HAPPY AS A CLAM

How To Procure Tasty Shellfish

BY ANDY NABRESKI

If you live near the coast in the Northeast, you have a major food source in your backyard. Local waters host many species of shellfish that can be classified as delicacies, and with a little knowledge and determination, you can go out and harvest them throughout the year. Shellfishing is a great way to get outdoors and observe nature. You'll get some valuable exercise and, best of all, you'll get many rewarding meals of food you found and gathered yourself.

QUAHOGS

Quahogs are abundant throughout the Northeast, and I believe they are the most versatile for cooking. Quahogs go by a few different names. A just-barely-legal quahog is often called a "littleneck." A medium-size quahog is a "cherrystone," and a big one is often called a "chowder" or simply a quahog.

Start by looking in bays and estuaries that get plenty of tidal flow. Quahogs live in a variety of conditions, including sand, mud, and even rocky areas, though I favor locations that feature more of a muddy/sandy bottom. Drive around to likely areas at low tide and seek out other clammers. I must warn you, however, not to intrude too closely on another clammer's turf. Clammers tend to be a happy lot but can be very territorial.

Quahogs live anywhere from the high-tide line to depths of over 20 feet. They tend to congregate along the shorelines, so I like to look for them in areas from the low-tide mark out to about 4 feet deep (at low tide). Pay attention to the sea floor as you are looking. Once you start finding quahogs, take note of the bottom type, and look for other similar areas.

Tools and Techniques

You'll need a quahog rake, a basket, and a gauge to measure them. Take the rake and start scraping the bottom. You want the teeth on the rake to penetrate at least an inch below the surface. (It's kind of like raking leaves.) Quahogs don't live very deep – they are just under the surface. When your metal rake hits one of the hard shells, there's a distinct feeling and sound that, over time, you will instantly know is a quahog, and

One Clam, Five Names...

Quahogs have unique names based on their size.

LITTLE NECK	10-13 per lb.	1" hinge
MIDDLE NECK	7-9 per lb.	1 ¼" hinge
TOP NECK	5-7 per lb.	1 ½" hinge
CHERRYSTONE	3-4 per lb.	2" hinge
CHOWDER	1-2 per lb.	2 ½" hinge

LITTLE NECKS (or littlenecks) are the baby quahogs. Named after Little Neck Bay on Long Island, they are the sweetest and most tender. They are best eaten raw, steamed and served with melted butter, or served whole over pasta.

MIDDLE NECKS are the next size up, and can be used in the same manner as littlenecks.

TOP NECKS are preferred for recipes where the clams are served as an appetizer in the shell. When they get to this size, I like to split the meat in half when shucking.

CHERRYSTONES are named after Cherrystone Creek in Virginia. When quahogs grow to this size, the meat gets tougher. Cherrystones are best when chopped and used for stuffies or chowder.

CHOWDER clams are the big, old, tough ones, but they pack the clammiest flavor. Dice them up after cooking, and use them for dishes like clam cakes, fritters, dips, and pasta sauces. Freezing helps tenderize the meat.

CLAMMIN' GEAR

CLAM PLUNGER: An effective tool for gathering steamers.

SHORT-HANDLE RAKE: These come in handy when you're dry digging for steamers.

TIP: Tie on a loop of string and wear it around your neck.

SHELLFISH GAUGE: You'll need one of these gadgets to measure "keeper" clams.

WADERS: Neoprene is the way to go if you plan on clamming in the winter.

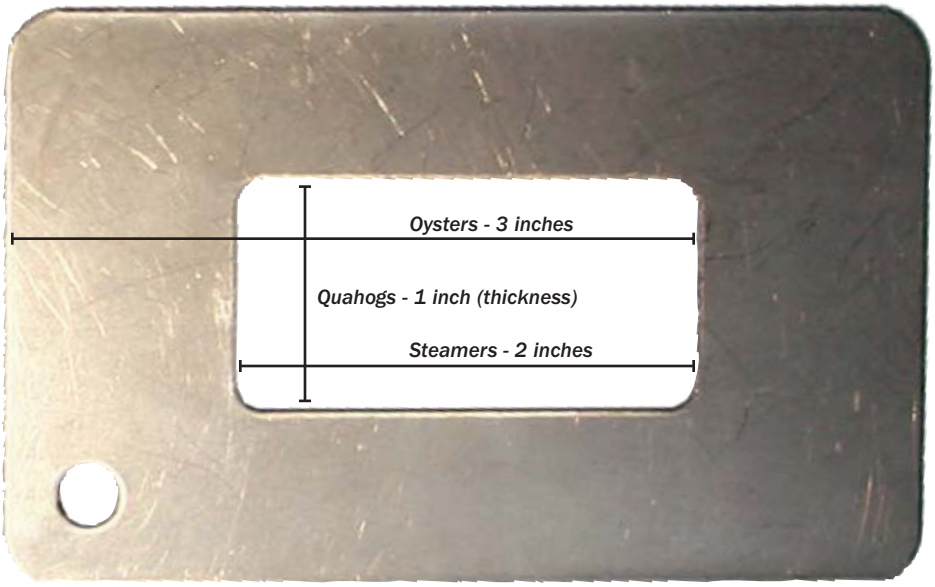
QUAHOG/OYSTER RAKE: There are a few diferent styles available, but this one is my favorite.

