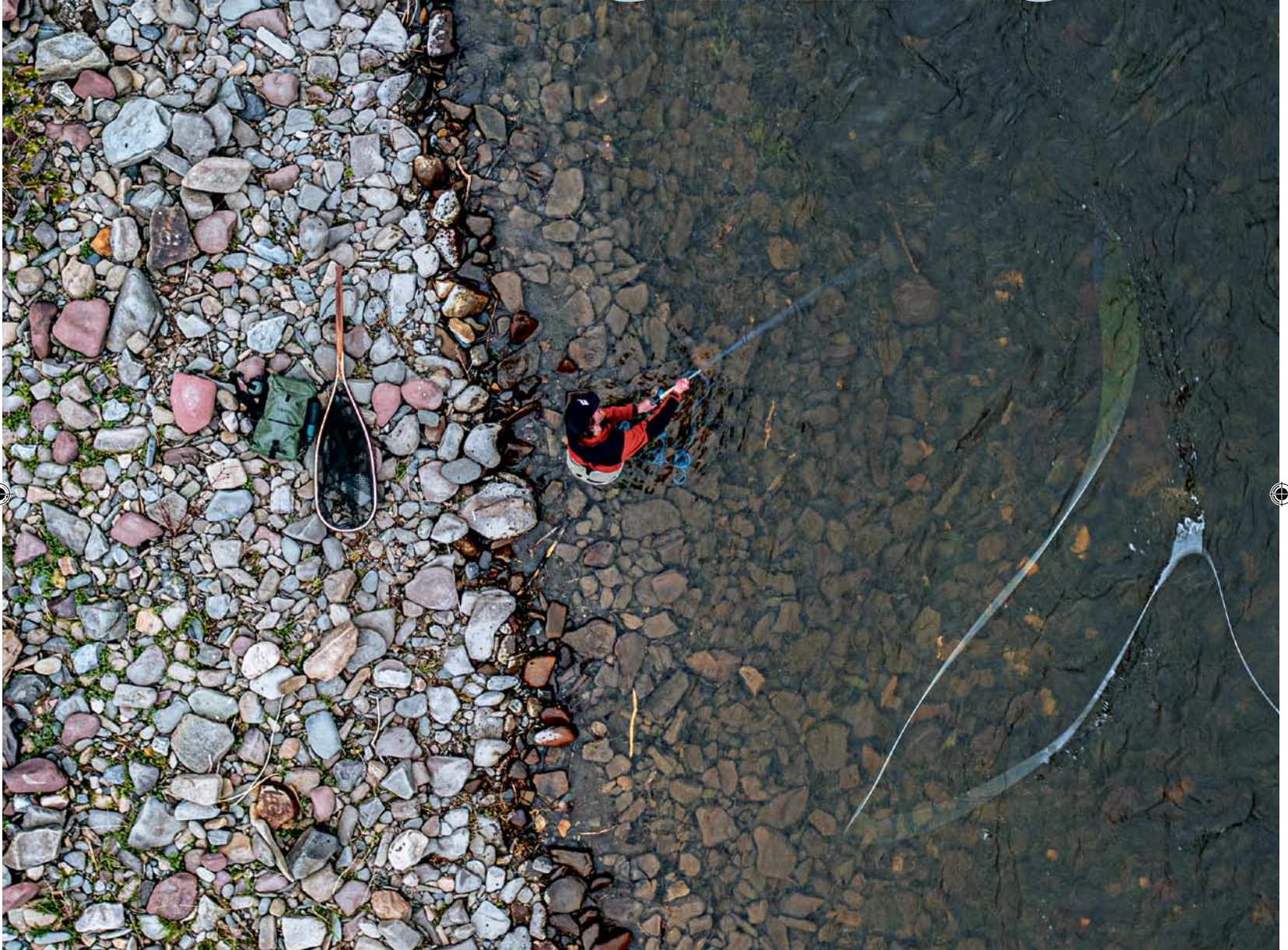




# NET GAINS



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HANDMADE IN ST-FERRÉOL-LES-NEIGES, QUEBEC, IN SUPPORT OF  
LIVE-RELEASE ANGLING EVERYWHERE; THAT'S A WIN-WIN-WIN.

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Many anglers have a story about the big fish that got away. But for Quebec brothers Antoine and William Choquette, their tale helped spawn a business with a product that is making a big splash in Atlantic salmon fishing circles and helping boost conservation efforts aimed at protecting the species through better live-release practices.

It happened around 5 a.m. on the last day of the 2018 fishing season at Le Gouffre, a salmon river that flows 72 kilometres through Quebec's Charlevoix region before merging with the St. Lawrence River in the picture-perfect town of Baie-St-Paul, an hour's drive northeast of Quebec City.

