

# VILLAGE VIEW

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If you've looked at a restaurant menu recently, you're probably restructuring your social patterns to exclude eating out, and centering your evening entertainment around auctions, band concerts or visits with neighbors and friends.

That doesn't mean you're not hankering for a mess of steamed clams, a heap of broiled scallops, or a plate of fried oysters. Those succulent bivalves are just as tasty at outrageous prices as they were when fish was the least expensive meal restaurants had to offer. You may have concluded a shellfishing expedition is a good way to appease your appetite. And it is.

Before heading for the mudflats or marshes, however, hie yourself to Town Hall, buy a shellfish permit, and become familiar with your town's regulations. These rules are designed to give an opportunity to enjoy a share of the shellfish and still protect the supply. If fishermen strip the flats and dig the marshes bare, there'll be no crop another year.

Each town surveys its shellfishing areas' resources at regular intervals; when supplies dwindle, the area is closed for restocking and left undisturbed until the shellfish replenish themselves. When they've grown to legal size, the area is reopened for harvesting. For a clam to grow to legal size takes about two years; for a quahog, four years.

The quahog, also called a hard clam, has different names at each stage of its growth. It's a littleneck when it's 2" to 2½" long, a cherrystone when between 2½" to 3" long, and a chowder when larger than 3" long.

Anything shorter than 2" is below legal size and must be returned to deep water so it can grow. When you get a shellfish permit you'll be given a metal ring with an inside diameter of 2". A family is allowed to take a peck of quahogs each week; that's about 130 littlenecks or 25 chowder clams. Fortunately these keep well under refrigeration; it's a big family that uses a peck of quahogs in a week.

The soft-shelled clam, as its name implies, has a fragile

shell; when digging be careful not to break or spear them. Those under two inches in length must be replanted with their necks upright and covered with a sprinkle of sand. Too much sand will smother the poor thing. These too come in sizes: steamers are 2" to 2½" long, longnecks 2½ to 3", and anything larger is a long clam. Longnecks are best fried; longs make scrumptious chowder, and steamers are just that.

Bay or Cape scallops can't be harvested after April 1st or until after the season opens in the fall, as decreed by town fathers. Since a scallop lives only two years and reproduces only in its final year, only second year scallops may be harvested legally. If you're still shellfishing when scalloping season opens, look for a well-defined raised growth line on the rim of each shell. Throw back the immature scallops to insure new generations will follow. They're good eating whether consumed raw or cooked.

The oyster season varies from town to town and year to year, but seldom opens until after Labor Day. Legal size is any oyster longer than 3". Raw or cooked, the oyster is a delicious tidbit. The real trick is getting it out of its shell. Take a lesson from an expert before attempting to shuck an oyster. It's easy when you know how; when you don't, it's bloody and the oyster usually wins.

Less well-known, and less often offered in restaurants, are mussels, surf clams, razor clams and blue claw crabs. All are deliciously edible when properly prepared, and all are protected by regulations set down by the towns where they can be found.

The blue mussel grows in clumps on rocks, pilings and flats, each one anchored with tiny threads. They're more common on the north shores of the Cape where waters are generally colder and more protected than those of Vineyard and Nantucket Sounds. You can gather them by hand or with a rake.

When you get home with a mess of mussels, scrub them thoroughly with a stiff vegetable brush to remove the threads and mud. They are easily opened by steaming and may be marinated, stuffed, or served just as they come from the steam pot.

The surf clam, the largest of our native clams, can reach nine inches in length and may be found when the tide is low just below the surface of exposed mud flats in Cape Cod Bay. Check your town's regulations for harvesting limits. This is a favorite for stuffing, clam pie, or chowder. The meat is tough and rubbery; however you cook them, use a recipe calling for clam meat that's been put through a grinder.

In brackish waters of rivers and streams, where the twice-daily tides mix salt water with fresh, live blue claw crabs. Those with bodies six inches long are mature enough to harvest, but check your own town's legal limit. If the crab you catch is carrying eggs, she should be returned to the water to ensure a new generation will survive.

The razor clam is the most difficult of all to dig. It lives near the low water mark in sand or mud, but deeper than soft-shell clams. A fast mover when disturbed, its long narrow shell will readily slip through the tines of your clam rake and you'll lose as many as you gather. Good in chowder, but because it's the most elusive, the razor clam is most often by-passed.

Finally, except when gathering mussels from rocks exposed by an ebbing tide, protect your hands and feet. Sharp shells can deal nasty cuts to tender skin. Don't attempt to dig with bare hands. Use a rake or clam hoe or you'll be nursing fingers for weeks.

Harvesting a bucket of shellfish can be an exhilarating experience, circumvent a shattering blow to your wallet, provides fine exercise in fresh air and sunshine, and will satisfy your craving for a shellfish dinner; all that's required is a minimum of equipment, some time and energy, and a sensible approach. You wouldn't pull up your carrots when they were only half grown or gather peas or beans when only an inch or so long. Clam seed doesn't come in packages; it has to be sown by a mature shellfish.

Take only legal sizes, take only your legal limit; put the smalls back. Then there'll be enough to go around, this year, next year, and for all the years to come.

Isn't one of the reasons people come to Cape Cod a chance to enjoy a plate of truly fresh seafood? A big bowl of steamed clams? A platter of oysters on the half-shell? A couple of fat stuffed quahogs? A generous wedge of clam pie?

You bet it is.