

The sport of shellfishing

By Rindy Higgins
Special to The Hour

Editor's note: This is the fifth in a ten-part series on shellfishing, both recreational and professional. In the next article we will explore commercial shellfishing.

WESTPORT -- They trudge out of the water dressed in their jackets and waders, and cross the beach with a look of great satisfaction. A bucket in one hand contains the day's catch. In the other hand is a clamming rake.

George Zygmant, 59, of Southport, and Mike Puskas, 58, of Fairfield, and have been meeting like this for as long as they can remember. On a recent Sunday morning, they carry their catch of quahog clams back to the small parking lot at Canal Beach in Westport. This will be just enough for dinner, they tell a visitor who peaks into the back of their truck. Then, like every hobbyist promoting a cause, they stop to talk.



George learned clamming from his uncles and Mike learned from his father long ago. They find this activity relaxing and rewarding.

"It's been pretty good since the town has taken over the management; they seed the beds, so there is quite a bit out there. Years ago, when the state had jurisdiction, everyone could shellfish these natural beds," they noted. "but the state didn't seed the beds, so the harvest decreased."

"Now we shellfish all year round," Zygmant says. "In early spring, we wade out to rake for clams or we walk along the flats at low tide to dig for steamers. We look for their holes. We overturn the sand with a pitchfork, and find lots of steamers just below the surface."

"When the summer season gets going, we boat out to Sprite Island or Cockenoe," Puskas adds.

In the winter, they cautioned a newcomer, it's important to clam below the low water mark. "If you take clams above the low water mark, you can't tell if the clams are voluntarily closed up or frozen shut. You won't know until it's too late and you feel sick after you cook and eat them," said Zygmant, speaking from experience.

One trick they use at home when preparing winter steamers is to add a jalapeno to some salted water and soak them for a short while. "This makes them spit and clean themselves out. In the winter, in the wild, steamers do this more slowly than in the summer and are therefore filled with more grit than otherwise."

Though permit sales are strong in Westport and in Norwalk, Puskas said, "there don't seem to be as many people clamming as there used to be. Young people don't seem to be doing it anymore. They need someone to teach them."

Yet a few days later at the same site, Frank Fragoso, 58, a retiree from Yonkers, was doing just that: passing on his techniques to the next generation. With him was his nephew Damion Fragoso, 24. The older Fragoso has been shellfishing all his life, having learned from his dad.

"All I need is this clamming rake, a bucket and float to wrap around the bucket," he says. "And look what I found: a half bushel of clams to bring home. This will last me three dinners. I'll eat some raw, grill some, and the rest I will top over linguine with a sauce."

"The \$50 for the permit is worth it. I look at this like a sport. Compare it to golf -- you buy equipment, drive to a course, pay a greens fee, and then come home with fewer golf balls than when you started. So shellfishing is a good deal."

As a retiree, Fragoso enjoys the exercise, being outside and passing the time with his nephew reminiscing about the old days.

Damion, 24, an assistant teacher, said he has discovered that he likes "the quiet of being here after being with school kids all week. But I wouldn't have even known about shellfishing if my uncle hadn't asked me to come along four years ago." Damion and a friend had gone off in search of steamers, but came back with a lot of oysters instead. Part of the hunt is the surprise.

While almost all shellfishers are male, a few females join the hunt. Not all fit the profile of a rugged outdoors person who enjoys digging, getting wet and muddy.

Take Robbie Sumberg, a Westport designer working with vintage textiles and a former vice president of Macy's. "I am not the typical person you find out there," she says. Sumberg grew up in New York City and moved to Westport years ago to raise her family.

"Although I have enjoyed Compo Beach with my family, I never considered getting a meal

from the waters there until last year when my friend Debra Moss called. She had gone shellfishing and found a lot of oysters. Because her husband is allergic to shellfish, Debra wanted someone to help her eat her catch.

"I went over to her house and we feasted -- gorged ourselves, really -- on raw oysters dipped in homemade cocktail sauce and mignonette sauce. Then we grilled some. I was so impressed that I bought a Westport Shellfish permit this year."

Sumberg admits she had everything to learn: about tides, when it is best to go out, and what equipment to use and how to use it, never mind how to cook her catch.

"So, decked out in my wellies, Debra and I went out on a sunny day in April to forage for dinner. We spent two hours plucking mussels and oysters by hand off the rocks.

"People came up and asked what we were doing and whether it was really okay to eat shellfish from these waters. We explained that the shellfish beds are carefully monitored for pollution and that these bivalves are safe to eat.

"A few days later, I invited friends over for my own oyster fest! We shucked and ate the oysters raw. For the mussels, we pulled off the beard (blackish fuzzy threads) with a firm tug, shucked them and cooked them in a tomato sauce over linguine. We called it Mussels a la Compo!"

Shucking, by the way, isn't easy; it takes practice. The oyster has one shell that is bowl shaped, so keep that face down. Insert a shellfishing knife between the shells at the far end, prying back and forth between the shells, cutting around the rim to sever the inside muscle.

Another way to open clams is to put them in the freezer for 20 minutes; they will open slightly and will yield to the knife quite easily.

What's the appeal to Sumberg? "It doesn't leave much of a carbon footprint and it's fun. The shellfish are fresher than buying them from a store. And after one meal, I have more than gotten my money's worth."

A few days later, Copp McNulty of Norwalk, an 82-year-old volunteer at The Maritime Aquarium, wants to talk about when he got started more than 50 years ago.

"I learned shellfishing from my folks. When I was a kid, there were always different rakes and buckets around in our garage. My parents had a boat and my grandfather was in the commercial fishing industry, so this was in my blood."

In the 1960's, McNulty would line up before dawn in front of Westport's Town Hall to be sure of getting a coveted permit because he particularly liked Westport's waters. He would wade off Saugatuck Shores, Compo Beach, and Sherwood Island to gather steamers from the flats, as well as oysters and mussels attached to rocks. When he had a boat, he clammed off of Cokenoe Island and Goose Island, too.

One very hot summer day McNulty watched disappointed shellfishing folks returning to their cars, complaining that there were no steamers to be found due to the heat. With typical gusto, he persisted until he found "a ton of steamers about 10-inches deep, just hiding from the heat til I found 'em!"

A hardy soul, he has shellfished all year round, walking the flats in winter looking for steamers.

"The best part about harvesting shellfish is that I love to eat them!" he exclaims. Over the decades, McNulty has created his own version of a Manhattan style, tomato-based chowder. The recipe appears in the box nearby.

All of these shellfishermen agree that properly handling the catch from the moment it comes out of the water contributes to safely enjoying their meals. The state recommendations on safe handling include:

- Be sure the shellfish meet harvestable size requirements. Rinse them immediately to remove grit, mud, seaweed growth.
- At home, scrub the shells well, checking that the shells remain tightly closed. Open shells indicate the contents are dead. Store live shellfish in a bowl with a damp cloth on top (not in an airtight container or water, since they will suffocate and die).
- If refrigerated close to 38 degrees, mussels and clams in their shells can keep for two or three days whereas oysters in shells can be stored for seven to 10 days. Freshly shucked clams can be refrigerated for two days, shucked oysters for five to seven days.

No matter how you catch them, or get them open, there is a tasty treat inside and lots of ways to prepare them for eating.

Rindy Higgins, a commissioner of a local shellfish commission and trustee of a conservation association in Massachusetts, was a marine educator for more than 20 years at The Maritime Aquarium. Her "Raking It In" series discusses the benefits and challenges, techniques, ecology, and cultural heritage of shellfishing in Westport waters.