



# MENEMSHA



BY JIM MILLER

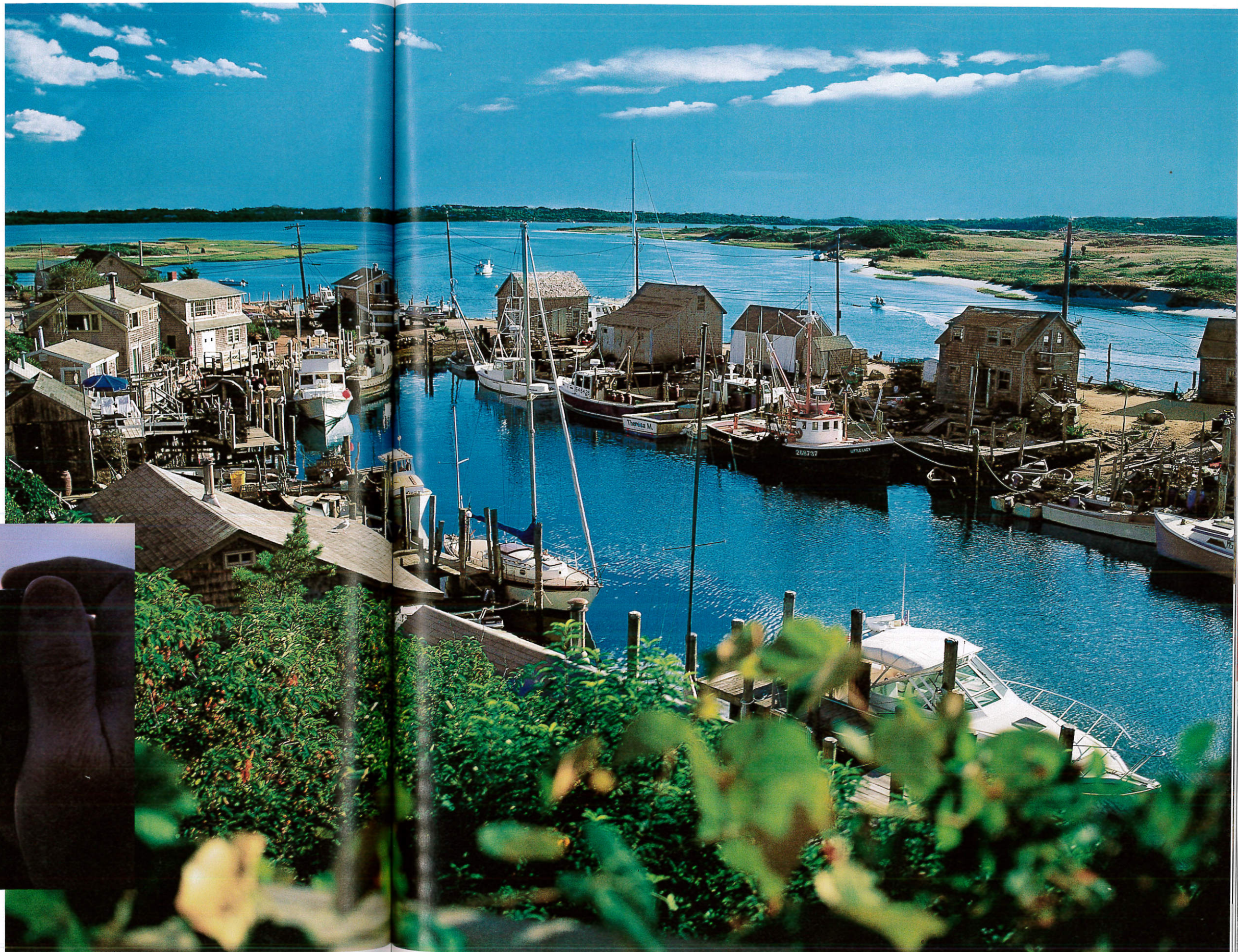
A working fishing village with front-row seats for sunset, Menemsha exerts an inexorable pull on lifelong Islanders and weekend visitors alike, a seemingly timeless place where vintage post card imagery coexists with gritty, wet reality.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER SIMON