SHELLFISHING LICENSE: Don't leave home without it.

WIRE BASKET: You'll need something to put all of those tasty clams into.

FLOAT: An old inner tube will work if you're on a tight budget.

NEOPRENE GLOVES: Keep your hands warm and help prevent blisters.



A shellfish gauge is a must. This type can be used to measure oysters, steamers, and quahogs. Steamers and oysters are measured by overall length, but quahogs are measured by thickness.

not a rock. When you feel that "thump," really start digging and try to get the teeth of the rake under the clam. Pull the rake toward you, flip it, give it a shake, and pull up a clam!

If you are averaging two 'hogs per rake, you're doing well. If it takes more than four rakes to get one quahog, start looking for another spot. Sometimes, moving 10 feet can be the difference between loading up quickly or going home with 10 clams. Once you find a good spot, don't stray too far. Shellfish beds don't regenerate quickly, so once a clammer clears out a particular location, it'll be slim pickings until the following year. Be persistent, cover some ground, and you'll find a sweet spot.

While raking for quahogs is perhaps the most productive technique, during the summer months you may witness "summer clammers" gathering 'hogs using their hands and feet. Simply walk around a clam bed until you feel something solid underfoot, then start digging with your hands. With a bit of luck, you'll come up with a clam; but beware of ornery crabs, or, worse, hunks of broken glass.

STEAMERS

The steamer, also known as a soft-shell clam, or as I like to call them, "piss-clams," is another great-eating shellfish you can gather.

To find them, head out at low tide and look for sandy areas. Walk along the low-tide line and look for tiny holes in the sand – these are clues that steamers live below. Digging steamers is more work than digging quahogs because they live much deeper. Most steamers reside 6 to 12 inches below the surface. There are two methods for gathering them: dry digging and plunging.

Dry digging is the most common method for gathering steamers. A short-handle rake makes the job easier, but if you don't have one, you can get away with just using your hands.

Tools and Techniques

Dry Digging

Dry digging, the more commonly used technique, is pretty basic, and almost prehistoric. A short-handled rake is a good way to start out, but if you don't have one, you can simply use your hands. I like to wear a pair of rubber work gloves when I'm dry

Plunging for steamers is a productive way to fill your basket. Start by creating a hole in the bottom with the plunger (left). Once you get down about 6 inches, flip the rake around and use the basket to sift through the debris in the hole. With any luck, the plunging will dislodge a few steamers and you'll be able to scoop them up (right).

digging because I never know what I might come across. There are things like broken shells, sharp rocks, and lots of big, ugly worms.

If you have a short-handle rake, jam it into the sand several inches past the hole. Pull up a big clump of sand and sift through to see if there might be a clam in it. Once I have a good hole started, I use my hands to start digging around. The hole will start to fill with water, which is okay because it makes digging easier. As you start to develop a nice hole, the sides will begin to cave in. Keep a sharp lookout, as you will usually see the long necks of the steamers extending up through the sand. When you spot the neck, start digging it out, trying to get underneath it. Grab it gently, and slowly pull it out.

Note: In many areas, regulations dictate that you can dry dig only when the air temperature is above 32 degrees. If you do it in freezing conditions, you will end up killing undersized clams.

Plunging

I have no idea who invented the plunger method, but the person who did was a genius. Basically, you use a toilet plunger attached to a 6-foot pole with a basket on the opposite end. The technique is to plunge a hole in the bottom and then sift through the debris.

I start out looking for steamers in sandy areas between the low-tide mark out to about three feet deep. I prefer to plunge for steamers in the middle of a dropping tide so I can work the proper zone, plus the moving current helps flush the sand out of the hole.

