

Hooked on Connecticut seafood —fresh from farmers’ markets

by Cory Hermann Janiak

What do you know about local seafood? Do you know what types are available? Do you know where to get the freshest of the freshest? If you’ve lived in Connecticut for any amount of time, you’re bound to have an opinion about seafood.

The Connecticut Seafood Council promotes local seafood with the slogan “Connecticut Seafood – As Fresh as it Gets”. I would like to take those words and impose a jingle that plays in the background as you read on, “...as fresh as it gets, as fresh as it gets, as fresh as it gets...” because you are about to embark upon another level of freshness. Believe it or not, there is something that goes above and beyond – dare I say it?—the local, albeit reputable fish market. Buying seafood from the fisherman or harvester who labored to bring it forth from the sea on the very same day is really “As Fresh as it Gets”. Sure, everyone’s heard of going down to the docks, but what if the docks could come to you? They can and they do, at the farmers’ markets.

To explore the subject in depth, I decided to spend a Saturday morning at the Wooster Square Farmers’ Market in New Haven. This is one of the four City Markets involved in the City Seed program. I was thrilled to learn that all of the vendors at these City Markets only sell Connecticut grown products that they themselves are involved in producing. Eliminating the middleman keeps prices low, and selling locally eliminates any need to consider additig preservatives to extend shelf life.

The Wooster Square Farmers Market is a year-round outdoor market (every other Saturday during the winter months, visit <http://www.cityseed.org/> for more information) where you can find Connecticut seafood (“as fresh as it gets, as fresh as it gets!”).

I visited on a typical overcast spring day when strollers packed with bundled babies and leashed pups



Bow-King Seafood baked stuffed clams are available at the Wooster Square Farmers’ Market. Patty King recommends serving with horseradish after reheating.

sporting sweaters filled the gaps between the booths. I maneuvered my way through the cheery crowd until I saw the white tent stamped with the Connecticut Grown label juxtaposed over signage for fresh shellfish. There below, happily selling her goods beneath the cover from scattered drizzle, was Patty King and the Dolan Brothers Shellfish/ Bow-King Seafood booth.

I was fortunate to have run into Patty at the booth since she is primarily jaunting around the surface of



Large trees provide ample shade over the Wooster Square Farmers’ Market during the summer.

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Patty King sorting out a dozen oysters for a customer.

Long Island Sound as a captain of a clam boat. She harvests Tuxis Island clams fresh from the deep, cold, and briny waters off the coast of Guilford. Her brother, D.J. King, is a Connecticut lobsterman that pulls traps near by. In addition to an offering of these Dolan Brothers Shellfish products at her booth, she provides Norm Bloom and Son oysters and clams bearing the brands Copsps Island and CedarPoint. Already, that's a lot to offer, but Patty also brings taste bud-tantalizing seafood made by her catering business, Bow-King Seafood. Year round offerings include clam chowder and baked stuffed clams, both made from her own Tuxis Island clams ("as fresh as it gets, as fresh as it gets!").

During the summer, there is a wider selection including baked stuffed lobster tails and the Amaya Brothers Cold Clam Ensalata, a spicy salad named after her deckhands. I was told it is very similar to a tangy scungili salad.

All of these products can claim the prestigious label, Connecticut Grown (usually seen as "CT Grown" on the logo). The Connecticut Department of Agriculture encourages Connecticut farms and fishermen to use this logo on their products. This lets you, the consumer, know that the product is fresh and local.

How fresh is it really?

I asked Patty how long it took a bag of clams to get from her dock to her booth at the market. She shared with me that it takes an average of ten minutes. If you are concerned about reducing your carbon footprint, buying something this local would be a good start! She originally began selling up at the Kent Farmers' Market by request, but after spending too much time in travel and away from her business she decided to stop selling at the inland market and open a booth closer to home, at Wooster Square. Often the clams will be harvested within a few days of the market (much like some fresh vegetables and fruits you find at farmers' markets, too) and kept cold and fresh according to HACCP standards (strict FDA food safety terms). But even better, you can count on the fact that the lobsters she sells have been pulled fresh from the sea that very morning.

