

THE JOY OF BEING A HUNTER- GATHERER OF THE SANDY, SALTY REALM

A first-time clammer learns the rewards of digging his own go beyond a delicious meal

By Bill Hanrahan



Bill Hanrahan shows off the yield from a morning of clamming in Stonington. Photo: Ellie Corey

This story starts with a rake; I am hoping it ends with a fork.

I am standing thigh deep in the middle of a cove in Stonington on a gray day in early April, channeling what feels like a Henry David Thoreau vibe. Henry, as you know, always wanted to live deliberately, and with waders on, rake in hand, and the water pushing past me on its way toward Fishers Island Sound, I am feeling deliberately optimistic.

This moment has been a long time coming. I am ready to plunge my rake's wide teeth into the water and scratch the sandy bottom.

I was asked over the winter if I would write a personal account of a virgin clamming experience in Connecticut's coastal waters and this is it. The waders may be loaners, but it was my own writer's obsession that led me on many a cold, dark winter night to ponder the clam.

The Indians, I learned, appreciated clams long before the white man arrived. I found a book in my library by the late Euell Gibbons. Euell may have been most famous for his 1970s Grape Nuts commercials, but he was a fine naturalist, and knew a lot about gathering his own food. He informed me that clams have many names, like littleneck, cherrystone, and the biggest, the "Quahog," "the white man's attempt to pronounce the Indian name for this valuable bivalve."

I read up on "bivalves," too. Simply put, the clam has two valves. It also has an incurrent and an excurrent siphon; one that takes in nutrients and another that expels waste.

Clams get to be clams after the release of eggs and sperm by adult clams in the warming tidal waters of spring, then they land and grow on the sandy bottom of a marsh or beach, places like the cove I'm standing in. If conditions are right, they feed on nutrients that flow in and out with the tides. Hidden in the sand, the tiny clams take in food and grow. Their result-

ing shells are a mix of protein, calcium carbonate and other cool minerals that make the shells whitish-grey, but also with purple parts.

"These purple parts of the Quahog shells furnished the Indians with the material from which they made the most valuable wampum," Gibbons wrote.

I plunge my rake into the water and strike hard at the sandy, mucky bottom.

Alongside me in the cove this day are two local experts on all things shellfish: Tessa Getchis, an aquaculture specialist with Connecticut Sea Grant, and Don Murphy, chairman of the Stonington Shellfish Commission. Tessa agreed to be my guide. Don is along at Tessa's invitation for added perspective. Following us in shallow water, waders on and camera at the ready, is Judy Benson, editor of *Wrack Lines*.

Judy had encouraged me to weave in details on the economic impact of recreational shellfishing in Connecticut. Fourteen shoreline towns have recreational harvest areas open to the public, and towns such as Madison, Guilford and Fairfield regularly hold clamming clinics and family days. Thousands of residents already know that with a little gumption, a lot of stick-to-it-iveness (and a permit), virtually anyone can be a hunter-gatherer in the modern world, bringing home delicious protein-rich food that's quite literally right under our toes.

"The economic impact is a lot bigger than most people think," said Robert "Bob" Pomeroy, a world-traveling aquaculture expert. I caught up with Bob by phone one cold winter morning as he drove to Cape Cod for his mom's 90th birthday. He was so happy to talk shellfish that I think he covered the Bourne Bridge and most of Route 6 before we hung up.

Bob grew up on Cape Cod, in West Yarmouth, clamming as a kid on the waters of Lewis Bay. His grandfather lived on the water and would give the kids nickels to dig clams while the old guy kicked back on the porch with an Irish whiskey. Later, he shucked the clams for the kids.



John Short, chairman of the Fairfield Shellfish Commission, shows different types of clamming rakes at Sasco Beach, one of the town's most popular clamming areas. Photo: Bill Hanrahan

“My mother, she’d steam them and we’d eat them as steamers,” he added. “My stepfather made clam chowder, and there’s nothing better in the world.”

Pomeroy now lives in Mystic and travels the globe as an aquaculture consultant, teaching fishermen in impoverished nations how to build sustainable food sources. In addition, as a Connecticut Sea Grant Fisheries Extension Specialist, Bob works with Tessa to really crunch the numbers.

There are, for example, approximately \$110,000 worth of recreational shell fishing permits sold each year in the state, but that’s only the most obvious number. “There’s a strong multiplier effect,” Bob said.

In other words, clambers spend their wampum. They need gear. They need rakes and baskets, swimwear, waders, ice, gas for the car. They need lunch. They rent boat slips and cottages on the shore.

“These are factors you don’t think of when you see someone out in a cove with a rake,” Bob said.

Today, I am that guy in the cove with the rake.

An osprey flies overhead. “He yells at me every time I sample,” Don says, referring to his diligent testing of these waters to ensure clamming is safe for the public.

