

Aunt Carrie's
SEAFOOD RESTAURANT
FOUNDED 1938

Shrines of Summer

ALONG THE SHORE OF RHODE ISLAND, CLAM SHACKS ARE HALLOWED INSTITUTIONS

BY LUCRETIA BINGHAM PHOTOGRAPHS BY LANDON NORDEMAN



CLAM SHACKS

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AYBE IT'S BECAUSE OF OUR COLD winters, but I've found that we New Englanders tend to greet summer with a little more fervor than people from other parts of the country. When those first blazing days of June arrive, we practically throw ourselves at the beach, eager to have hot sand under our feet, to feel the scorch of the sun on our shoulders, and to savor the briny-sweet taste of the season's first tender fried clams. For me, eating clams by the sea is the purest expression of summer. And just as sacred as the food itself are the unpretentious institutions that serve it: clam shacks.

These convivial joints specializing in raw, fried, and stuffed clams, clam fritters, chowders, and, often, other classic summer fare like steamed whole lobster with fresh corn on the cob take advantage of the vast abundance of seafood—especially hard-shell and softshell clams—that thrives along the North American East Coast. Some of these places are bona fide shacks: wood-frame buildings that sit

astride a rickety dock or rise from a reedy shoreline. Others are multistoried shorefront restaurants with full bars and ample seating.

Worthy clam shacks that use fresh shellfish from local waters and serve their own, homemade chowders and clam cakes, or fritters, still exist in a number of New England states, but with all due deference to Connecticut, where I was born, on a recent clam shack quest I encountered the greatest concentration of them next door in Rhode Island. It was in the tiny Ocean State, specifically around the beaches and docks of Narragansett, that I rediscovered the types of clam shacks I remembered from my childhood—and, in fact, found a few that were better.

Fried clams are a popular order at Champlin's, below. Facing page, clockwise from top left: measuring the catch; local color; clam digging in Narragansett Bay; fresh-caught steamers. Previous pages, clam cakes at Aunt Carrie's.



CLAM SHACKS



RHODE ISLANDERS HAVE long been fans of casual seaside dining. By the late 1800s, family gatherings and political functions frequently centered around the clambake, a ritual derived from the local American Indian tradition of cooking shellfish over hot stones on the beach. But Rhode Islanders, apparently, weren't content to limit the pleasure of eating lots of shellfish to special occasions; they "pined for an opportunity to enjoy this feast whenever they felt like it," as Horace G. Belcher put it in *The New England Yankee Cook Book*, published in 1939. "And so, in the latter part of the last century and in the earlier years of the present, the shores of upper Narragansett Bay were dotted with clambake resorts where bakes were served daily." By the 1920s, these clambake "pavilions" had begun to give way to take-out establishments—perfectly suited



to America's nascent automobile culture—as well as inexpensive, seafood-focused family restaurants.

Over the years, an influx of Italian and Portuguese immigrants to Rhode Island, combined with the state's strong sense of regional identity, has wrought a distinctly local cuisine that includes, among other dishes, clear and tomato-tinged chowders; stuffed, baked clams (known as "stuffies") made with linguica or chouriço sausage; garlicky conch salad; clam cakes; fried calamari tossed with hot peppers; and a special kind of fried dough balls akin to the Italian zeppola. (For a lexicon of Rhode Island food terms, see page 94.)

All these local marvels were on my must-eat list LUCRETIA BINGHAM's most recent article for SAVEUR was "A Fine Virginian" (January/February 2007).

