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Catherine V. Schmitt

Maine Sea Grant, catherine.schmitt@umit.maine.edu

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Diver-harvested scallops: Precious as pearls

by Catherine Schmitt

Like caviar or pearls, the words “diver scallop” evoke a sense of exclusivity and careful handling.

The thought of an individual fisherman, who knows each crevice and rocky ledge in the local waters, diving to the ocean floor and hand-selecting only the choicest scallops makes the diver scallop so appealing on the menu.

In the Northeast, fresh diver-caught sea scallops are delivered to local restaurants the same day they are caught.

Unlike clams, oysters, and other bivalves, scallops cannot hold their shells closed and therefore can't survive long out of the water. Consequently, they're shucked on the boat shortly after being harvested. The meats are placed in containers and refrigerated until delivered to restaurants or shoreside processors.

Any that aren't sold right away are quickly frozen.

The eye, or adductor muscle, is the edible part of the scallop. The adductor muscle is more developed in the scallop than in oysters and clams because scallops are active swimmers and use the



Russell Wright, marine patrol officer with the Maine Department of Marine Resources, measuring scallop meats. It is difficult for the state to enforce the 4-inch law because most scallops are shucked quickly after capture and the empty shells are thrown back over the side. So the meat count provides an alternative way to measure the catch. Photo by C. Bartlett



Summerhouse Scallops with Roasted Pears and Wine-Butter Sauce.
Stephen Smith photo

muscle to open and close their shell, a motion which propels them through the water.

Philip Rosen, who fishes out of Belfast, Maine, has been diving for scallops for 10 years. A member of the Maine Scallop Advisory Council, Rosen says that legal scallops are larger than 4 inches in shell diameter, and it takes three to four years for a scallop to grow to this size. There is no upper limit on shell size, but super-large ones tend to be tougher and not as sweet.

Diver-caught scallops are available in season to both wholesale and retail markets. As might be expected, diver scallops are more expensive than dragged scallops, and the price fluctuates weekly depending on market conditions.

Dan Scofield of New Era Fish in Portland, Maine, sells fresh diver scallops in 8-gallon buckets or heat-sealed bags that are delivered within 24 hours.

Scallops are best used as soon as possible after harvesting, but they will keep refrigerated for two to three days, or they can be frozen with good results. The raw meats are creamy white and sometimes slightly orange because of the food (algae) they consume.

Scallops have a distinct, sweet odor when they are fresh. It is also important

to ask for “dry” scallops that have not been soaked in water and preservatives (diver-caught scallops are usually not treated this way).

Diving for scallops is permitted from December to April in Maine and New Hampshire, and year-round in Massachusetts. Dragging for scallops — using a chain-sweep across the ocean bottom — occurs year-round in federal waters, those farther than three miles from shore. ■

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- 8oz ham, diced
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- 1.5 packs Ritz® crackers, crushed

Boil eggplant and drain. Saute onions and celery.

Mix all ingredients, salt and pepper to taste.

Bake at 350 degrees for 45-60 minutes.



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Water in scallops? Here's why

You may have noticed that advertisements for scallops always indicate "water added." Why?

Scallops are usually shucked by fishermen as soon as they come out of the water, and during the journey to shore — and store — they lose moisture, 5 percent or 6 percent total water content over the course of two days, according to Roger Tollefsen, president of the New York Seafood Council.

The scallop industry figured out many years ago that if you soaked the shucked scallops in a phosphate solution (considered safe by the FDA), the scallops would retain their moisture.

Unfortunately, says Tollefsen, some unscrupulous operators discovered that the longer you soaked the scallops, the more water they would absorb, and that you could actually get scallops to absorb more water than they naturally contain.

In other words, the consumer winds up paying for water.

The FDA stepped in, stating that only scallops containing no more than 82 percent water by weight can be labeled and sold as "scallops" without further explanation. If the scallops contain between 82 percent and 86 percent water, they

must be labeled "water added."

While water-added scallops are considered inferior to "fresh," a store that labels them as such should get credit for being honest. If they are not so labeled, you can often tell a treated scallop because, says Tollefsen, "it is weeping a milky residue."

The best defense against a bad product is a good fishmonger. ■

— Sun-Sentinel in Florida

What you need to know

Species Name: Atlantic sea scallop (*Placopecten magellanicus*)

Range: Newfoundland to North Carolina

Season: Dec. 1 – April 1

Fishery Status: The fishing industry cites pros and cons to harvesting scallops by hand, although there is a lack of scientific research on the environmental wisdom of dragging versus diving. Diving has less impact on the ocean floor community, but many feel that the large, high-quality scallops harvested by divers are those that contribute a lot to spawning output and keep the population healthy.

Portion size: Sea scallops are the largest scallop, with shells up to 9 inches across and meats (the adductor muscle that holds the top and bottom shell together) up to 2 inches across. A typical portion of diver scallops is one to five meats.

Packaging: New Era Fish offers fresh scallops in 8-gallon buckets or heat-sealed bags that are shipped in refrigerated containers.

Cost: Price fluctuates depending on the market and size; examples of last year's prices include \$9.50/lb for 20/30 meats, \$12.50 for 10/20, and \$15 for under 10 per pound.

Where to get them:

New Era Fish, Portland, ME
(207) 671-5772
Browne Trading Company,
Portland ME
(207) 766-2402

Diver scallops featured at epicurean festival

Maine diver scallops were recently featured on the menu of the Naples 2006 Wine Festival and at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C.

Diver scallops are best served simply, without too many other ingredients that might hide their flavor and texture — not smothered with too-salty sauces or baked into oblivion.

Save the deep-frying for smaller summer scallops caught offshore; the diver scallop deserves a place at the center of attention and is best served pan-seared, grilled, or broiled.

Scallops are a tender crop; take care not to overcook them, as they toughen easily. Scallops are done as soon as they lose their translucence and turn opaque — like caviar or pearls. ■