Start out in a spot that has a concentration of tiny holes in the sand and use the plunger-end of the pole. It's similar to plunging a toilet, except you don't want the plunger head to make direct contact with the bottom. (Even though it's made of rubber, it can still crush a steamer's delicate shell.) Try to stop the downward momentum just before you make contact with the bottom. The plunger will begin forming a crater in the bottom. Go fast and furious on the first go-around since the steamers are going to be at least 6 inches down. Once you get a decent hole started, flip the rake around and use the basket to sift through the debris in the hole you created. You'll be amazed with the stuff you sift up: old shells, crabs, crazy-looking worms, and other oddities. Don't be surprised if you get a few quahogs in the top layer.

Keep repeating the process of plunging and sifting, keeping in mind that it usually takes a few minutes to get down into the zone. After a while, you will begin to develop a feel for it, and when you dislodge a steamer, you'll feel it. Once you get down deep enough and start coming up with steamers, start working the edges of the hole. Going

Got butter? A steaming bowl of blue crabs and softshell clams is a staple of my summertime diet.

down deeper isn't going to get you more clams since they all live at approximately the same depth. Often, when I find a good spot, I plunge a trough through the bottom, always moving onward as I plunge.

Note: Plunging steamers is illegal in some towns, so check the local regulations.

A common complaint about steamers is that they are too "sandy," but nine out of ten times, a sandy clam should be blamed on improper care. It's important to "flush" steamers before you eat them so I bring a 20-gallon cooler along. When I've gotten my share of clams, I fill the cooler half full of sea water and put all of the steamers in it. The cooler serves two purposes: it keeps the steamers at the same water temperature they were captured in, and the lid prevents water from spilling all over my truck. When I get home, I add a half-cup of cornmeal to the sea water. I then let them soak overnight, or for up to three days in cool weather. Folk wisdom suggests that the cornmeal makes the steamers spit out any sand. Some old-timers tell me that the cornmeal makes no difference; simply soaking the steamers in sea water is sufficient. I'm as stubborn as any old-timer, so I always add the cornmeal...it's cheap, and my clams are rarely sandy.

OYSTERS

When I began shellfishing in the mid-90s, there were enough wild oysters around for a decent harvest, but a few years later, the Northeast was hit with the perfect storm for the destruction of our oyster beds. A severe case of the fatal Dermo virus took hold of the oyster stocks, and then two severely cold winters in a row took a major toll on the last survivors. Many bays froze over, killing the oysters in shallow water, which is where most of them live. To make matters worse, there was also an outburst of oyster drills, where whelks survive by drilling holes through oysters' shells and eating them alive. Our oyster beds were decimated.

By the year 2000, the stocks were at an all-time low. If you were lucky, you might find four or five legal living oysters on a tide. In many areas, the oyster population was on the brink of collapse.

Happily,, around that time, researchers at Rutgers University developed a strain of oysters resilient to viruses. It was a major breakthrough and spawned a burgeoning aquaculture industry. Oyster farms began popping up like mushrooms,

Jackpot. One scoop with a clam rake yielded over a dozen legal oysters.

Get a Permit

In Maine and Massachusetts, recreational shellfish permits are handled at town level. Rhode Island doesn't require residents to have permits, but out-of-staters need them. Connecticut and New Hampshire both require a state permit. In New Jersey, you need a $10 permit. New York doesn't require a permit to shellfish on state lands, although some towns have additional restrictions on catch limits, size limits, season, type of gear; they may also require residency and additional permits. (Contact the town you plan to harvest in for more information.)

Also be aware that there are restrictions on when and where you can shellfish. Beds are generally managed throughout the year, and areas open and close depending on the health of the stocks. Check with the town to find out what areas are open to harvesting, and to determine size and bag limits.

and farmers made great strides in fine-tuning their craft.

Aside from being delicious, oysters have a remarkable ability to remove nitrogen from water as they filter-feed—this is a heroic feat, since excessive nitrogen triggers algal blooms that deplete the water's oxygen and create dead zones. Many towns and municipalities use oysters to clean up local harbors and bays. Using the same techniques as oyster farms, some towns are now growing oysters by the millions to help clean the water, and then allowing harvest by both recreational and commercial fishermen.