Here in Connecticut we are very proud of our shellfish and our CT Grown labeled items, and every effort is made to provide a fresh and healthy product. At the Wooster Square Market, outlets

Connecticut Farmers' Markets with seafood:

- East Haven
- Fairfield*
- Madison
- Milford
- Mystic
- New Haven*
- Stonington

**available in winter*

and extension cords are made available for those that need to keep refrigerators running. Also, the Health Inspector stops by to certify that each vendor is up to code at every single market event. Patty keeps a close eye on the temperature of her shellfish by keeping temperature logs. Every time the door to the mini-fridge swings open when she goes to scoop more shellfish out for a customer, you can spot a thermometer poking through the mesh bag and gleaming with its dial perpetually pointing below 40°F.

Her shellfish bags are purple and bear two labels. The first is a certified shellfish tag that must accompany the shellfish wherever they go. This tag allows anyone to trace clams and oysters back to the shellfish bed they were harvested from and the date they were taken. A reputable seafood harvester and dealer will have all of the information filled out and harvest only in certified clean waters. The second is a giant label sporting the CT Grown logo bold and colorful in the center. Below the country of origin on the label, in large print,

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Some of the Connecticut Grown shellfish available at farmers' markets (pictured are oysters from Norm Bloom and Son and Dolan Brothers Clams)

Bow-King's Seafood clam chowder is offered year round at the Wooster Square farmers' market.

it reads "Keep Refrigerated 38°F to 40°F", a reminder that is not necessary, but very helpful.

Patty not only meets all of the regulatory standards for keeping seafood safe until it gets to her customers, she exceeds these standards. She offers means to keep her products safe and fresh until her customers can get them home. If you visit her booth and have forgotten to bring your cooler or insulated reusable bag, she offers zip-lock baggies of ice for all of the shellfish and freshly harvested seaweed specifically to keep the lobsters moist. As an added New England bonus, the type of seaweed she collects is called knotted wrack (*Ascophyllum nodosum*). This species is the seaweed that has been used in traditional New England clam bakes for centuries. Sprigs of this seaweed can also be added to the water used to boil lobsters for an additional salty sea flavor.

As well as the attention to detail she communicates on food

safety issues, Patty offers up her knowledge on how to shuck an oyster or clam or how to properly boil a lobster. With her catered products



The New Haven area group of City Farmers' Markets can be found four days a week and can easily fit in to your schedule. Visit <http://www.cityseed.org/> for more information.

she includes hints on how to heat and serve while wrapping up a customer order. These are just some of the added benefits of going to a farmers' market; you get to talk with the people who have invested their lives in their products. You know that they are passionate about what they do and you can rely on the fact that these local fishermen and harvesters really know what they're talking about.

At Patty's booth, the most popular item is littleneck clams by the dozen. These are the smallest size offered commercially in this state, and are also called Steamer clams for their prevalence as a steamed item in pasta dishes. If you've ever had a clam on a half shell, what you had was most likely one of this class size. The next biggest class of clam is known as the topneck. These are popular in the grilling market and as Clams Casino. The largest marketable clams are known as chow-

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Northern quahogs



ders... and as you've probably guessed, these are the ones popularly used in clam chowder. Chowder clams are also used to make clam strips or are chopped and added to sauces. Chowders and the size class smaller, Cherry Stones, or Cherries, are both the perfect size for stuffing. Patty shared a helpful tip for shucking these larger clams before cooking: get them really cold first. Putting them in the freezer for a short time immediately before shucking will make them easier to pry open.

Captain Jeff Northrop of Westport Aquaculture was also kind enough to share his experience as a seafood vendor in the farmers' market scene. His involvement with Westport farmers' market sprouted from his relationship with supporters of Wholesome Wave, an organization founded on making fresh and local food available, with an emphasis on lower income individuals. (For more details, visit <http://wholesomewave.org/index.html>. After receiving an amazing response at this one market, he branched out to the Ridgefield Farmers' Market and the indoor winter market in Fairfield.