METHODS

Clam Cakes (Clam Fritters)

These fritters (pictured on page 88) are the perfect side dish for chowder. This recipe is an adaptation of one in *The New England Yankee Cook Book* (Coward-McCann, 1939). Pour canola oil into a large pot to a depth of 2". Heat over medium-high heat until oil registers 350° on a deep-fry thermometer. Meanwhile, sift 1 cup flour, 4 tsp. baking powder, 1 tsp. salt, and 1/8 tsp. freshly ground black pepper into a bowl. Stir together 2 cups (about 3/4 lb.) chopped clams (preferably quahogs), 1/2 cup milk, 2 tbsp. melted butter, and 1 lightly beaten egg in a bowl. Add flour mixture to clam mixture and stir. Working in batches, carefully drop spoonfuls of batter (about 3 tbsp. each) into oil. Fry, turning once, until golden brown and just cooked through, 3-4 minutes. Transfer fritters to a paper towel-lined plate and sprinkle with salt. Makes 1 dozen.

Fried Clams

Amanda Maybeck, the restaurant manager at Champlin's, coats her fried clams (pictured on facing page) with a combination of bread crumbs and a batter mix made by Rhode Island-based Drum Rock Products. Pour canola oil into a large pot to a depth of 2". Heat over medium-high heat until oil registers 340° on a deep-fry thermometer. Meanwhile, combine 2 cups Drum Rock Fis-Chic Wonder Batter (see page 104) and 2/3 cup fine dried bread crumbs in a bowl. Drain 1 lb. (about 30) shucked whole softshell clams (called steamers). Working in batches, toss clams in bread crumb mixture, pressing gently to coat; shake off excess. Carefully drop clams into oil and fry until crisp, about 2-3 minutes. Transfer clams to a paper towel-lined plate, then sprinkle with salt. Serve immediately with lemon wedges. Serves 4-6.

CLAM SHACKS

RECIPE

Red Chowder

SERVES 6

When it comes to clam chowder, says Imogene Wolcott in *The New England Yankee Cook Book* (Coward-McCann, 1939), “Rhode Island and Connecticut housewives uphold the tomato. The rest of New England scorns it”. This tomato version (right), a variation of Manhattan-style clam chowder, is based on one served at Champlin’s in Narragansett, Rhode Island.

- 2 **tbsp. butter**
- 1 **medium yellow onion, chopped**
- 1/2 **tsp. Lawry’s seasoned salt**
- 2 **cups chopped clams, preferably quahogs**
- 4 **cups bottled clam juice (if shucking quahogs, use their strained liquor to replace some of the bottled juice)**
- 4 **large white potatoes (about 1 3/4 lbs.), peeled and cut into 1/2” cubes**
- 1 **10 3/4-oz. can condensed tomato soup**
- 1/2 **cup canned tomato purée**
- 1/4 **tsp. cayenne**
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- Oyster crackers**

Melt butter in a large pot over medium heat. Add onions and seasoned salt; cook until softened, 8–10 minutes. Add clams, clam juice, and 1 qt. water. Raise heat to medium-high; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer for 30 minutes. Add potatoes and increase heat to medium-high; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low; simmer until potatoes are almost cooked through, 6–8 minutes. Stir in tomato soup, tomato purée, cayenne, and salt and pepper to taste. Simmer until potatoes are tender, 8–10 minutes more. Ladle into soup bowls. (The chowder tastes even better when chilled overnight and reheated.) Serve with oyster crackers.

as I embarked on an exploration of the Narragansett Bay shore, but before I tried anything else, I yearned to satisfy a craving for the premier clam shack specialty, fried clams. Accordingly, my first stop was Champlin’s Seafood Deck, a flag-festooned, two-story restaurant and fish market that allegedly serves some of the best fried clams in the state. I arrived midmorning, before the fryers had started up, so I perused the retail fish market on the ground floor while I waited. There I found Annie Senerchia, a sweatshirt-clad woman in her 40s who was working the fish counter. I noticed that, in addition to a huge variety of fish and prepared foods like conch salad and calamari salad, they sold quahogs—as Rhode Islanders call the larger, hardshell clams most commonly used for chowder—both whole and already chopped. “Even the old-timers buy them chopped. They don’t want to shuck,” Senerchia said.

