Sailing the High Seas

By Laura Swanson

Joe Ockenfels grew up in the most unlikely of places to end up becoming an ocean charter boat captain: Arizona.

But after he visited the Oregon Coast on vacation in the early 1990s and booked a bottom-fishing trip with Joe Gierga of the Siggi-G, he quite literally was hooked.

“No pun intended,” says Joe. “I was hooked. I really was. The next year, I booked several trips. We caught our limits, and Joe G. asked me about staying the summer to work on the boat, but it just didn’t seem possible.

Within two weeks of returning to Arizona, I was laid off, and I called Joe and Siggi. It was the end of the season, but I went to work anyway for two months, and told myself, ‘If I make it through the winter...’ Next thing I know, 10 years went by. I loved it so much here.

That first fall, I caught a 40 pound salmon on the Trask.”

The company, Siggi-G, was established in 1973, when Joe and Siglinda “Siggi” Gierga had the 40-foot boat built, christening her the “Siggi-G.”

“Joe G. says to me after a few years, ‘What are you going to do?’ and I said, ‘I’m doing it.’ He says, ‘No. You need to get your captain’s license.’”

That is when Joe started going out during the winter on commercial crab boats.

“I needed to gain experience, ocean time,” says Joe. “You get real experience working on crab boats.”

The Coast Guard’s qualifications and criteria for a captain’s
license require time on the ocean—more than 700 days on the water.

"Joe taught me everything I know," says Joe. "He told me, 'I'll teach you everything I know in two days.' After 20 years, I'm still learning from him."

In the early 1990s, Joe Ockenfels purchased the Siggi-G boat and continues the charter fishing business. Since then, he has seen dramatic changes at the Port of Garibaldi.

Due to increased regulatory requirements and restrictions, the fleet—which once numbered more than 20 vessels—now has less than 10 charter boats.

In the mid-70s, catch limits were 15 rock/bottom fish and three lingcod. Today, the limits are six bottom fish and two lingcod.

"We have an attitude that's worked," says Joe. "We've continued to be successful and roll with the punches of this business."

His philosophy is it's about fishing, but if it's as much, or more, about the adventure.

"I can recall my first images of the coast from the ocean every time I go out," says Joe. "Sharing the enthusiasm of this experience, the awesome sight of coming back up the coast to Cape Lookout... It's incredible to think only 15 people in the world are seeing this right now."

The Siggi-G fishes as far south as Pacific City and goes north to Cannon Beach and Tillamook Head. The boat's focus has always been rock or bottom fishing, but they also book trips fishing for salmon, halibut and tuna.

The charter boat season is as much determined by regulations as the weather. Depending on the weather, the Siggi-G will start booking trips on weekends in April.

On the second Thursday in May, the halibut season starts on select days.

"We'll fish over 20 miles out at 700 feet for halibut," says Joe.

The charter fishing season continues through September, but in recent years has had to deal with closures and restrictions during the popular summer months.

"On the nicer days, the farther out the excursion, the more marine species you are likely to encounter," says Joe.

Bird and whale-watching trips also are offered.

A charter fishing trip begins with sunrise check-in, from about 5 a.m. to 6:30 a.m. With all the gear provided, 10 to 15 passengers board the Siggi-G. It is recommended you bring a lunch and beverages.

"We'll drop some crab pots in the ocean and then in 45 to 90 minutes reach the fishing grounds," says Joe.

By 1 or 2 p.m., the boat will return to the dock, the passengers catch will be filleted, the crabs cooked and iced-down.

"We'll send off happy customers with a fresh seafood dinner," says Joe. "What could be better than that?"

During late fall, Joe works on the boat and repairs equipment. During the winter season, he goes out on a commercial crab boat.

Joe has a supportive staff—all family. Son Tom has worked for several seasons as the Siggi-G deckhand, and daughter Courtney Brown manages the office.

Tom, a member of the Neh-Kah-Nie High School Ocean Sciences Bowl state champion team, is a freshman at Central Oregon Community College in Bend. Courtney is a sophomore at Cotter College in Missouri. Both return home in the summer to help with the family business.

Joe's wife, Carol Brown, is director of the Tillamook County Pioneer Museum, and in the past has served as a Port of Garibaldi commissioner.

"It's about people," says Joe. "I love doing what I'm doing, and you meet some incredible people. It's a people-loving business."

More than 80 percent of the Siggi-G's trips are booked by repeat customers.

"Right now, I have people calling to check the schedule, saying, 'We look forward to this trip every year,'" says Joe. "Groups have had the same weekend for 15 years. You create relationships with passengers, and some customers are as dear to me as my family."

"I've heard it so many times" 'You're doing what I've always dreamed of.' And it's true, this Arizonan is living a dream as captain of the Siggi-G on the great Pacific Ocean. It's the best place in the world."

For more information about charter fishing, contact Capt. Joe Ockenfels at (503) 322-3285, or visit their website at www.siggig.com.