“This area right here,” Don says, “is sampled at least twice a month, 12 months a year... We have 30 stations just along the coast of Stonington... There are hundreds and hundreds of stations on Long Island Sound.”

Don and Tessa are both hard at work, digging. “If you go in a circular motion like this,” Don explains, “you can sort of cover one area more thoroughly.”

My rake digs in. It releases a plume of fine sediment that floats and swirls and clouds the waters in front of me. I feel something! I wiggle and scratch the tines deeper, trying to get underneath it, just as I’d been taught.

I was taught, in fact, on Easter morning, by John Short, chairman of the Fairfield Shellfish Commission. We met at Sasco Beach, one of the town’s most popular clamming areas.

“I grew up down the road from the beach,” John said. “I was asked to be on the commission and it just clicked. I love it. I love being out there and doing all this, and, as for the clamming, I love to eat clams. It’s fun! It’s relaxing. You’re digging and you’re finding clams... the family, the kids. They leave the cellphones in the car... It’s amazing, when the kids go out, once they start hitting clams, they can’t stop digging – it’s the same with everyone, you hit a couple clams and you’re so into it. It’s like digging for gold.”

Like Don, John emphasized that eating clams is safe, because shellfishing is only allowed in places free

of heavy metals and other contaminants. “When you go to a restaurant you feel it must be safe, and where do you think those clams come from? These same waters,” he said.

The tide was too high on Easter for clamming, but John brought his rakes – including one called a “Chatham Scratcher” – and he dug holes in the sand to show me proper technique. “I’ll teach you the basics so when you go out with Tessa you won’t look like a fool.”

“I’d appreciate that!”

Back to the task at hand: There is a palpable sense of excitement, and there is a subtle but undeniable good-natured competitiveness to clamming; I can feel it.

I lift my rake and swoosh it through the water to wash off the sand and silt, ready to reveal my catch. I’ve done it! I’ve hauled up a beautiful, round... rock!? (I thought John said this wouldn’t happen in front of Tessa?)

I admit to a brief lull in my clamming adventure. For a moment, I don’t think I’m going to get any clams. I’d been nervous and excited when I got up in the morning, and Ellie, my wife, had promised, “If you bring home the clams, I’ll make linguini with clam sauce.” What if I let her down?



Bill Hanrahan had a successful first outing as a clammer on an April day in Stonington. Photo: Judy Benson



Lou Bull, an avid clammer and clerk at Hillyers Tackle Shop, shows some of the equipment sold along with clamming permits at the Waterford store. Photo: Bill Hanrahan

“Don’t worry, you’ll get some,” Tessa says. “We’ll get you enough for dinner.”

And we do! Before I know it, we’re all hitting clams, each of us pulling up at least a few big, fat beautiful clams. Quahogs! “Hogs,” as Don calls them, and with purple-edged shells just like Gibbons promised.

Tessa and Don are magnanimous, each giving me their catch to ensure I go home with plenty for a meal. The mesh bag attached to my waders is getting heavy with clams.

We pull up a few smaller clams, too. Don checks them with his clam ring. There are strict rules on size and catch limits out here, and if a clam fits through the ring, you have to throw it back.

Speaking of rules, if you try clamming, don’t forget: you absolutely must have a permit. I went to Hillyers Tackle Shop in Waterford to get mine, but was informed by the man behind the counter, Lou Bull, that you have to buy your permit in the town where you plan to shellfish. I was glad I stopped at Hillyers, though, because Lou is a charming man, and quite philosophical about clamming. He started going out in the late 1950s, with his grandfather.

“You’ve only got a certain amount of time on the tide,” he said. “You’re living in the moment. We are hunter gatherers and there’s a thrill to catching clams. They don’t run very fast, but it’s still a thrill to get ‘em.”

I eventually bought my permit at Don’s

Dock in Stonington – a different “Don” than the guy I’m talking to now in the cove.

“I grew up in New London and started clamming in the Thames River,” Don says. “We’d go out with no shoes and feel the clams with our toes. Then you’d dive down and pick up the clam... There’s a satisfaction to catching your own food. And there are a lot worse things than being out on the water. You could be sitting in front a computer.”

Don rarely catches his limit; just enough for a dinner or two. “I like to catch enough so I have some littlenecks or topnecks so I can put them on the grill and let them boil in their own juices a little bit, and eat those that way. The bigger clams, the cherrystones and the hogs – the quahogs – I shuck those and generally do either stuffies, that’s baked stuffed clams, or, linguini with clam sauce, which is just the best.”

Don encourages families to try clamming for all the obvious reasons, yet also for a slightly less obvious one: “The more people that do this, the more people who are paying attention to the water and, in my view, commercial and recreational shellfishing are powerful forces towards improving water quality.”

Tessa shares this same creed. She grew up clamming and fishing

these local waters; today, her two girls, ages 7 and 9, are just as enthusiastic. She tells me she loves her job as an extension educator with Sea Grant, based at UConn Avery Point, working with the shellfish industry, the regulators and also the public.

