



In search of Nantucket's golden nuggets

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 22, 2017

‘Who’s ready for a snack?’ Nantucket fisherman Bruce Beebe asked. He inserted his knife into the corner of a muddy scallop shell, unhinged its top, cleaned away the guts, and presented us with white, raw meat. Nantucket Gold. That’s what islanders consider these tiny sweet nuggets, thought to be one of the finest mollusks in the world.

Beebe shucked a few more, nearly as fast as we could slide them in our mouths. They were tender and firm, sweet and salty, clean and fresh, rich and buttery. They’re a much sought-after, rich delicacy, and we’d bloody well earned them. We were shivering in our fleece, aboard the Kristine B, Beebe’s well-used, open-deck fishing boat, bobbing in the waters of Nantucket Bay. We’d met Beebe and his smiling wife, Kristine (yep, the boat’s named after her), early on this crisp, clear, cold morning. Beebe works a regular job as a tug operator, but he and Kristine go scalloping when they can.

“There’s not that many of us out here anymore,” he says. “But I still really like it. It’s something we can do together, and make a little extra money.”

They were dressed in warm jackets topped with thick, waterproof slickers, rubber gloves, and boots. We were less prepared, but game to give scalloping a try. We pattered out into the bay, not more than 10 minutes from the dock, to the thick, dark beds of eel grass (also known as sea grass) that grow in the shallow waters just off shore. Nantucket Bay scallops use the island’s native inshore eel grass as a nursery, one of the last surviving commercially viable wild scallop fisheries in the country.



PAMELA WRIGHT FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Bruce Beebe displays some of his haul from the seagrass scallop beds in the waters off Nantucket. Only scallops that are two years old are allowed to be harvested.

“If everyone plays by the rules, it’s the perfect fishery,” Beebe explained as he threw six wire nets out the back of the boat. We began trolling at a slow speed, gently pulling the nets through the eel grass, scooping up scallops along the way. “You don’t want to throw in heavy stuff that’ll rip up the bottom and destroy the eel grass,” he said.

That’s rule number one. Rule number two: leave the seed scallops; only take the ones that are two years old. We learned to tell the difference when Beebe turned the noisy winch motor on, dragged in the first net, and emptied the sloppy catch onto a wide shelf set across the boat, splattering us with cold salt water. It was a messy pile of seaweed, scurrying crabs, sea stars, a flopping baby fish, and lots of scallops.

“See this line,” Beebe said, pointing out a clearly visible, slightly raised line across the exterior of a scallop shell. “That’s the growth line. It lets you know that the scallop has been around for two seasons, and is legal to harvest.”

Whether we take them or not, these second-year scallops are going to die in the spring, when the weather and water turn warm. They have about a 20-month life span.

We put on heavy, rubber gloves, and began sorting through the pile of scallops, tossing the legal ones in a wire basket, pushing the rest back into the water. When the baskets were full, they were dunked in the water for a quick rinse and emptied into plastic crates. In less than two hours, we had our limit: 10 bushels of scallops. The limit is five bushels a day per licensed person (both Bruce and Kristine have scalloping licenses), with a max of 10 bushels per boat. That’s rule number three: only take your limit.

Still, it seemed like a lot of scallops! “We don’t always get this kind of catch,” Beebe said. “But this year has been really great.”

That was a surprise. We’d heard only doom-and-gloom stories about shrinking eel grass beds and scallop catches. Last year, we were told the price of scallops was so high because of limited catches that many island restaurants couldn’t put them on their menus. Most of what was caught, headed off island to high-end restaurants willing to pay top dollar. But this year has been a banner season for Nantucket Bay scallops. (The commercial season runs from November through March.)

“This is unheard of, the best in a decade,” said local fisherman John Logan, as he sat shucking his day’s limit. “Some years, it would take several days to get this haul.”

Why is it such a good year? No one agreed: it goes in cycles; the water was cooler; there was no red tide. Seasoned scallopers gave us a “who knows?” shrug when we asked, content to accept and take the bounty when it comes.

Catching and sorting the scallops is just the beginning of the process (albeit an often cold and arduous one). Someone has to shuck them, and someone has to buy them. Some scallopers shuck their own; many take their catches to one of a handful of shucking shanties set up on the island. We headed to one of them, located at Bartlett Farm, where a handful of people come each day during the season to shuck as many scallops as they can, getting paid 20 percent of the yield. They opened the shells with quick — nearly furious — precision, cutting away the sweet white scallop meat, and piling it into buckets that are then weighed and purchased by buyers.

Nantucket firefighter Christian Ray has been shucking scallops since he was 8 years old. And he's really good at it. "Yesterday I shucked 87 pounds," he told us. "The day after Thanksgiving, I shucked 124 and a quarter pounds."

We did some quick math. There are about 45 to 50 scallops in a pound. That means the day after Thanksgiving, Ray shucked more than 5,580 scallops. Jeff Henderson, owner of Salty Balls Seafood Co., one of a half-dozen or so buyers on the island, pays between \$12 and \$13 a pound. So, that day Ray made about \$300 for shucking.

Henderson is buying 500 to 700 pounds of scallops a day (and working 14- to 15-hour days during the season). "Fed Ex comes with a van every day, and I load it up," he said. He sells them to distributors and restaurants across the country.

You have to catch them, sort them, shuck them, sell them, and distribute them. In the end, you eat them — the sweet, tender adductor muscle of the scallop. We headed to Brant Point Grill at the White Elephant Hotel to enjoy some of Chef Tom Pearson's Nantucket Bay scallop preparations.

"They're incredibly sweet and versatile. You can do almost anything with them," Pearson said of the island's seasonal delicacy. "They're special; you can only get them from here, and for only a short period of time."

We grabbed a table at the popular waterfront dining room, ordered chilled Sancerre to go with Pearson's first course: slightly torched scallops served in a well-seasoned coconut milk broth with black garlic, fish sauce, and lime. The flavorful Asian-influenced dish was slightly spicy; the scallops ultra-sweet. Our second dish featured barely seared bay scallops with artichoke hearts, white anchovy and Shimeji mushrooms, a delicious and deceptively simple earth-to-sea medley. The entrée course showcased sauteed Nantucket Bay scallops served with roasted parsnips and brussels sprouts, resting on smears of parsnip cream puree and dusted with chopped chestnuts. A jackpot of Nantucket Gold!

Before we left the island, we tried bay scallops every which way: fried, poached, sautéed, broiled and roasted. But eaten raw on the half shell, served in a bobbing boat in the shallows of Nantucket Bay, was hard to beat.

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