I knew firsthand how tough it is to separate those sturdy bivalves from their shells, I told her, having



Rhode Island’s Beloved Bivalves

The Ocean State’s 400 miles of shoreline are blessed with an extraordinary bounty of seafood, but no catch is as quintessential as the hardshell clam, or quahog (variously pronounced kwuh-HOG and KO-hog). The state’s shellfishermen landed more than a million pounds of quahogs last year, and Rhode Islanders consumed a substantial portion of those. The Atlantic hardshell clams harvested in Rhode Island’s waters are almost all wild-caught and go by a variety of names, depending on their size: littleneck, cherrystone, and chowder (also called, confusingly, quahog). All are loved for their salty-sweet taste, which owes to the particular salinity, temperature, and ecological diversity of Rhode Island waters.

Rhode Island’s Narragansett Bay, a glacially cut estuary dotted with islands and refreshed with a constant flow of seawater, has always been an especially rich breeding ground for quahogs, which take their name from *poquahock*, an Algonquin word meaning round clam. The Narragansett people—the original inhabitants of what is today Rhode Island—harvested quahogs in great quantities from the bay,

made beads from their shells, and used the beads for bartering, which explains their scientific name, *Mercenaria mercenaria*—from the Latin word for wages or reward.

When European settlers arrived in New England, they brought with them an appetite not for clams but for oysters, which by the late 19th century had become popular among the well-to-do vacationers who descended each summer on Rhode Island’s shores, especially along Narragansett Bay. But as industry developed alongside tourism on the bay, pollution began to decimate its shallow-water oyster beds; the hurricane of 1938 destroyed those that remained. It was only after the demise of the local oyster industry, at the outset of World War II, that Rhode Island’s shellfishermen turned to clams, which remained safely ensconced at the bay’s bottom.

“At that time, there was no national market for clams,” says Ted Blount, president of Blount Seafood, whose family has worked in Rhode Island’s seafood industry since the 1880s. But after World War II, as vacationers returned to Rhode Island’s shores and roadside seafood shacks sprang up to

serve them, clamming became a viable industry in Narragansett Bay. “Back then, it was all bay quahogs [large chowder clams],” says Blount. “Now we have to go offshore for sea clams because the only things left in the bay are cherrystones and littlenecks.”

The methods used by Narragansett Bay’s quahoggers—as clam diggers are called in Rhode Island—haven’t changed much over the past century. Recreational quahoggers usually trudge into the estuaries at low tide and comb the sand with rakes, whereas the bay’s commercial shellfishermen most often work from semi-flat-bottomed boats, pulling and maneuvering a rakelike device along the seabed and scooping the clams into a basket. The two other professional methods are tonging, in which diggers probe the sea floor with a giant, scissors-like tool, and (more commonly) diving.

Most quahoggers in Narragansett Bay work for themselves and own their equipment, and most say they love their work. Even those who are born to the trade but leave it to pursue other careers often return to Rhode Island’s waters on weekends to do a little digging, either for fun

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spent a foggy and cold summer on Martha’s Vineyard as a teenager learning how to gather quahogs. Though many New Englanders collect clams by scouring the tidal flats using long-handled rakes, I wanted to find the big specimens that burrowed in deeper water. Wearing scuba gear, I would skim silently along the bottom of Vineyard Haven Harbor, trailing a mesh bag, looking for the telltale holes in the muddy sand.

Bob Mitchell Jr., the 35-year-old general manager of Champlin’s, explained that the quahogs sold there, as well as the smaller littlenecks and steamers, are raked from salt ponds near Rhode Island’s south shore or from Narragansett Bay and unloaded by boatmen directly into the restaurant’s dock front warehouse.

