

# Celebrating *clams*

Fried, steamed or baked, clams are a true summer delight

Story and photography  
by Janet Wallace



**A** gull calls in the distance. Waves crash against the beach. I inhale and enjoy the delicious aroma of wood smoke, saltwater and seaweed. It's time to relax and enjoy the view while the clams bake in a bed of hot seaweed.

Creamy clam chowder can wait until winter. In the summer, I like clams fried, steamed or baked outdoors.

Here are three ways to enjoy these tasty summer treats...

## Fabulous fried clams

Rich but not greasy. A crispy batter that shatters when you bite into it. The taste of the sea. That's what I want in a fried clam.

"Where can I find the best fried clams?" I asked my friends while we devoured a seafood platter. In New Brunswick, their answers ranged from **Bouc-touche** to **St. George**, **Cap-Pelé** to **Alma**, sparking a spirited discussion. I asked friends in the other three Atlantic Provinces and the response was similar—lots of debate. So rather than select only a few clam shacks or diners, here are some tips for finding great fried clams.

First, identify what you're looking for. Crispiness is only one factor. Setting is another. For example, I love eating fried clams on the beach after a long hike. I appreciate the view, the wind off the water and the satisfaction of indulgence after exertion.

Sometimes the view doesn't matter. At one diner, I don't care that the windows face the parking lot because the tempura-like batter on the clams is divine. Tradition also counts. Many people like going to the same place year after year, and generation after generation.

My quest for the best fried clams evolved after a friend told me her family had just decided which restaurant was serving the best fried clams that summer. I realized I was missing something, like being on a train trip or a voyage and focussing only on the destination. Sure, a meal of fried clams is enjoyable, but so is the search for them.

Use fried clams as a reason to explore small seaside towns and sample food at beachside restaurants. Go into a coffee shop and ask a group of strangers where to get clams. You'll likely hear stories, mild-mannered debates and end up with a good meal and a better appreciation of our region.

## Beyond batter: steamers

Steamed mussels are common in restaurants throughout the Maritimes yet steamed clams are rarely found on menus. You can, however, cook up a mess of steamers at home with little time or effort. The result:



A traditional clam bake at the beach—more than just a meal, it's a day-long affair.

Tender clam meat with a heavenly broth.

Steamers refers to both the ingredient—soft-shell clams—and the dish. Soft-shell clams sold in fish markets and grocery stores just need a quick rinse before cooking. If you dig the clams yourself, leave them in cold saltwater (seawater is best) for a few hours or overnight so they can purge themselves of grit.

To cook, simply put an inch of water, wine or beer in the bottom of a pot. I prefer to use water so I can taste the unadulterated flavour of the clams. Place the clams in the liquid or in a steamer basket, bring the pot to a boil and cook until the shells open (5-10 minutes).

The trick to eating steamers involves pulling apart the shell and removing the membrane that covers the siphon. Discard the shell and dunk the clam first into the broth and then into melted butter. Enjoy.

## The ultimate beach food: the clam bake

A clam bake is far more than a meal—it's an event—a way to celebrate summer in Atlantic Canada.

A traditional clam bake is a day-long affair. While some people dig clams, others can gather rocks and driftwood. (Check regulations concerning outdoor fires, removal of driftwood and, most importantly, whether the clams are safe to consume.)

Dig a pit, line it with large beach stones and set a fire on top. In an hour or two, the wood will have burned down. Cover the coals with seaweed and lay the clams in a trench in the middle. Put more seaweed over the clams, and then cover the whole pit with a wet canvas tarp. Pile sand over the edges of the tarp to hold in the steam and smoke.

Pour yourself a glass of wine or beer and wait. After 45 minutes, check and see if the clams are ready (they'll open up when cooked).

You can add lobster, corn on the cob, potatoes, sausages or mussels. And you can cheat.

Last fall, chef Dave Irvin from the **New Brunswick Community**



**College** showed a British celebrity chef, Valentine Warner, how to bake clams. The site was a sandy beach at the base of the bathhouse on **Minister's Island**. Dave took a few shortcuts to help speed up the clam bake. He brought dry hardwood and newspaper. Once that was burning, he covered it with hardwood briquettes. After that, Dave followed tradition and covered the briquette coals with rockweed.

The result: succulent clams that tasted of saltwater, seaweed and smoke.

Of course, an easier shortcut is to go to a clam bake.

### Tips from chefs

I asked some chefs in **Saint Andrews, NB**, how they preferred to eat clams.

Simply steamed with white wine and served with a little melted butter, says Chris Aerni of the **Rossmount Inn**.

Steamers on the beach, says Alex Haun of **Savour in the Garden** in **Kingsbrae Garden**. "I'll grab a clam hoe and a couple six packs and go out with my buddies. We pick clams, get sea water and make a big bonfire. We eat clams on the beach and life is good."

Dave Irvin likes clams "steamed and served with a mirepoix of julienned veg with a splash of white wine." He also loves a clam bake. He and his three kids (ages 8, 10 and 12) "dig clams even in the dead of winter."

Lisa Aronson of **The Algonquin Resort** likes clams steamed in beer, grainy mustard and onions, served with garlic bread. 🍷



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### Herby Cheesy Clams

Courtesy chef Alex Haun, Savour in the Garden, Saint Andrews, NB

- 4 lbs (2 kg) clams
- ¼ cup (50 mL) butter
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 shallots, diced
- 1 cup (250 mL) dry white wine
- 1 cup (250 mL) fish stock
- 1 cup (250 mL) heavy cream
- 1 cup (250 mL) grated Tomme le Champ Doré (New Brunswick cheese), or substitute with Oka
- ½ cup (125 mL) chopped fine herb mix—even quantities of fresh parsley, chives, rosemary, thyme and/or summer savoury
- sea salt
- fresh cracked pepper

Use fresh, clean, odourless clams; wash clams thoroughly two to three times to remove any grit or sand.

In a large saucepan over medium heat, melt butter; add shallots and garlic and cook until translucent. Deglaze with wine and stock; bring to a boil.

Add clams, stirring thoroughly, and cover for 6-8 minutes (depending on size of clams) until clams begin to open. Add cream and cover once again, until clams are fully open. Toss in herb mix and cheese; season with salt and pepper. Discard any clams that do not open.

**Tip:** Serve in a large bowl with small plates surrounded by friends and family with a glass of something special!



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