

# From Bay or Sea, Scallops are Sweet

A look inside the shells of these tasty mollusks

BY CHARLIE COPPOLA

At this time of year, the bay scallop boats are back in action, scooting in and out of bays and estuaries off the coast of Rhode Island and Massachusetts, hauling up bushels of scallops in their beautifully colored, radial shells. I handle a lot of fish and shellfish, supplying restaurants, retailers, and customers out of my shop in eastern Rhode Island, and I pay particular attention to delivering the most flavorful scallops available. I know I can get a dependable supply of big, meaty sea scallops year-round, while the smaller bay scallops have a limited season. Since all scallops start out tasting sweet and delicate, what a consumer really has to watch for is how they're handled once they leave the ocean bottom.

## WHAT YOU'RE EATING

Like other bivalves, such as clams, oysters, and mussels, the entire scallop is edible. In Europe and Asia, you'll frequently see scallops sold live in their shells. In America, though, traditionally only one part of the scallop, the adductor muscle, is widely distributed and eaten. The adductor muscle, the round, fleshy disk that we think of as the scallop, is what opens and closes the shells. Many shellfish, including clams, have two adductor muscles—scallops have a single large one.

Fresh raw scallops (see photos at right) have a briny flavor much like oysters. Unfortunately, scallops are susceptible to contamination by bacteria and pollution like any other shellfish. While the adductor muscle isn't affected, the roe and organs are, which is why whole scallops are not widely available. Taylor Seafood of Fairhaven, Massachusetts, (508/990-0591) farm-raises Atlantic bay scallops under controlled conditions and distributes them

*Each colorful shell houses a morsel of flavorful meat. Atlantic bay scallops are gathered from shallow waters, shucked, and shipped fresh around the country.*



*Scallops on the half shell. You don't usually see an entire scallop because only the adductor muscle is widely distributed. This whitish disk (at upper left in the photo above) opens and closes the shell. All of the scallop, however, is edible. The adductor muscle with the coral, or roe, attached (below) is one way you might see raw scallops served.*





*Treated with STP*



*Untreated (dry)*

*Chemical prevents moisture loss but adversely affects flavor and texture. Scallops treated with sodium tripolyphosphate (left) are white, limp, stay separate, and have no odor. More flavorful untreated scallops, called “dry” scallops (right), have an ivory-yellow color, are very firm, tend to stick together, and have a slight sulfur odor.*

fresh in the shells. Ask at your fish store if they can track some down for you. Also, Asian markets often carry frozen scallops, both whole in the shell and just the meat with the crescent-shaped orange roe attached on the half shell.

### THREE TYPES WIDELY AVAILABLE

Although hundreds of different species of scallops exist in our oceans worldwide, only a few of these species are harvested commercially on a large scale. The three you’re most likely to find at a fish market are Atlantic sea scallops, Atlantic bay scallops, and calicos.

**Sea scallops**—Atlantic sea scallops are the largest of the scallops sold in the United States. The meat ranges in size from the diameter of a quarter to that of a silver dollar, with as few as five pieces per pound and as many as 35 pieces. These scallops make their home from the Gulf of St. Lawrence in Quebec to North Carolina. They’re harvested in the wild by boats pulling large metal bags weighted down with a heavy metal bar along the bottom that scrape up the scallops from the ocean floor.

Sea scallops are usually shucked at sea and brought to port packed in muslin bags surrounded by ice. Some companies freeze scallops right on the boats. This can result in a superior product to fresh scallops, but more on that later. Since sea scallops are harvested year-round, you shouldn’t have a problem getting them fresh at your fish store.

**Bay scallops**—The Atlantic bay scallop, the most succulent scallop of all, resides in shallow waters from Nova Scotia to Florida. These delicate, small scallops are not as plentiful as sea scallops, and both state and local agencies regulate the local scallop season to make sure bay scallops are not over-harvested. The season runs from fall until spring; harvesting is halted during the summer while the scallops spawn.

Bay scallops are shucked when the boats return from fishing, packed in gallon containers, and then usually shipped off fresh and untreated. They’re not

always available, so if you see bay scallops, buy them—they’re a real treat.

**Calicos**—Calico scallops live in waters off the southeastern United States. They’re very small (while there’s 70 to 90 shucked bay scallops per pound, it takes 150 to 200 calico scallops to make a pound). Calicos aren’t as flavorful as Atlantic bay scallops, but they’re generally available year-round and cost less than sea or bay scallops.

Calicos are stored live in their shell on the boat decks until the boat reaches dock, where the scallops are unloaded into processing facilities. To be competitively priced, calicos are briefly steamed to open their shells and then shucked mechanically.

### WHAT HAPPENS TO SCALLOPS BETWEEN THE OCEAN AND YOUR REFRIGERATOR

Some companies flash-freeze sea scallops right on the boats. Freezing the scallops at sea or freezing them in port soon after harvesting stops bacterial breakdown in the meat. Scallops that aren’t frozen right away may stay on the boat for days before being dropped off at port. Shipping them off to distributors might take another day or two. So beware—they may not be fresh at all by the time they get to you (scallops past their prime will look extremely limp). Sea scallops that are individually quick-frozen are superior to unfrozen scallops, and this is usually reflected in a higher selling price.