The Choquette brothers—both of them bright-eyed millennials and outdoor enthusiasts who were then novice salmon fishers—had been wilderness camping near some of the 60-plus pools along la rivière du Gouffre. Dawn was just breaking when they started fishing with small Black Bear Red Butt flies on two pools about 200 feet apart.

"I made a few casts," recalled William, 29, who had yet to hook a salmon in the two years since he and his brother had taken up the sport. "Suddenly a fish took my fly and I yelled, 'Fish on!'"

Antoine—Tony to his family and friends—quickly reeled in and ran down the shore to help his brother. "I couldn't see the fish because it stayed at the bottom," said Antoine, a mechanical engineer who turns 32 in October. "But I knew by the tension on Will's line that it was a big one."

After a 20-minute fight, the fish came close enough to shore for the brothers to catch a glimpse of what they later estimated to be a 30-pound, 1.5-metre-long Atlantic salmon—one of the biggest ever caught on Le Gouffre.

"When I saw it I yelled, 'Holy cow!'" said Antoine, who had caught his first two salmon—much smaller ones—on the same river a year earlier. "We didn't have a net, so I waded in and tried tailing it. But I had trouble because it was so big I could barely get my hand around its tail."

He credits adrenaline for his being able to hold the fish just long enough to immortalize the catch in a photo. But an instant later it was gone. "We barely had time to admire it," said Antoine. "It showed just how difficult it is to land a big fish without a net."

That experience, together with the loss of several more salmon the following season due to failed tailings, prompted William's girlfriend to buy him a landing net from a local sporting goods store. Though both brothers used the net, they were concerned that its rough construct—a steel frame and hoop and knotted nylon mesh bag—would harm fish and reduce their chances of survival after being caught and released, which is the only method of fishing they practise.

"So I decided to make one myself from wood, which is much nicer and more traditional," said Antoine, a woodworking hobbyist who makes furniture and other items in the garage behind his house in St-Ferréol-les-Neiges, a small town 50 kilometres northeast of Quebec City, next to the Mont-Sainte-Anne ski resort.

William Choquette casts out over Lower Adams Pool on the Matapédia River. The Fréro net on the shore will help him to play a fish quickly and release it after a short fight and with minimum contact, while keeping it in the water.

JEAN-SÉBASTIEN CHARTER



JEAN-SÉBASTIEN CHARTER (2)

William and Antoine Choquette in their small workshop in St-Ferréol-les-Neiges (above). The nets are made from locally sourced hardwoods (below).

Looking like they belong: The nets have struck a chord with anglers who want to practise proper live release techniques. William Choquette keeps one handy on La Grande Fosse on the Rimouski River (facing page).



After buying and studying several landing nets—including one from British Columbia's Mobynets, which makes world-class wooden nets using hardwoods and non-abrasive meshes—Antoine made a 3D schematic and template, then built a prototype in just three weeks.

Made from strips of local maple, ash or walnut in the frame and imported smooth, knotless rubber in the net, it measured over six feet tall with a four-foot handle, a hoop that was 16 inches across and 40 inches long, and a net depth of two feet. "I was quite proud of it," said Antoine. "It was beautiful and there was nothing like it on the market—then or now."

The brothers tested the net during the 2020 fishing season, landing several salmon with it on different rivers across Quebec. The first was on the Matapédia, which ends its 65-kilometre course in the Restigouche River at Quebec's border with New Brunswick.

"It worked perfectly as planned," said Antoine. "Fights were shorter, capture was easier and we lost a lot less fish."

Equally positive were the reactions the net elicited from fellow salmon anglers on the rivers where the brothers fished. "A lot of people said how cool it looked and asked me where I got it and if it was for sale," said Antoine.

Too bad he didn't sell it, he quipped, because he and William forgot it at a pool on the Bonaventure River in the Gaspé Peninsula in the last week of the season and it was never found—at least not by anyone who intended to return it. But encouraged and emboldened by anglers' reactions to the net, Antoine and William decided to make and sell a batch of 20.

They also came up with a distinctly Québécois brand name for their start-up: Frero sur la rivière. 'Frero' is a play on the French words frerot (little brother) and eau (water). They started building the 20 nets in Antoine's garage in April 2021. They also posted ads on Facebook, pre-selling the entire batch within days.

One net notably went to Quebec fly-fishing and outdoor equipment supplier Hooké, which took stylish pictures that were posted on its website. A handful also went to St. John's-based Atlantic Rivers Outfitting Company, which put them to use at its two high-end, fly-in fishing lodges in Labrador.

"The nets are fabulous," said Tyrone Buckle, a life-long salmon angler and Atlantic Rivers' director of operations. "They are esthetically pleasing and made with beautiful craftsmanship. Everyone loves them."

