



Janet Wallace



Beachcomber Buffet

Scoring your supper on PEI's gentle shores

By Janet Wallace

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Above: Each type of clam has its pros and cons, razor clams (bottom image) are plentiful but it takes a knack to get them.

The woman's jubilant call rings out. "Got one! An oyster!" she says excitedly. The only other sound is the gentle lapping of water against the shore. Then, there's a soft plunk as the oyster hits the bucket; we're one step closer to dinner.

Two of my favourite activities are beachcombing and eating shellfish; when I combine the two, well, that's pretty close to heaven.

Four of us are walking in the tidal Boughton River in eastern PEI with our guide, Jim Conohan. In between pointing out shellfish and demonstrating how to use a periwinkle as a whistle, Jim recounts fishing stories. He's caught everything from oysters to lobster, and from haddock to massive bluefin tuna. We're enjoying the Beachcomber's Clam Boil organized by Experience PEI.

Foraging for your supper

Getting my own food is nothing new for me. I have gardened for years and I used to raise sheep, goats and poultry. Even getting my own seafood is a familiar experience. I've dug clams before but never had it this easy: just picking up shellfish as I stroll.

The key to this process is timing. I had never thought of collecting shellfish when the tide was in. When covered by water, many shellfish stay on top of the sand, or at least a part of their shell sticks out. No digging required. The other important element is finding a place where the water isn't too deep—you need the sweet spot of enough water to cover the mollusks but shallow enough so you can easily wade.

I normally start digging clams before low tide. After the water recedes, shellfish burrow down into the sand or mud. I spot the breathing holes and dig. Experienced clammers can identify the type of clam by the size, shape and other characteristics of the hole.

Each type of clam has its pros and cons. Steamers are my favourite for eating because they have such tender flesh, but a good steamer



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clam bed isn't always easy to find. I particularly like digging quahogs because they have tough shells that don't break as easily as soft-shell or razor clams. Razor clams are plentiful but it takes a knack to get them. They're fast and will quickly slide through the sand to elude you—until you learn to anticipate this behaviour. I've heard of people sprinkling salt down razor clam holes to get them to come out, but that seems like cheating.

Digging clams isn't strenuous labour, at least not if you just want enough for a feed or two and you're in a good spot. Bring a bucket and something to dig with (spade, clam 'hack' or garden fork). A sieve or colander is helpful to strain the clams.

Oysters and mussels are the easiest to collect—no need for digging, you just pick them off the ocean floor or from rocks or seaweed. If you bring your shucker, you can eat an oyster on the half shell just a moment after pulling it from the water. Oysters, however, are often regulated; harvesters have leases to areas of the seafloor.

Safety first

Harvesting wild shellfish is a lot like gathering wild mushrooms. You can collect incredible delicacies for free while enjoying a day on the seashore or a walk in the woods. But, like wild mushrooms, you need to know what you're doing to harvest shellfish safely. A mistake in mushroom identification can be fatal. With shellfish, there are two main dangers. The first is that shellfish can be toxic if they die long before being cooked. When outside of water, live shellfish are either tightly closed or will close their shells when tapped. Discard any that stay open. Also, throw away any that smell bad. After being cooked, the shells should open wide; any that remain closed should be thrown away.

Even living shellfish, however, can be contaminated by toxins. In Atlantic Canada, shellfish are regularly tested. Along beaches and by

Bonanza!

Every once in a while, a storm will bring in a treasure trove of shellfish. In 2010, the small village of Petit-Rocher, NB, received a late Christmas present when huge numbers of lobsters were beached by enormous waves. Hundreds of people then came out to gather the crustaceans, including the village mayor, Pierre Godin.

When interviewed by CBC, Mayor Godin thanked God for the "marvellous" incident.

A spokesperson for the Department of Fisheries and Oceans pointed out that collecting lobster out of season and without a licence is illegal; beachcombers could be fined up to \$100,000.

In response, the mayor said "If it's illegal, they are going to have to make a very, very big prison for us all," according to the *Telegraph-Journal*.

clam digging sites, you can see signs stating which shellfish are safe to consume at the time. You can also find this information online on provincial websites. I avoid harvesting shellfish in areas near many cottages or farm fields, by wharves and after heavy rains that may cause run-off.

Provincial regulations apply to shellfish harvesting. Sometimes you need a license; other times, you can harvest a certain number without a licence. Size restrictions may apply. You can find details by talking to tourism operators or online (search "shellfish harvesting" on the Fisheries and Oceans Canada's website).

As with wild mushrooms, the best way to learn to harvest safely and sustainably (to protect the population) is by going out with a knowledgeable person. On PEI, you can have a fun excursion and a meal: Experience PEI offers several adventures involved with digging, picking up and shucking shellfish. PEI Coastal Tours and Experiences offers oyster tours and tastings. A beautiful aspect of shellfish is they are not only delicious, but also easy to prepare. Oysters, of course, can be eaten raw, and so can scallops and quahogs. For mussels and small clams, steaming in a bit of water or wine until they open is all the work that's needed. Of course, you could sauté a bit of garlic and onion in the pot before adding the liquid, and maybe serve with melted butter... but that's like the icing on the cake; wonderful but not necessary. Large quahogs and bar clams are tougher: they work best in chowders, dips or cut into strips and fried. In parts of New England, quahogs are sometimes called "stuffers" because of a common way of cooking. The clams are steamed and then the flesh is chopped up, sautéed with onion, celery and garlic and mixed with bread crumbs. The filling is put back into shells and they are baked. 🍷

