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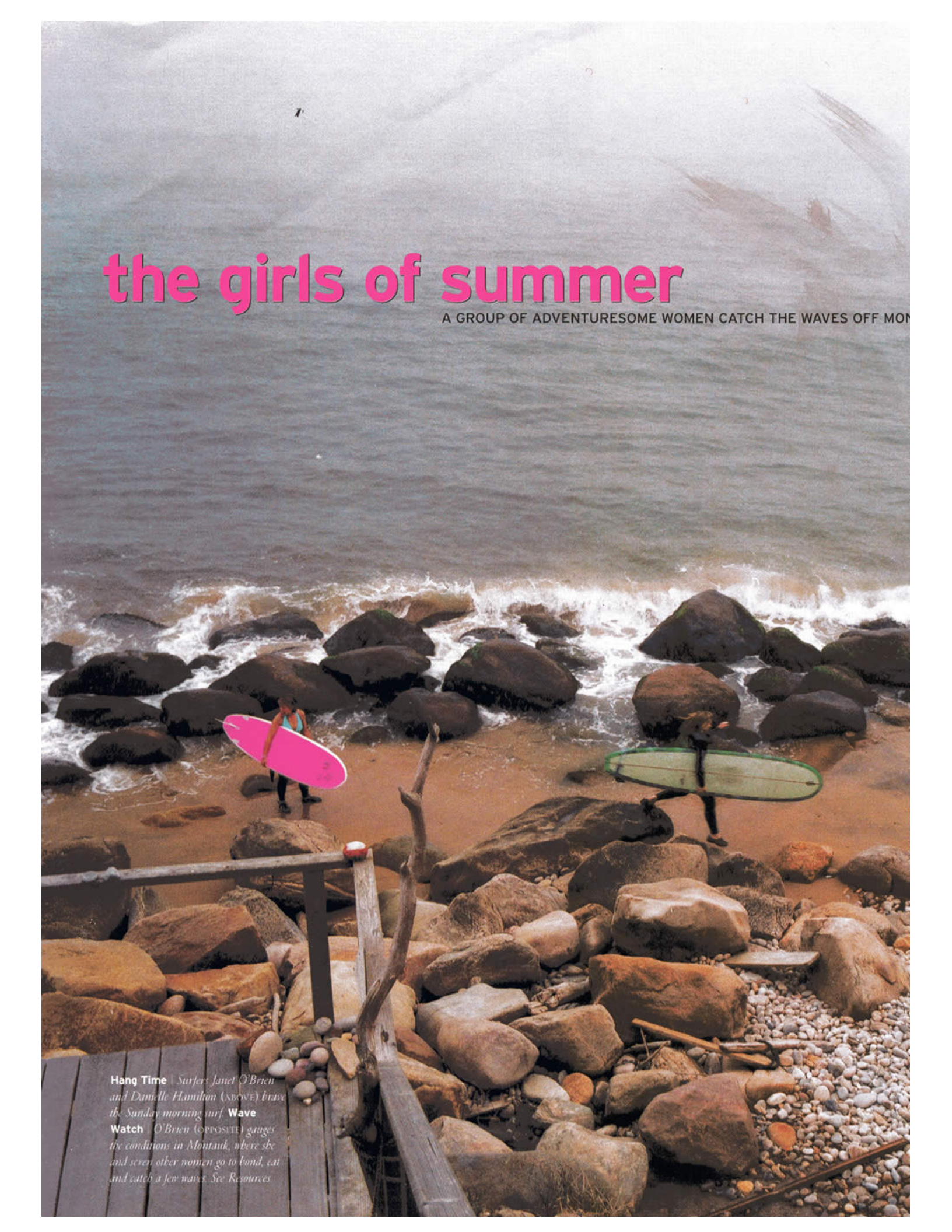


Independence!

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the girls of summer

A GROUP OF ADVENTURESOME WOMEN CATCH THE WAVES OFF MONTAUK



Hang Time | Surfers Janet O'Brien and Danielle Hamilton (ABOVE) brave the Sunday morning surf. **Wave Watch** | O'Brien (OPPOSITE) gauges the conditions in Montauk, where she and seven other women go to bond, eat and catch a few waves. See Resources



A DEEP CAMARADERIE OVER THE TABLE

BY KATHERINE LAGOMARSINO | PHOTOGRAPHS BY A. PERRY HELLER



Wave Runners | They may look delicate, but Danielle Hamilton and Bettina Stelle (TOP) can tame monstrous swells with their boards. Stelle was raised in landlocked Switzerland but grew up listening to the Beach Boys. She has been surfing for six years. **Dive In** | O'Brien and local rock star Nancy Atlas (ABOVE) dig into the easy meal. **Style and Sustenance** | A Janet O'Brien feast (RIGHT) is about choice and simplicity. Here she lays out an assortment of cheeses, breads and olives to accompany a quick-roasted whole fish. **Beach Bound** | The women (OPPOSITE) typically wear net suits year-round, "because you've got the rocks here," explains O'Brien. See Resources.