At 11 o’clock I headed upstairs to the kitchen, where I met Amanda Maybeck, the restaurant manager, who was readying the day’s first batch of clams. “We use small to medium-size steamers,” said Maybeck, an athletic-looking 45-year-old, as she rolled the plump, fresh-shucked mollusks in a specially concocted bread-

ing mixture and dropped them into the hot oil. (Champlin’s, like most respectable clam shacks, uses whole clams, including the tender bellies, though it also sells clam strips, made from the chewier siphon, or “neck”, of ocean quahogs.) The clams sizzled furiously before the frying basket was removed and the clams were left to drain. Maybeck heaped a dozen onto a plate garnished with a lemon wedge and pointed me to a table. As gulls shrieked overhead in the midday sun, I popped a clam into my mouth and bit into the soft flesh. I was in heaven, and hungry for more.

I RESISTED THE TEMPTATION to down another dozen clams and decided to move on. My quarry was a local specialty called clam cakes—deep-fried clam fritters—and my destination was a huge restaurant called George’s of Galilee, which is celebrated for its version of the dish. Every one of the 100-plus tables and five dining rooms at George’s seemed to be filled when I arrived. It’s hard to imagine that the place started out, in

For Rhode Islanders, eating clams by the sea is the purest expression of summer



A New England shellfisherman in the 1940s.

or to earn extra money or both. Still, the quahogger’s life is not without its challenges. Before they were banned in Rhode Island waters in the 1950s, commercial dredging boats plowed up the bay’s sea bottom to land bigger catches, making it harder for individual quahoggers to earn a living. More recently, huge aquaculture farms in states like Florida and Virginia, where clams grow faster in the warm waters, are driving prices to historic lows.

“Twenty years ago, there were a thousand quahoggers in Narragansett Bay, and they got about a quarter per piece,” says David Beutel, a fisheries specialist at the Rhode Island Sea Grant at the University of Rhode Island, in Kingston. “Now there’s only 120 full-time quahoggers, and they get about 15 cents a piece.”

Still, the increasing abundance of relatively cheap clams from out-of-state sources has not undermined the loyalty of Rhode Island’s clam shack owners and cooks, the majority of whom still buy only locally caught or grown shellfish whenever possible. Asked whether Rhode Island restaurateurs will soon have to give in to the rising tide of competition, Beutel scoffs. “No way,” he says. “They’d be driven out of business if they didn’t use local clams.” —Dana Bowen

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Restaurant owners "would be driven out of business if they didn't use local clams", says a fisheries specialist



Rhode Island Clam Shack Lingo

BOAT STEERER: Another name for a clam cake (see below).

CABINET: A milk shake.

CLAM CAKE: A flour or cornmeal fritter made with chopped clams.

CLEAR CHOWDER: Clam chowder in a clear seafood broth.

CHOURIÇO: A dry-cured Portuguese-style sausage often used in stuffies (see below).

COFFEE MILK: Ice-cold milk mixed with coffee syrup; Rhode Island's unofficial state drink.

DOUGHBOY: A deep-fried dough cake sprinkled with sugar; some locals dip theirs in chowder.

JOHNNYCAKE: A white-cornmeal skillet cake sometimes served alongside chowder.

LINGUIÇA: Another, milder dry-cured Portuguese-style sausage.

QUAHOG: A hardshell clam; also, specifically, a large clam used for chowder.

QUAHOGGER: One who digs for clams.

RED CHOWDER: Clam chowder in a tomato-based broth.

SINKER: Another name for a clam cake.

STUFFIES: Baked, stuffed quahogs.



1948, as a humble coffee shop that the original owner, a bakery-truck driver named Norman Durfee, bought from a guy named George Partelow. Norman's grandson, Kevin Durfee, now owns the place, I was told, and the clam cakes he sells are tasty and satisfying, but, alas, I found them to be heavier than I'd hoped.

Seeking perfection, I left George's and asked a man stepping into a pickup truck parked across the street where I could find the best clam cakes. "Go five miles up the road," he told me. "A place right next to the water called Starboard's. Puts the others to shame!" The Starboard Galley, as the place is officially known, has been around only since 1996 (and, since my visit, has moved to a new location, in Charlestown)—a fact I found surprising given the unequivocal vote of confidence the place got from a guy who looked to be a dyed-in-the-wool Rhode Islander and, as

RECIPE

Stuffies

(Stuffed Quahogs)

SERVES 6-8

This recipe is based on one in *The New England Clam Shack Cookbook* by Brooke Dojny (Storey, 2003).

