

Gift from the sea: New Bedford's bounty starts with scallops

By Ann Parson Globe correspondent, July 15, 2019, 4:26 p.m.



Nick Santerre is chef at Cork Wine & Tapas in New Bedford. “Fresh! Never frozen,” he says of the locally sourced scallops he proudly serves.

On a recent evening at Cork Wine & Tapas, which occupies a stone warehouse built when New Bedford was king of whaling, four people at the bar made quick work of the pan-seared sea scallops.

It’s a hard dish to eat slowly. I know — I’ve been hooked on Cork’s famous plateful since the harborside restaurant opened in 2007. The scallop meats, firm but tender, are served on ginger-garlic jasmine rice and irresistibly drizzled with roasted macadamia cream sauce. The

added bonus, of course, is that the scallops on your fork are nearly fresh off the boat.

“Fresh! Never frozen,” said Cork’s chef, Nick Santerre, who receives two batches of scallops from his suppliers each week. “There’s no need for frozen!” Santerre spoke so fervently about how he sources his scallops, I thought he must be descended from Portuguese fishermen, but it turns out he’s part French and Irish with a whisker of Native American.

New Bedford has been the country’s No. 1 fishing port for 20 years running, due largely to the value of its hauled scallops, which end up on dinner plates around the world. “One of our assets is Logan,” said Edward Anthes-Washburn, director of the Port of New Bedford. “Airliners are constantly taking off with their bellies full of New Bedford scallops.”

As New Bedford's scallop reign has lengthened, the downtown restaurant scene has noticeably grown and flourished. Along with older establishments like Antonio's, which will soon celebrate its 30th anniversary and remains unmatched for its generous no-frills portions — its paella, for example, is a Portuguese seafood lovefest — there are new restaurants and younger chefs eager to lure diners with inspired ingredients.

The classic dish of scallops baked in cream and topped with buttery crumbs still is easily found. However, restaurants new this decade offer all sorts of specialties: bacon-wrapped scallops with succotash and sun-dried tomato jam at The Black Whale; a decadently chunky scallop roll at Greasy Luck Brewpub; grilled maple glazed sea scallops at Elizabeth's in Fairhaven; scallops stuffed with shrimp and linguica at Quahog Republic; and orange-ginger scallops at Merrill's, to name a few.

By far-and-away, the port's greatest asset is Georges Bank, a huge region on the outer continental shelf 150 miles offshore. Scallops eat phytoplankton, and it's said that off Georges, where the Gulf Stream and Labrador Current slough off nutrients and sunlight sparks photosynthesis in the shallow depths, phytoplankton grow three times faster than anywhere. Also, there's a gravelly seabed for little drifting scallop scat to grip onto.

When Craig Claiborne came to the New Bedford Scallop Festival 60 years ago, then too the city was "scallop capital of the world." Its scallop fleet of "about 75 boats" had hauled "about 8 million pounds" in the first six months of 1959, he reported. Today there are more than 300 scallop vessels, and last year they landed an astonishing 38,849,263 pounds of scallops, according to NOAA Fisheries.

Between the good scalloping years, there were bad ones, and a valuable lesson was learned about how to turn sea scallops into a sustainable fishery. (Let's get one thing straight: People pat themselves on the back for the Atlantic sea scallop's revival, when the species itself deserves much of the credit. One female can produce over 200 million larvae, which, if left alone, mature quickly.)

"Years ago, it was like the wild west," one retired fisherman told me. Fishing boats could go just about anywhere, which lent to the overfishing of prime fishing grounds.

In 1994, three areas on Georges Bank were closed to protect groundfish stocks from further losses, and when they reopened in 1999, fishermen scored a

bonanza; the seafloor was covered with large scallops. Regulators were quick to implement a rotational system of open and closed areas, just as farmers do with crops.

“We have a really good handle on the status of the resource,” noted Janice Plante, at the New England Fishery Management Council. Surveys by dredge sampling, drop cameras, and tow cameras help regulators keep a real-time eye on the Atlantic sea scallop population, which stretches from Maine to Cape Hatteras. Scallopers can only dredge in designated sites and are limited in their number of trips and pounds hauled.

“Unlike some other fisheries, the scallop industry acts like an industry, because they plan years and years ahead,” noted John Bullard, former head of NOAA’s Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries. For example, each year NOAA designates how many pounds of catch is acceptable, and how many pounds would put the species at risk of being overfished.

The job of getting the scallops from sea to table remains labor intensive and dangerous. Once dredged and hauled on deck, the scallops are usually shucked at sea, the meats packed in cotton bags and stored on ice or frozen. It’s not uncommon for a single fisherman to shuck 50,000 scallops over the course of a 10-day trip, according to Laura Orleans, director of the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center.

By the time a boat is back in port, it’s a race to get the meats to auction, processor, wholesaler or distributor, and to a market or restaurant. “Fish isn’t wine,” Phillip Mello, the general manager of Burges Seafood, likes to point out. “It doesn’t get better with age. It’s very stressful at times to try to get the product out of here.”

Keeping scallops on ice, as close to 32 degrees as possible, extends their shelf life. On-ice, they are considered fresh and “dry-packed.” In contrast, when processors treat scallops with a phosphate solution that helps preserve them, they are “wet-packed.”

Cork’s chef Santerre, who always uses the same providers, shuns “wet” scallops. “Consistency is the key. I get them 100 percent dry and not treated.” Treated scallops, he said, don’t caramelize well and release excess water.

Given that some boats treat scallops before reaching port, some restaurants must be serving them. People are evasive on the subject. Still, for many chefs in the area, “fresh” and “not treated” is the holy grail. The restaurant Fathoms

goes the extra mile, in that its owner operates his own scallop fleet and stocks the restaurant directly. For the sweetest, tenderest scallops imaginable, try Fathoms' scallop-scrod casserole.

As healthy as the sea scallop fishery is right now, seafood watchers know that the future is never a given. Climate change is a concern, since a related rise in ocean acidification harms shellfish.

Meanwhile, with Americans' appetite for seafood climbing, those within New Bedford's seafood community are asking, how can the bounty off our coast be better utilized?

In the United States, "we import 80 percent of our fish. It's crazy that we export so much good local fish — like dogfish, which goes straight to England for fish-and-chips," said Chris Cronin, the chef at popular dNB Burgers. Dogfish meat, said Cronin, is mild, slightly sweet, and flakey, similar in taste to haddock.

This summer, the owners of dNB Burgers will open Union Flats, an "upscale" fish shack just a block from the harbor. The plan is to embrace underutilized local fish as well as oysters from local shellfish farms, scallops, and other sustainable products.

"No frozen fish!" exclaimed Cronin, who wants to source "underdogs" from the wharves and eliminate as many middlemen as possible. He has his eye on haddock, redfish, scup, hake, and other species that, while plentiful, seldom land on menus.

"Finding a way to present a more sustainable food." That's what it's about.