We are off the water now, sitting in Tessa’s car, when she sums it all up:



The mesh bag attached to Bill Hanrahan’s waders grew heavy with clams after an hour of digging. Photo: Judy Benson

“We want people to care about Long Island Sound and protect the Sound and learn about it, so one of the ways to do that is to get people out there, experiencing all the Sound has to offer,” she says. “It all starts with youth. My kids get so excited about it and what they learn when we’re out there... All of those questions they have, it’s such a good conversation starter for families and youth, and that’s where it all happens – when they start asking questions, and then they start to care, and then they want to take action, and then we have so many more people who are passionate advocates for our Sound and for our watersheds that lead to the Sound. That’s what I find really exciting.”

I’m home and our kitchen is in chaos. We are steaming open clams on the stove, linguini is boiling in a pot, and Ellie is stirring her “famous” sauce: lots of chopped garlic, parsley, olive oil, a little butter, white wine, fresh juice from the clams that are popping open. I use a sturdy ice cream spoon to pry the clam shells apart and we scoop out the meat, chopping it up and adding it to the simmering sauce.

My maiden clamming adventure is a reminder of how special it is right here, in the place we call home.

Bill Hanrahan

This whole day is making me philosophical, too. Years ago, Ellie and I had the good fortune to travel much of the United States in a Volkswagen, often camping in the most magnificent state and national parks. My maiden clamming adventure is a reminder of how special it is right here, in the place we call home. In a recent book I read called *The Nature Fix*, writer Florence

Williams dissects how our experiences outdoors in natural places can provide a host of health benefits, from lower blood pressure to enhanced moods. Williams could add a chapter on clamming.

We open a bottle of chardonnay and pour the wine. The linguini and the clams are on the plates, each with a “jaunty sprig of parsley” as Euell Gibbons recommends. We clink our glasses and toast the clam. And maybe it’s the wine or the endorphins after a long day, but I feel happy. I feel deliberate! I am thankful for the bounty that has gone from sea to table, cove to plate, rake to fork.

Like clams, we dig in.

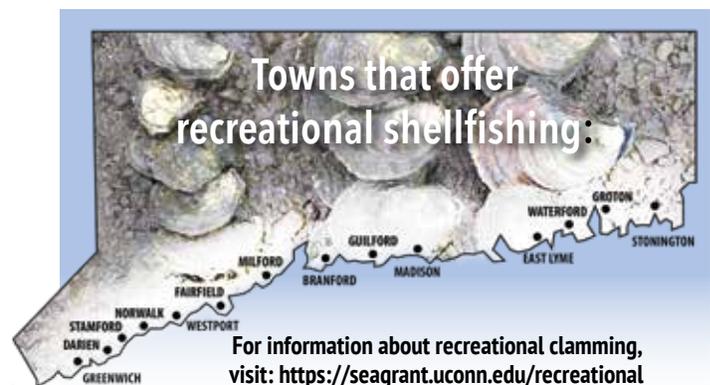


Linguini and Clam Sauce, a la Ellie

- 1 pound linguini, cooked al dente
- clams: As many – species and quantity – as you can get your hands on
- garlic: at least 8 or 10 cloves, chopped
- Flat-leaf (Italian) parsley: most of a bunch, large tough stems removed (set aside a couple of jaunty sprigs)
- olive oil: couple tablespoons
- ½ cup or so white wine: chardonnay or pinot grigio; whatever you’re drinking
- Cooking liquid from the clams: ½ cup or so
- butter: if you’re cooking for Bill Hanrahan
- Parmesan cheese
- red pepper flakes
- freshly ground black pepper

1. Sauté the garlic in olive oil until it’s soft, but not brown. Add wine and clam liquid (which you’ll get in the next step) to keep the garlic soft-not-brown. You want enough liquid to make the dish juicy, but not too much to drown the clams. Remove the pan from the heat.
2. In a separate pan, steam the clams in an inch or so of water until they open enough to manually pry them open; scoop out the meat and chop it up. We had difficulty opening some of the bigger clams, so let them steam longer in their shell; basically cooking them through during this step. Reserve about ½ cup of the clam cooking liquid for the sauce.
3. Add the chopped clams and the chopped parsley to the garlic mixture (and butter, if you’re Bill Hanrahan). Sauté for just a couple of minutes: you want the flavors to mesh, but for the parsley to stay green and the clams to stay firm.
4. Over a heaping helping of linguine, scoop plenty of the delicious mixture; be sure to include lots of liquid. Add a generous portion of Parmesan cheese; top with red pepper flakes and freshly ground pepper.
5. Garnish with a jaunty sprig of parsley... et voilà.

Serve with a fresh, zingy spinach salad, and a crusty baguette for sauce-sopping.



For information about recreational clamming, visit: <https://seagrant.uconn.edu/recreational>