- 15 slices white sandwich bread
- 3 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. linguica (Portuguese sausage; see page 104), finely chopped
- 6 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 2 ribs celery, finely chopped
- 1 small yellow onion, finely chopped
- 1 green bell pepper, cored, seeded, and finely chopped
- $\frac{2}{4}$ cups chopped clams, preferably quahogs
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup clam juice or strained clam liquor
- 6 tbsp. finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 3 tbsp. fresh lemon juice
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tbsp. Tabasco
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tbsp. worcestershire
- 6 tbsp. butter, cut into pats
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 16 empty large quahog half shells
- Paprika and lemon wedges

Heat oven to 275°. Pulse bread in food processor into fine crumbs. Transfer to a baking sheet and bake, tossing often, until dried, 15-20 minutes; set aside. Raise oven heat to 425°. Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add sausage, garlic, celery, onions, and peppers; cook until soft, 12-15 minutes. Add clams, clam juice, parsley, lemon juice, Tabasco, and worcestershire; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low; add butter. Add bread crumbs and salt and pepper to taste; stir. Divide stuffing between shells. Bake on a baking sheet until browned, 22-25 minutes. Sprinkle with paprika; serve with lemon wedges.

such, probably wary of upstart establishments.

The restaurant couldn't look more different from George's: the Starboard Galley was a cinder-block building with a tiny kitchen, a single take-out window, and a four-table dining room. My suspicions were further aroused by a sign above the entrance that read, "The Best Clamcakes and Chowda in Narragansett". (I recently learned that it has since been upgraded to read, "The Best Clamcakes and Chowda Anywhere".)

I ordered clam cakes and red chowder—Rhode Island's version of Manhattan-style clam chowder. The peppery tomato-based broth chock-full of chopped quahogs and white potatoes was good enough to put me off heavy, cream-based chowder

From top, the take-out window at Champlin's; littlenecks on the half shell. Facing page, a platter of stuffies.



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The clam cakes were exquisite, with browned bits of quahog, crisp as bacon, peeking out of the fritters' golden crust


forever. But it was the clam cakes that really impressed me: they were as light as, well, cake and generously bejeweled with bits of tender clam. All suspicions were firmly laid to rest.

At that point I'd eaten enough to get me through to breakfast, but one more stop awaited me: Aunt Carrie's, south of Narragansett's town center, in Point Judith. It's here that clam cakes were allegedly invented, and I've heard many Rhode Islanders also speak reverently about the fried clams to be had at this shorefront restaurant, one of the oldest clam shacks in New England.

Aunt Carrie's could be called the grande dame of Rhode Island clam shacks. The wood floors of the dining room shine, and lace curtains billow elegantly in the afternoon breeze. The owner, Elsie Foy, married the grandson of Carrie and Ulysses Cooper, who founded the restaurant in 1920 on the site where the couple's family used to camp in the summertime.

Manager Ray VanHine started as a dishwasher at Aunt Carrie's 21 years ago and is now among the elite few who know the original clam cake batter recipe. "It's the holy grail!" he said. "Most of the other res-

taurants would love to know how we do it." He took me into the kitchen and showed me the three ancient-looking frying vats—known as Fryolators—they use to make the fritters. "During the summer all three Fryolators are going all day long," VanHine said, "frying about 120 clam cakes at a time."

I took a plate of clam cakes and a dozen fried clam bellies out to the restaurant's enclosed porch and found a seat next to two sunburned teenage girls in flip-flops. The fried clams—juicy and just the right size—were as good as any I'd ever had, and the clam cakes were exquisite, with browned bits of quahog, crisp as bacon, protruding from the golden crust. I glanced at the girls next to me, who were sharing a plate of the fritters. They went about their business silently, except when the one closer to me murmured, with her mouth full, "Real good." I couldn't have said it better. 

