



Treasure Hunt

Fresh Digby scallops are known the world over for their flavour and sweetness. Experts suspect it has something to do with the water quality and the unique tidal gyres. To fully appreciate such a treat, don't overcook them

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Following my dive buddy, we make our way past scuttling crabs and darting flounder. He stops suddenly and hangs suspended in the cold, clean emerald water. Anticipation courses through me as I catch up to him. I follow his signal to look at the seafloor. Spread out before us are hundreds of distinct symmetrical shapes. An epicurean treasure: scallops.

Scallops are one of the ocean's most delectable creatures, but to fully appreciate their gastronomic potential takes a bit of knowledge and a few basic cooking techniques. "Scallops are a protein that is very meaty and rich, and they're easy to overcook," says Alain Bosse, a Pictou County-based chef and restaurant consultant. "The best way to do scallops is to undercook them. When you think they might be ready but you're not sure, they're done."

The Atlantic sea scallop, or *Placopecten magellanicus*, is a bivalve mollusk like mussels, clams, and oysters. But scallops can actually "swim" or move through the water by clapping their shells together. The muscle that gives them this ability is the portion that is eaten. "What really distinguishes scallops is that they have a big adductor muscle in the shell," says Shawn Robinson, a research biologist at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) at the Biological Station in St. Andrews, N.B. "The adductor muscles are big and central in the shell, so when we harvest them we get a nice chunk of meat." The Atlantic sea scallop can live for

more than 20 years, making it even more palatable. “Our scallop doesn’t have to reproduce successfully every year, so it stores a lot of energy in the adductor muscle or the meat,” says Robinson. “That’s why our scallops taste so sweet.”

While scallops are found in most waters surrounding Nova Scotia, the specimens caught in the Bay of Fundy, especially off the town of Digby, are world renowned. The bay’s powerful tides provide all filter-feeding shellfish with a constant and nutrient-rich food source, but another factor might explain why the region’s scallop fishery is so productive. “The ideal location for a bed of scallops is not only one with the right habitat and food conditions but also one with the right hydrographic conditions that allow the larvae to get up into the water column and to recruit back to the beds where they came from,” says Robinson. That’s exactly what happens in the Bay of Fundy; there’s a gyre or a slow whirlpool right off Digby, and that confluence of physical conditions allows for good scallop growth.

Digby’s processors have been among the world’s largest exporters of scallops since the inception of the North American scallop fishery. The Digby scallop fleet is now managed under a quota system legislated by the industry and the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans using experimental tows of gridded-off areas and studying the landings of the commercial fishing fleet in previous years. Participants in past fishing seasons are given a share of the quota according to their history with the fishery.

[O’Neil Fisheries Ltd.](#), a private seafood company operating in Digby, has 12.5% of the overall scallop quota. O’Neil’s year runs from Oct. 31 to Sept. 1. “We try to leave a little bit of the harvest for each week so we can go out with fresh sales to various customers on a week-to-week basis,” says company president Tom O’Neil. “If you tried to catch your entire quota in six months, you’d be in a frozen situation for a good part of the year and perhaps you’d run out of inventory.”

O’Neil’s boats typically make three to four day trips to the fishing grounds. The scallops are landed on deck, where they’re immediately shucked, washed, bagged, and iced. The discarded shells go back to where the harvest began. That’s because when the “spat,” or baby scallops, come down from the water column, if they’re lucky enough to land on a scallop shell, it’ll have all of the ingredients and nourishment to grow another shell.

The scallops are then offloaded at the plant to be shipped fresh and frozen throughout Canada, the United States, and Europe. While the global recession and strong Canadian dollar have hurt other seafood industries, particularly lobster, the scallop market seems to be maintaining its value. “Even some of our offshore competitors say they sell Digby scallops because they’re familiar with the product,” says O’Neil.

Chef Alain Bosse concurs. “If you can get fresh Digby scallops, you’re in business,” he says. “The flavour or sweetness is the big thing. I suspect it has something to do with the water quality and the tidal situation, but it’s definitely a superior quality to any scallops known in the world.”

Scallops can be prepared countless ways, but before you begin, keep in mind Bosse’s sage advice. “Make sure all the ingredients for your meal are prepared and your guests are seated at

the table before you begin to cook your scallops,” he says. “In bigger scallops, you’ll find what is called the scallop bit, or in fishermen’s terms, the beard. It’s another muscle, and if you remove it first, that’s half your battle. Before you put your scallops in a sizzling hot pan, take some paper towels and dry them. Water will make them boil, and when they boil, they overcook.”

If you’re sautéing scallops, a hot pan is essential. While using butter will provide more flavour, olive oil is also good and, because of its higher burning point, might be better for novices. “When your pan is sizzling hot, sear your scallops on one side so they start to caramelize,” says Bosse. “When the scallops start splitting in the corners it’s time to flip them, and in less than a minute on the other side you’ve got a perfect cook. Do it as fast and hot as possible. Even if you think they’re not quite cooked, by the time they get to the table they will be.”