Where I live in Falmouth, Massachusetts, gathering a peck of oysters now takes less than 20 minutes. The propagated areas are so fertile that a single sweep of a clam rake can produce over a dozen legal-sized oysters, and things should only get better. The transplanted oysters are reproducing naturally in their newfound homes, and I hope we may once again see wild oyster beds flourish.

SHUCKING TIP

Prior to shucking, place your quahogs or oysters in the freezer for 15 to 20 minutes. This will shock their abductor muscles and make them much easier to open.

Tools and Techniques

Gathering oysters is not difficult, as long as you are in the right spot. Since oysters live on top of the sea floor in shallow water, they are easy to see. I use the same rake that I use for quahogs, and simply drag it across the bottom. The hardest part is prying the oysters from whatever they are attached to. I also take the time to clean them up and remove any barnacles or limpets that are clinging to their shells.

Oysters mush be 3 inches in length to legally harvest, and there is a bag limit. Their shells can be razor-sharp, so wear a pair of gloves while both harvesting and shucking. You should also check for small seed oysters that may be attached to adult oysters. By law, you are to dislodge any seeds that might be growing on your quarry.

Eating oysters raw, while they are still alive, is a primal act. It's food in its purest form. During oyster season, I eat at least four or five raw oysters every day. *"Come and get your daily oysters!"* is a common phrase yelled out nightly in my household. A crack of black pepper, a small dash of cocktail sauce, slurp it down.... so good! And a fried oyster Po' Boy sandwich is one of the tastiest things in the world.

BAY SCALLOPS

In the minds of many culinary experts, bay scallops are the most delectable treasures from our local waters. When you find them in local fish markets, expect to pay at least $30 per pound. Do not confuse them with sea scallops, however, that live in depths of at least 60 feet and are much larger. Its shell is the size of a softball and lacks defined ridges. Fresh, local sea scallops taste great, but fall well short of the sweetness of a fresh bay scallop.

Bay scallops are not nearly as plentiful as they once were, mainly because of the destruction of eelgrass beds. (Nitrogen run-off has been blamed as the primary reason for the downfall of the eelgrass.) Bay scallops depend on eelgrass for their survival, so without it, their chances for survival diminish. There are good years and bad years for bay scallops and, lately, it seems there have been more bad than good.

Oyster drill

Bay scallops live in depths from 3 to 30 fee, but they do not bury into the bottom. They live on top of the sea floor and depend on camouflage to avoid predation. It is also

A cornucopia of bay scallops that washed up on the beach during a powerful winter storm.

the only local bivalve that can actually "swim." It has a large adductor muscle (the only part of a scallop that is usually eaten) that allows it to rapidly open and shut its shells, providing a jet-propulsion mode of transportation. Don't worry, though, because it can't swim fast or far, so you don't have to worry about chasing it down.

You won't need a shellfish gauge to measure bay scallops. A "keeper" scallop is defined as "having a first annual growth ring." When a scallop turns one year old, it develops a defined ring around its shell (kind of like a ring in a tree trunk).

Bay scallops have tiny eyes that line the outer rims of their shells. If you look closely at an open scallop, you will see two rows of small blue dots, which are their little eyeballs looking back at you.

To find bay scallops, start out by locating areas that feature plenty of healthy eelgrass. I've found a few hot spots by using Google satellite images and checking for areas with dark bottom. Bay scallops are equally at home in the open ocean as they are in bays and estuaries, so you'll have to look around. Do not expect anyone to give you a hot spot. A fertile scallop bed is sacred to a shellfisherman, who would rather take it to his grave than give it away.

Tools and Techniques

Dipping

One popular method of collecting bay scallops employs the use of a contraption with a scallop net and a Plexiglas window (called a "hood") that allows you see everything on the bottom. The net has a long handle and a small-diameter opening with a long purse behind it. In a pinch, you could get away with using a quahog rake or a crab net, but it's a bit awkward.

Head out at low tide. Tie your hood and shellfish basket to your waders and go out as deep as possible. Simply cruise around the eelgrass beds

A scallop hood is a contraption with a Plexiglas window that allows you to see everything on the bottom.

while looking through the hood. The scallops blend in pretty well, but their distinct round shape on the bottom usually gives them away. When you find one, simply scoop it up with your scallop net. The extra-long mesh allows you to keep the net underwater and it can hold dozens of scallops before you need to bring it up and empty it into your basket.

Walk along slowly and deliberately. I like to move in a zigzag pattern to make sure I completely scour an area before moving on. I usually find the most scallops in deeper water, so going out on a moon tide gives me access to areas that receive less pressure and I can cover more ground.