THE PANTRY, page 104: Sources for chopped quahogs, Drum Rock batter mix, shucked softshell clams, linguica sausage, and empty quahog half shells. See www.saveur.com/clamshacks for a recipe for indian pudding.

THE GUIDE

RHODE ISLAND

AREA CODE: 401

Dinner with drinks and tip:

EXPENSIVE Over \$25 MODERATE \$10–\$25 INEXPENSIVE Under \$10

WHERE TO STAY

FISHERMEN'S MEMORIAL STATE PARK CAMPGROUND

1011 Point Judith Road, Narragansett (www.riparks.com/fisherma.htm). Rates: \$14–\$35. Open April to October. This 90-acre park encompasses 182 campsites. It's hardly wilderness camping—RVs are welcome—but it's five minutes from the beach.

OCEAN ROSE INN

113 Ocean Road, Narragansett (783-4704; www.oceanroseinn.com). Rates: \$119–\$289. The main building of this stately old inn is a 110-year-old Victorian house, located just yards from the Atlantic Ocean.

WHERE TO EAT

AUNT CARRIE'S 1240 Ocean Road,

Point Judith, Narragansett (783-7930; www.auntcarriesi.com). Open April to September. Moderate. This family-owned institution is known for its extra-large clam cakes, but plenty of customers come just for the indian pudding (a custard-like dessert made with cinnamon and molasses).

THE BLACK PEARL BANNISTER'S WHARF

Newport (846-5264; www.blackpearlnewport.com). Closed January and February. Expensive. An upscale but eminently comfortable option after you've clam-shacked your way across Rhode Island is the Black Pearl. One of the excellent chowders here is seasoned with dill and finished with vermouth.

CHAMPLIN'S SEAFOOD DECK

256 Great Island Road (on Galilee Harbor), Narragansett (783-3152; www.champlins.com).

Open year-round. Moderate. There's no middleman at this waterfront restaurant and fresh-seafood market: the owners get their clams directly from the boats every day, and they use only Rhode Island clams for their fried dishes and chowders, which are duly legendary.

CHOPMIST CHARLIE'S

40 Narragansett Avenue, Jamestown (423-1020). Open year-round. Moderate. Stuffies (baked, stuffed quahogs) are the favorite dish here; the chef, Chris Olobri, browns them on a griddle to achieve a toothsome crust. For dessert, the apple crisp and key lime pie are musts.

EVELYN'S NANAQUAKET

DRIVE-IN 2335 Main Road, Tiverton (624-3100; www.evelynsdrivein.com). Open April to October. Inexpensive. Founded 39 years ago, this restaurant serves an excellent "undressed" lobster roll on a hot dog bun with mayo on the side.

FLO'S CLAM SHACK

4 Wave Avenue, Middletown (847-8141). Open March to December. Moderate. This

local favorite is famous for its spicy stuffed quahogs, as well as superfresh raw littlenecks and fried clam bellies.

GEORGE'S OF GALILEE

250 Sand Hill Cove Road, Narragansett (783-2306; www.georgesofgalilee.com). Open year-round. Moderate. This bustling restaurant sells up to 12,000 clam cakes a day during the peak of the summer and has a lively bar scene.

IGGY'S DOUGHBOYS & CHOWDER HOUSE

889 Oakland Beach Avenue, Warwick (737-9459; www.iggysdoughboys.com). Open year-round. Moderate. A dependable source for chowder and clam cakes, Iggy's, which also has a location in Narragansett, is best known for the doughboy: a zeppola-like confection of fried dough.

STARBOARD GALLEY

Charlestown Beach Road, Charlestown (364-7100). Open Memorial Day to Labor Day. Inexpensive. Recently relocated from Narragansett, this restaurant caters mostly to the take-out trade and is known for its outstanding chowders.