Below the rugged, windswept bluffs of Montauk lies a cove where magnificent swells crest and crash with booming thunder. Here, on any given Sunday, you'll find a sleek group of wet-suit-clad women chasing down beautiful breakers with their surfboards. They've christened the cove "Dirty Little Nugget," and like all good secrets, the exact location of this one remains theirs alone.

"It's just downwind from Killer Beach," hints Janet O'Brien with a sly wink. O'Brien and some seven other women have made this a Sunday ritual for roughly four years. They come; they surf; they feast and they tell tall tales of their adventures on the high seas. Among them is O'Brien, a caterer, Nancy Atlas, a local rock star, Danielle Hamilton and Nancy Opitz, teachers, Katie Fix, a documentary filmmaker with Plum TV and Bettina Stelle, a patron of the Sag Harbor Whaling & Historical Museum and owner of the house where they gather. They come from all walks of life but are bound by this sport they pursue with passion.

Invariably, when a group of women gathers, the conversation turns to husbands, boyfriends and children. In this case, the talk always circles back to all things surf, like left-breaking and right-breaking waves, five-four-three and one-two-one wet suits, long boards and short boards. Then there are the injuries they've amassed through the years, which they yarn about with a kind of war-veteran bravado. O'Brien alone has bruised a rib, gashed her leg (10 stitches!) and stepped on a stingray (and still has the scar to prove it).

Stitches and scars are only part of it. It's the mental toughness and the Zen-like calm necessary to face a mountain of water as it barrels towards you. "That's the greatest satisfaction I've found with surfing so far," O'Brien says. "It's being able to paddle towards a huge wave and get safely over it before it smashes on top of you. You go up, and you crash down the other side. It's like being on the dark side of the moon."

But after a morning of strenuous paddling and wave riding, a



Fruit of the Sea | A classic Mediterranean dish (TOP LEFT), a baked whole fish stuffed with red onions, orange slices and dill, serves as the meal's centerpiece. **Work Out** | "Surfing is so good for you, I don't even have to go to the gym," says O'Brien (TOP RIGHT). **Cheese Spread** | A mixture of tastes such as tangy, sweet and salty come from the selection of cheeses (ABOVE RIGHT) alone. Add a bowlful of tapenade and a few pods of roasted garlic, and this becomes the perfect assortment for all palates. **Surf's Up** | O'Brien (ABOVE LEFT) admits to being a die-hard surfer. She and several others have been known to brave the waves in temperatures well below freezing in the winter. **Babes and the Beach** | It's like Blue Crush, only New York-style. Here, Hamilton, Atlas and O'Brien (OPPOSITE) hang tough before hitting the water. See Resources.



Bathing Beauty | O'Brien (LEFT) rinses off the salt of the ocean at the Stelle's bluff-top summer house. Now a pro, her first experiences as a surfer didn't go as smoothly. "I'd paddle out and the sweep would take me down a half mile away," says O'Brien. **Woman's World** | A white wine and sparkling water toast (OPPOSITE ABOVE) to celebrate good friends and safe surfing. **Heaven On Earth** | The Stelle's home occupies one of the most romantic lookouts on Long Island. "Even if the conditions are not perfect," says O'Brien, "it's still a lovely drive out here." See Resources.

surfer girl realizes she can't live on salt water alone. On this day, O'Brien has whipped up a breezy spread filled with simple yet decadent dishes providing the necessary savory, salty and sweet that make a meal satisfying. The group grazes on a small, whole salmon rubbed with kosher salt, stuffed with red onions, dill and orange slices and baked for 25 minutes. There are four distinct cheeses: an aged Gorgonzola, a Boucheron, a Reggianito from Argentina and a creamy, dreamy sheep's cheese made with truffles. There are three types of breads, three kinds of olives, a few pods of roasted garlic, a bowl of oven-dried plum tomatoes bathed in extra virgin olive oil, salt and thyme and roasted, rosemary-infused red peppers. Stelle has supplied a mound of baby greens from her Sag Harbor garden. The feast is complete with a heap of ripe red strawberries and a melted chocolate sauce.

"My whole mentality of food is that it doesn't control my life when I'm not working," says O'Brien, who caters everything from P-Diddy's infamous white party to Calvin Klein photo shoots. Sunday is her one day of rest. She often drives out to Stelle's house on Saturday night after her last event of the day, so she can greet the tides in the morning and field the flurry of phone calls asking about the surf that start at around 7 a.m. Montauk's conditions can be hit or miss.

Yes, at times, a few men do show up to join the gang. Many of their husbands brought them to the sport in the first place. But with the husbands and boyfriends comes a slightly different take on surfing than that held by the women. "With the guys it becomes more of a competition and more of a one-upmanship," says Fix, who travels with her husband worldwide, seeking out supreme surfing locations. "With the women, I think something about it is a little purer." Perhaps their surfing philosophy is as pure and untarnished as the clandestine Montauk cove these fortunate few have managed to keep all to themselves. ☀