The nets' arrival on the market was also timely, added Buckle, as both the pandemic-driven upswing in fishing in general—and salmon fishing in particular—and the growing popularity and use of nets to land fish over the traditional tailing technique led to a run on quality landing nets in the marketplace. "There were simply none available from our regular supplier," said





Buckle, who has since ordered 50 more Frero nets. “The brothers’ timing was impeccable.”

The advent of the Choquettes’ nets also ties in nicely with Quebec’s new 10-year management plan for Atlantic salmon conservation. In addition to decreasing the number and size of salmon that anglers can keep on the 65 rivers where sport fishing is permitted in la belle province, the plan, which came into effect in 2016, encourages the practice of live release using proper procedures and equipment, including the use of fish-friendly landing nets.

“We’re already seeing some encouraging results,” said Myriam Bergeron, a biologist and the general manager of the Fédération québécoise pour le saumon atlantique.

According to Bergeron, catch and keep for salmon has declined by 50 per cent in Quebec in recent years, while more than 70 per cent of reported catches last year were released.

“Catch and release has become very popular among

anglers here,” said Bergeron. “Just a few years ago everyone was afraid that it would lead to the end of fly-fishing for Atlantic salmon. But the exact opposite has come true.”

Bergeron said that landing nets are a better way to land salmon than tailing, because they limit the length of the fight and reduce the need to bring fish close to shore where they can strike rocks and sand and sustain injury. It also allows anglers to release the fish where there is more current, which helps Atlantic salmon to breathe.

“When you manipulate fish it’s important to have a minimum of both combat and contact so the fish retains strength and the mucous that protects them from bacteria and fungus isn’t taken off,” she said. “Catch and release is all about increasing the chance of survival.”

Similarly, she said nets should ideally be made of non-abrasive, fish-friendly materials that don’t injure the animal by damaging or removing scales or scratching its eyes. “Non-

JEAN-SÉBASTIEN CHARTIER







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knotted rubber nets are the best,” said Bergeron. “I don’t think the use of wood for the frames or hoops makes a difference—but they are definitely more attractive.”

The size of net openings, she added, is another important factor. “They need to be very big so fish can enter the bag easily,” said Bergeron. “I’ve seen many nets that are too small for salmon, and that can be a real concern.”

Though reluctant to endorse any particular brand, Bergeron said Frero nets appear to be ideal for salmon fishing. “I’ve only heard good things about them,” she said. “And it’s nice to see a Quebec-made product on the market.”

For the Choquette brothers, the quality of their nets and the unrelenting demands they have been getting from stores, outfitters and salmon anglers convinced them a year ago to ramp up production and make Frero a going concern. Working weeknights and weekends in Antoine’s crowded, 500-square-foot garage, they have made nearly 200 landing nets to date. Most are their large model—dubbed Le Matapédia—which retails for around \$400. But they also make a smaller net—called Le Gouffre, which sells for around \$330—as well as customized nets with laser-engraved names, logos and photos, and nets with flies encased in crystal-clear epoxy.

Most are sold through a small but growing number of fly-fishing shops in Quebec and B.C., where their brand is growing in both recognition and popularity thanks to the stunning photos and videos they post on social media of them and their landing nets in fish-catching action. They also sell online through their visually striking website, which has a mission statement that says it all: “Wildlife conservation, catch and release and responsible fishing are at the heart of the company.”

Born and raised in Quebec City, the Choquette brothers learned to fly-fish for speckled trout at an early age at the

A Matapédia River salmon is released from a Frero net.

family’s chalet on a lake in the vast lands of the Quebec Seminary near the provincial capital. They stopped fishing as teenagers, but Antoine got back into it during the four years he spent skiing and working in Whistler and other Rocky Mountain resort towns after high school.

“I fly-fished for rainbow trout with gear I bought at Walmart for about 20 bucks,” he said. “I didn’t have a net so I would beach them or tail them.”

Back home in Quebec, Antoine decided to give salmon fishing a try—and asked his always-eager brother William to join him. “One day Tony said, ‘Come on, we’re going salmon fishing in the York River in Gaspé.’ So us and a friend drove there during the night, paid for access and started fishing the next morning.”

Though they didn’t catch anything on that or several subsequent trips, the brothers kept at the sport. In particular, they became regular season pass holders at L’Association de conservation de la vallée du Gouffre (ACVG), the non-profit group dedicated to the protection of Atlantic salmon in the watershed.

“Le Gouffre is where we honed our skills and where the idea for our net was really born,” said Antoine. “It’s a fantastic river that is close and easy for us to get to. And the number of salmon there, especially big ones, shows how successful conservation efforts can be.”

And those big salmon will now have a better chance of surviving to spawn other rivière du Gouffre giants, thanks to fish-friendly Frero nets. ➤

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