Menemsha is in Chilmark, but it doesn't seem *of* Chilmark. There is no three-acre zoning in Menemsha, no private beaches with six-figure keys, no massive estates nestled secretly in the wooded hills down rutted dirt paths passable only by Land Rovers. The drama in Menemsha plays out in full view, and is accessible by bus. There are cheap eats, a little beach, public bathrooms, piles of junk lying about, and gas station coffee. Another side of Chilmark is visible over the dunes – huge multi-million-dollar houses perched above the sea. The juxtaposition makes Menemsha so necessary, so needed. Chilmark's past and present, the Island's past and present, together in the frame.

Descend the hill into Menemsha, and walk out onto the new dock, rebuilt after the big fire two summers ago. The boats tied up there are nondescript, distinguished only by the length of the waiting list endured to earn these slips. The charter boats rest down by the fish shacks, near the bike ferry purring back and forth between the Aquinnah landing across the channel. The Coast Guard boathouse is gone, like a missing tooth; the Feds will replace it soon. Across the street, the Coast Guard station shines, and the tank-like aluminum patrol vessels sit ready at the dock.



With one of the Island's most accessible sunset-viewing spots (above), and a picturesque inner harbor populated by old-fashioned fishing shacks and colorful boats (right), Menemsha's charm draws residents and visitors alike.



great?" If you ask if he grew up on the Vineyard, he replies, "Not yet." Like so many others who've been here for decades, Scott came to the Vineyard just for a weekend.

Coffee and T-shirts at Beetlebung. Fried clams at the Bite. The Harbor Crafts Shop. Then around the corner and over the creek to the fish markets. A man in an impossibly dirty ball cap leans into the door of an idling pick-up, talking to a friend. A swimsuited woman holding a balky toddler by the hand makes her way across the street to the solar-powered toilets. Traffic creeps, no one in a particular hurry.

Sitting on a bench behind Menemsha Fish Market, eating a grilled salmon teriyaki sandwich. The warm noon sun is overhead, so there is no shade. A lobsterman in jeans and rubber boots uses a pitchfork to load skate from a plastic bin on the dock into a barrel on his boat. People in shorts and flip-flops walk down the warm planks of the dock, licking soft-serve cones, and ask him about his task.

What would Menemsha be without fishermen at work? It's a life-and-death business to the fishermen (and the fish), and the sorry state of the fisheries (and fishing regulations) means fishing is tougher now than ever. It's never been easy.



Annette Cingle and Scott McDowell, here with an Atlantic cod wall hanging, share their love of fish through copper artwork and fishing charters.