At the market you will see that his booth sign reads "West Port Aquaculture" across the top followed by the products he sells: clams, Bluepoint oysters, and lobsters. But most importantly it also displays his name, Captain Jeff Northrop. He feels that it is really important that people associate his product with a name and a face. He needs his customers to feel confident about where their food is coming from and that it is safe and healthy to eat. As a testament to this, he always staffs his booth himself (with a helper), so you

Quahog size chart. What do you do with the different sized clams? Some options are listed below:
Chowder— clam strips, chowder, stuffed clams
Cherry (cherry stone)—stuffed clams
Top neck—clams casino, grilled
Little neck—steamed (as in pasta dishes), on the half shell

can count on meeting Jeff if you visit any of the markets where he sells. Clams and oysters are available all year and lobsters are available during the summer and fall. During the winter Jeff serves up hot clam chowder to bring some warmth to chilly New England days.

As fresh as it gets

All of Jeff's seafood is harvested within 20 miles of the farmers' markets where his products are sold. When asked about how fresh his products are he replied, "Our products go direct from the boat into a stationary reefer and then into iced coolers for delivery to the markets. Please note that our product is harvested daily to order, and is never warehoused." Cue the jingle again, "As Fresh as it Gets!"

Jeff revealed that he began shellfishing because it is a family tradition, and one he is very proud to be a

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Captain Jeff Northrop's Family Clam Chowder

2 sticks butter
 1 lb. smoked bacon, chopped
 3 sweet onions, chopped
 1 pkg. celery, chopped
 2 cups water
 1 tsp. salt
 1 tsp. pepper
 200 littleneck clams, shucked, liquors reserved
 1 bag potatoes, peeled and chopped
 1 qt. whole milk or half & half
 Thyme

In a tall 3 gallon pot combine butter, bacon, onions, and celery. Cook until golden brown then add water, salt, and pepper. Cover and leave at a simmer. Meanwhile, over a large bowl, open 200 little necks, making certain to catch all the nectar/liqueur in the bowl. Peel and chop the potatoes then add them along with the clam nectar to the pot. Bring to a boil and cook until potatoes soften. At this point you add the clams and a pinch of thyme. Bring back up to a boil and simmer for ten minutes. Remove the lid and let cool. When cool, add one quart of whole milk or half and half. That's it! People are always amazed at how simple it is to make, and marvel at the texture and consistency. Creamy, not gloppy, and so flavorful!

part of. He notes, "like most of us in the industry we do this because it's in our blood. Many of us have [shellfish] beds that go back in our family many generations, some even to colonial times." His comment serves as a reminder that when you choose to buy a local product, you are not only supporting the local economy, but you are preserving a heritage. As a tribute to his own heritage, Jeff has generously provided a copy of the recipe for his family's clam chowder. He has seen original copies of this recipe dating back to 1857.

Finally, there is a regional flavor imbued in Connecticut Grown shellfish. Because these local bivalves are harvested from the deep and cool salty waters of the Long Island Sound estuary the meat is firmer and

Seafood available at Connecticut Farmers' Markets:

Shellfish-clams, oysters, sea scallops

Crustaceans-lobster, red shrimp

Finfish-cod, fluke, hake, haddock, pollock, sea bass, scrod, sole

Seafood facts from the Connecticut Seafood Council

- The largest farms in Connecticut are underwater.
- Oyster farming has been practiced in Connecticut over the last 3 centuries.
- Connecticut leads the northeast in marine aquaculture production.
- The American Oyster is the official state shellfish.
- American Shad is the official state fish.
- Connecticut is ranked first in clam production on the East Coast.

saltier than those harvested in shallower waters of other estuaries, river mouths, and embayments. Look for this difference to be most notable when serving oysters and clams on the half shell. But also, as you slurp down a local oyster or two, or even sip a spoonful of freshly made clam chowder, close your eyes and appreciate how wonderful it is to have the opportunity to experience this local flavor ...as fresh as it gets!

Now, the only question that remains is...what's for dinner?

Editor's note: For info on the markets, point your web browser to: <http://www.ct.gov/doag/site/default.asp>

(Click on Farmers' Market)

About the Author:

Courtney ("Cory") Hermann, now Janiak, was writing this on the day before her wedding, which featured Connecticut Grown flowers and a menu of Connecticut Grown seafood, cheeses, and vegetables. She was swept off her feet, away from Connecticut Sea Grant and the shores of Long Island Sound, and now calls the Maryland shore of the Chesapeake Bay her home. Cory took all the photos in this article.