

# VILLAGE VIEW

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If I were asked to name three things about the Cape I've missed most during this winter in Florida, I'd have to say that people top the list: family and close friends. The second biggest miss is scallops.

Although never a major part of my diet on Cape Cod, every six weeks or so when the urge is strong, I splurge and treat myself to a good feed. A scallop dinner isn't fare anyone would choose much oftener than that, but once you've grown accustomed to eating them every so often and then do without for months on end, you really do hanker for a taste of that succulent mussel.

When I was a child, scallops were frequently on the menu at our house. Fifty years ago, they weren't the expensive delicacy they are today. Then, as now, Osterville had no fish market; instead, one of the local fishermen would appear at our back door in the late afternoon and offer Mother a quart of scallops for \$.50 or \$.75, and I don't ever remember that she didn't buy them when she had a chance.

On those nights, it was usually my assignment to clean the bits of shell and seaweed from the meat, then roll them in yellow corn meal while Mother heated a little bacon fat in the big black iron spider she always used for frying; then, when we heard Dad's car, Mother would start them cooking. By the time Dad had washed up, the scallops were golden brown and ready. Scallops shouldn't be overcooked; it makes them tough.

In those days, all our meals were prepared on a cast iron coal stove that dominated the kitchen, helped heat the house, and kept the family supplied with hot water. The sweet smell of frying scallops quickly spread throughout the downstairs rooms, and no one needed to be called to the dinner table.

Although the black monster of a coal stove has long since

been superseded by a series of white-enamelled electric ranges, Mother still fries scallops in the same iron spider she used when her children were small. My own choice when preparing scallops is to broil the delicious morsels; and, while it's probably grounds for accusing me of treason, I prefer sea scallops to bay. The larger variety, not quite so sweet but more delicately flavored, are less rich and better suited to my gastronomy. This is a personal preference at which epicures may sniff.

Florida scallops, if there are any, do not appear in local markets, nor do they arrive for sale at my door. Restaurants offer them, and I've been tempted. With typical Yankee caution, however, I've sampled them in combination with other treats from the sea, when included with a seafood platter. Restaurants here, like most on the Cape, deliver fried fish so heavily breaded the flavor is almost totally disguised. I retaliate by removing the crusty coating and consuming only the meat that lies within.

The scallop served in these parts has approximately the correct shape, color, and texture, but lacks utterly any taste. Shrimp tastes shrimplike; haddock or cod tastes fine. But I should as soon chew a piece of cellulose sponge the diameter of a quarter and the thickness of my thumb, as one of these so-called scallops.

Thinking that perhaps the fault lay in the preparation, I parted recently with \$8.50 for a pint of "Cape Cod scallops" at a nearby and reputable fish market. Following the time-honored never-fail recipe, the one women in the Leonard family have used since the days of coal-burning stoves, I brought the sizzling scallops to the table. They were barely edible.

Future fish dinners, until I return to my native shores, will be limited to such dainties as pompano, a Florida fish that vies with the best of finny creatures. Bluefish, as plentiful in Florida waters as in those off Craigville Beach, is excellent. Fresh shrimp abundant in these warmer seas and compare pleasantly with frozen varieties Cape Codders know. Crab, and there is a wide choice of types, are all good.

The blue crab, once common in estuaries on the Cape's south shore, is plentiful in Florida. Found here, too, is the stone crab. Most of these are harvested among the islands of the Everglades on the Gulf coast of this peninsula. Only the

claws are taken from the crustacean; the creature itself is tossed back into the water because it possesses the ability to generate a new limb when one is lost. So fragile is the meat of the stone crab that the claws are steam-cooked immediately, then quick-frozen, and widely distributed. No better crabmeat is to be found, but its price includes the heavy shell and is, therefore, a consideration. A hammer to crack the claws is essential.

Fresh fish in Florida is abundant and good. Grouper, I find, tends to be dry and tough, but yellow tail and red snapper make fine eating. Flounder here is like flounder at home. Oysters are small but tasty if you can find them. Some native Floridians relish catfish and mullet but these don't appeal to me.

There's no reason to feel deprived of choices of fish, here; nor do I. And yet, I do miss scallops.

The third thing? Chickadees. Birds aplenty flock to Florida's coast. Robins consume the fruit of the ficus tree until they flutter, intoxicated, because the berries ferment as they ripen, and the robins don't know when to stop. Mockingbirds are nesting, now, and singing their musical notes at all hours, filling the neighborhood with their joyful sounds. Shore birds include the comical-looking pelican, great blue heron, smaller grebes, gulls, of course, and, occasionally, anhinga. While the latter groups don't serenade from trees in residential properties, they're always visible along the waterfront where the Indian River flows between the village and the barrier island that protects this coastal community from the ocean's battering waves.

My Field Guide to American Wildlife informs me that the Carolina chickadee should range throughout Florida, but not a one have I yet spied. Since its song is almost identical to that of its northern cousin, and its appearance so similar it's difficult to tell them apart, I'm certain I'd have noticed if any nested here.

When spring comes to the northland, and along with the birds of summer I return to Cape Cod, among the first things I'm planning on is picking up a mess of scallops, inviting family and friends to share them, and while summer gives way to fall, watching the chickadees splash in the birdbaths, feed among the blueberry bushes, and listening to their friendly songs among the shrubbery.