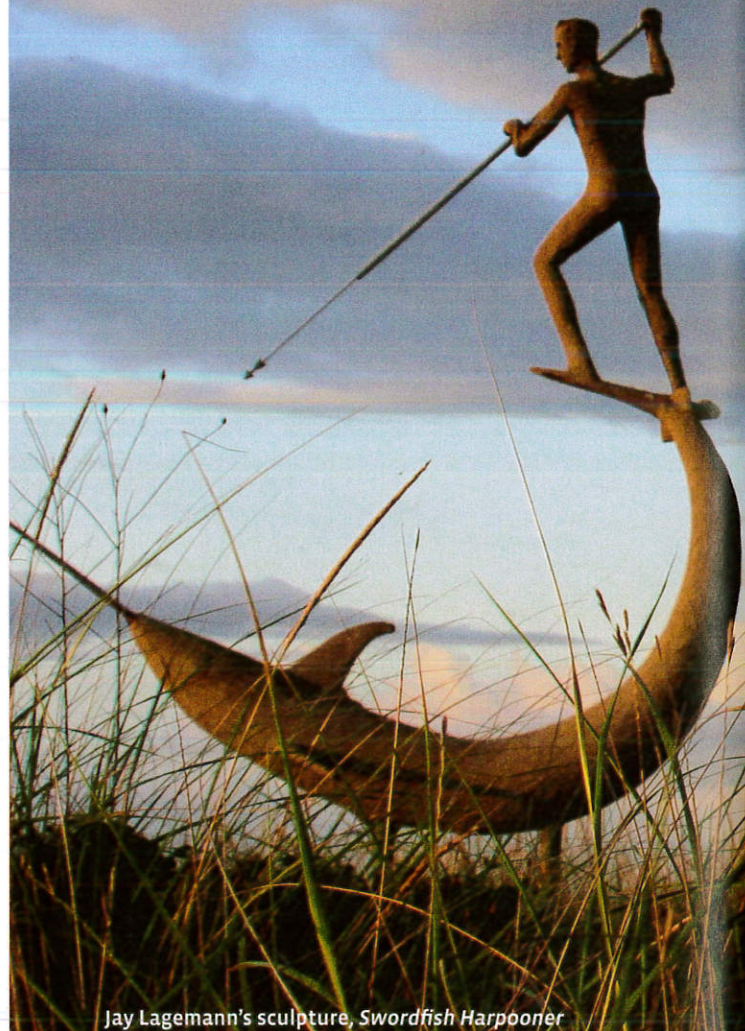


Everett Poole at the former Poole's Fish Market in the late seventies with longtime employees Polly Kinsella Bassett and Lucy Patterson Cox.

Menemsha changes, but does not change. And if you think all of this timeless and picturesque seafaring grittiness happens by accident, think again. Read the Chilmark Master Plan, the town's guide for itself. The goal: "To maintain the visual character of Menemsha as a small fishing village." And "Assure the priority of commercial fishing boats [over] pleasure craft."

The fishing boats and the pleasure craft, fishermen and financiers, all eventually pull up to the venerable Menemsha Texaco, where it doesn't matter who you are in New York or Boston or Philly or DC if you accidentally pump gas into your rod holder. In summer, manager Marshall Carroll spends more than a hundred hours a week at the helm of Menemsha Texaco, slightly less in the winter. Quiet but friendly, Marshall says, "The best part of the job is that we see all walks of life" at the Texaco, which is also part convenience store, part tackle shop, part tourist trap, part ship's chandlery, and part meeting house. "We do a little bit of everything," Marshall notes wryly, "and nothing well." The Menemsha Texaco is actually a Shell station.

Into the parking lot, patrolled by the Chilmark PD. Off-season storms cover the lot with inches of sand that get plowed back to the beach. The *Swordfish Harpooner* sculpture by Jay Lagemann stands poised in the dune. The sand and water are popular all day, but sunset is the star attraction. You can pick up a boiled lobster to take to the beach for dinner (order ahead), and sit on the cooling sand to watch the sun descend into the sea near Cuttyhunk. The wispy clouds turn fiery orange, and the boats moored offshore pose for snapshots. When the sun hits



Jay Lagemann's sculpture, *Swordfish Harpooner*



Anne and Jonathan Mayhew with their kids, Maggie and Christopher.



The Menemsha jetty makes a sweet spot for end-of-the-day fishing.