Dredging

If you own a seaworthy boat, you can gather bay scallops using a dredge. If you look around hard enough in some seaside shops, you just might find one. It's basically a smaller version of the same dredges used on commercial boats, and most local regulations allow recreational shellfishermen to use them.

A dredge consists of metal mesh on a chain that drags along the sea floor with a net that rides behind it. Set it behind the boat and slowly drag it along the bottom. When the mesh hits a scallop, the scallop instinctively clamps its shells shut, which propels it up off the bottom. The scallop falls back down and is scooped up in the net.

This is tough work and beats up a boat, but it produces. If your boat doesn't have an electric winch, you are in for a long day.

A scallop net. The extra-long netting can hold dozens of bay scallops before you need to empty it into your basket.

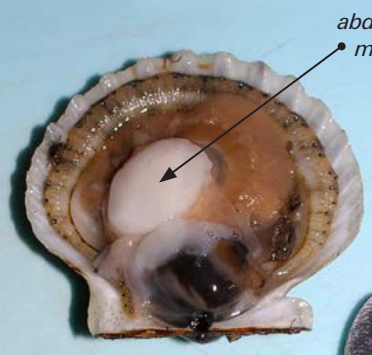
Snorkeling

Using a wetsuit and snorkeling gear is another great way to harvest bay scallops, but bring along a scallop net anyway so you don't have to constantly dive to the bottom. A dive bag and a diving flag are also musts.

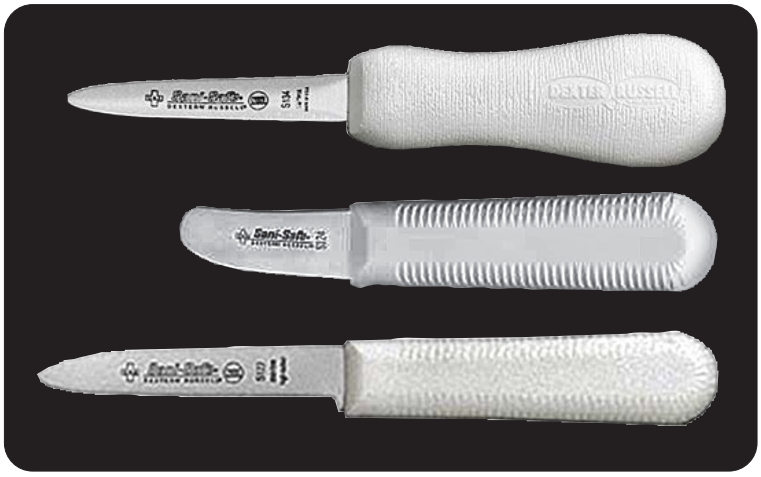
Scavenging

Since many bay scallops live in the open ocean off our local beaches, they are vulnerable to intense storms. Large waves that sweep through at low tide sometimes lifts bay scallops right out of the eelgrass and washes them up on shore. You can simply walk along the beach after a good storm and fill 5-gallon buckets with washed-ashore scallops. It's scavenging at its finest. However, it generally take a powerful storm to make this happen. The wind must blow at least 30 knots for two straight days and it must be blowing directly onshore.

SHUCKING BAY SCALLOPS



Always shuck scallops as soon as possible; they are fragile and don't live long out of the water. They are easy to shuck, but it is tedious work. If you don't have a proper scallop knife, you can get away with using a butter knife. Insert the knife at the hinge of the shell and cut along the top of the shell. Pop off the top shell and cut around the abductor muscle to separate it from the membrane. Then flip the knife under the abductor muscle and it should pop right out.



When it comes to shucking, using the proper knife makes a world of difference. From top to bottom: oyster knife, scallop knife, quahog knife.

Throw in a moon tide and it's a recipe for success. I've only witnessed this phenomenon in late fall and early winter, which I think is the time of year that scallops are closest to shore.

Look for any areas on the beach where large clumps of eelgrass are washing up. Bundle up and get down to the beach at sunrise, before the seagulls pick the place clean. It's best if the tide is low, but it's not essential. Simply walk along the shoreline and look for scallops. You will sometimes have to dig through piles of eelgrass to find them; other times, they will be constantly pushed up onto the beach with every incoming wave. If the conditions are right, you will fill up a bucket in no time at all. Some of the shells might be broken from pounding in the surf, but they are still plenty good to eat. You will feel like a caveman, but it's all in the name of fun and free food.