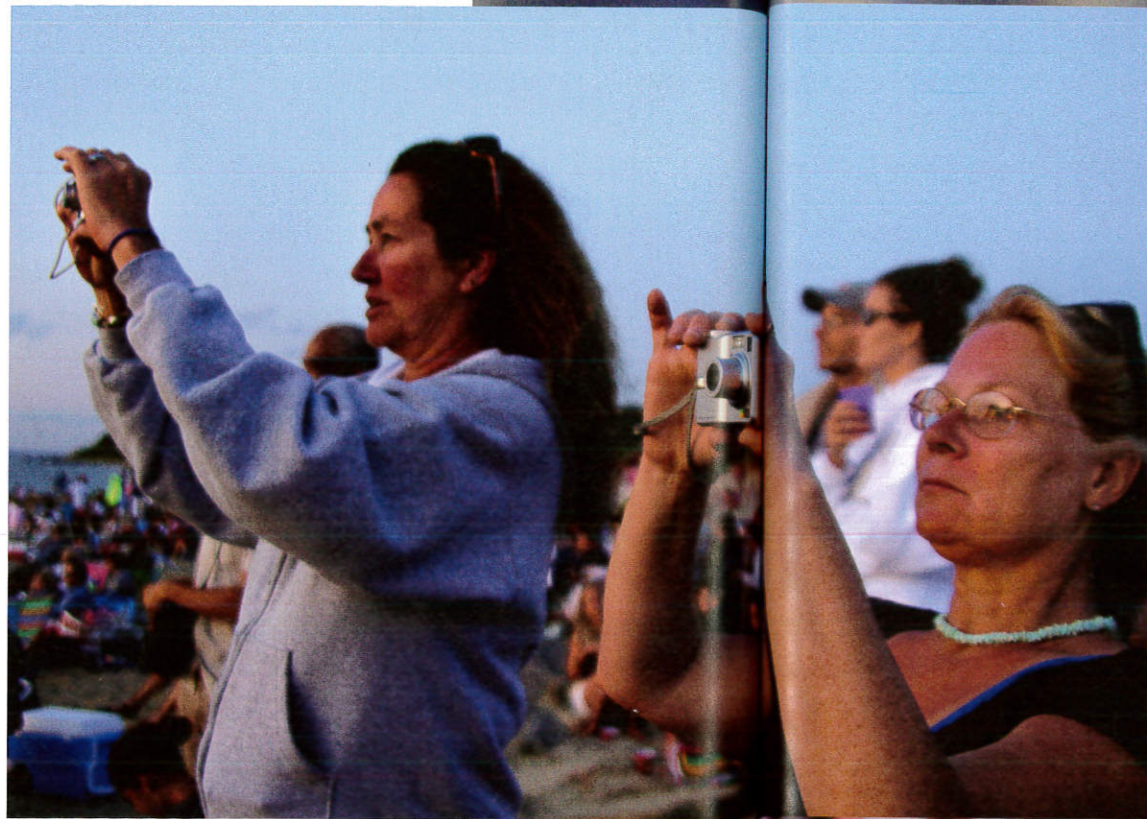
A cheerful Betsy Larsen operates Larsen's Fish Market on Dutcher Dock.

the horizon, applause, and then the place clears out.

On the jetty, people are fishing – kids with poles bought minutes before at the Texaco next to older men who've been at this spot for decades, silhouettes in the fading light. Birds are working in the fast-moving current. This is a serious spot during the fall fishing derby, but not so much now. Even here the fishing is not what it once was. "Nothing is what it used to be," notes Scott McDowell.

Menemsha changes in the off-season, of course. Like leaves, most of the people blow away, and it's easier to see the hard-scrabble nature of the place, like a trip back in time. The fleet of yachts has been replaced by a flock of eiders seeking shelter behind the jetty. Fishing boats are huddled against the dock; the Constantino L gets a new pilothouse. The sea and sky display cruel hues not often seen in summer.

There are more beautiful places on Martha's Vineyard than Menemsha. There are hills and meadows and marshes and ocean views more dramatic, there are towns more historic and much more well-kept. There are better beaches and a wider variety of restaurants and shops elsewhere. There are less-crowded places to fish. But sunbathers, swimmers, picnickers, fishermen, and shopkeepers do not love those places with the same ardor. Artists and photographers do not flock to those places in the same profusion. Menemsha offers a blend of man and nature, land and sea, old and new, shabby and chic, wealthy and much-less-so that is inexplicably captivating. Menemsha does a little bit of everything, and everything well. ♦



Sunset draws a crowd, but a painter can still find a quiet spot to set up an easel.



Jackie Flynn Morgan, Karen Flynn, and Lydia Fischer take a breather on the front porch at the Bite.