When sea scallops are taken out of their shells, they usually contain between 75% and 79% water. Once shucked, however, they gradually lose moisture. Many processors treat sea scallops by soaking them in sodium tripolyphosphates (STP) to replenish the water that’s already dripped out and to help prevent further moisture loss. STP also retards the growth of bacteria and removes any “fishy” odor. The problem is that soaking scallops is often abused, and sea scallops are pumped with water which the consumer ends up paying for. The Food & Drug Administration has instituted a labeling

program so that any scallops with more than 79.9% water must be labeled as “water added.”

Not only are you paying for water when you buy scallops treated with STP, but you’re also getting something that doesn’t taste as good as untreated scallops. Treated scallops have none of that fresh ocean flavor that “dry” (unsoaked) scallops have; rather, they have a chemical-like flavor or no flavor at all. Soaked scallops don’t cook well, either. The trapped water flows out into the frying pan, causing the scallops to steam rather than sauté. It’s impossible to get them to caramelize. You can pick out dry scallops because they’re creamy ivory to orange in color, sticky, with a slightly sulfury smell (see photo on p. 65). STP-soaked scallops are uniformly white, they don’t clump together, and they have very little odor.

### ONCE YOU GET SCALLOPS HOME

As with any seafood, I don’t recommend freezing scallops at home. Ice crystals tear cell walls and the scallops lose a great deal of water when defrosted. The one exception I would make is freezing bay scallops since they have a limited season and aren’t readily available commercially quick-frozen. If you do freeze scallops at home, spread them out in a single layer on a plate or baking sheet and put them in the freezer. Once frozen, transfer them to a plastic bag and remove as much air as possible to reduce freezer burn.

Before you cook scallops, inspect them for seaweed, bits of shell, and sand. Pick off the shells and seaweed by hand. If your scallops have any sand on them, quickly rinse them in cold water and pat them dry with a paper towel. Otherwise don’t wash scallops or they’ll absorb water. Some scallops may still have a small, white tab attached to them that becomes chewy when cooked. If the chewiness bothers you, pull them off. I usually leave them on.

Cooking scallops, or any other seafood, requires you to keep in mind one basic principle—do not overcook them. Scallops take very little time to cook. Try picking scallops of uniform size so they cook evenly. When pan-frying or sautéing, wait until the oil is very hot before putting in the scallops so that the heat sears in the natural juices. Finally, to eat them at their juiciest, serve cooked scallops immediately.

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*Charlie Coppola is as likely to be sending monkfish to Korea as to be dry-packing bay scallops to area restaurants. Coppola studied seafood business management, worked at Dean & DeLuca, and fished off of Long Island before becoming a partner in Manchester Seafood in Tiverton, Rhode Island.*

# Two great scallop dishes

BY JOHANNE KILLEEN & GEORGE GERMON

Scallops, when properly cooked, have a juicy, rich texture that’s just incredible. When overcooked, they’re like rubber. Scallops cook extremely quickly, especially the small bay scallops, so the trick is to take them off the heat just as they lose their translucence.

When you sear scallops in a skillet (as in the first recipe), keep an eye on the sides of the scallops and take them off when they begin to turn opaque. In the second recipe, the scallops are never really over the heat—they cook off the stove in the stock.



*Simple elements come together in a succulent dish. Creamy, boiled new potatoes and a piquant green sauce accompany quick-seared sea scallops.*

### **SALT-SEARED SEA SCALLOPS WITH BOILED POTATOES & GREEN SAUCE**

Cooking these scallops on top of coarse salt keeps them from sticking to the skillet without having to use oil, and it leaves the scallops pleasantly salty. Be sure not to salt the potatoes to preserve the balance of flavors. You’ll have plenty of the green sauce left over—enjoy it with grilled or roasted fish, or roasted chicken. It will keep for three days. Serves two as a main course or four as a light appetizer.

6 new potatoes  
 2 bunches curly parsley, washed, dried, stems removed  
 2 cloves garlic  
 2 hard-boiled egg yolks  
 1 cup plus 1 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil  
 1 Tbs. red-wine vinegar  
 ¼ tsp. crushed red pepper flakes  
 1 scant Tbs. kosher salt  
 1 lb. sea scallops, dried thoroughly on paper towels

Put the potatoes in a saucepan and add water to cover. Bring to a boil, lower the heat to a simmer, and cook until tender, about 20 min.

Meanwhile, make the green sauce by combining the parsley, garlic, egg yolks, 1 cup olive oil, vinegar, and red pepper flakes in a blender or food processor. Blend until smooth. Set aside.

When the potatoes are done, drain the water and leave the potatoes in the saucepan at the side of the stove to keep them warm.

Sprinkle the kosher salt evenly over the surface of a 9-in. cast-iron skillet and heat on the stove over high heat. After about 3 min., the salt will begin to dance. Gently place the scallops on the salt, leaving space around each one. Sear until small beads of moisture appear on the top of each scallop, about 2 to 3 min. With tongs, turn the scallops over and place them on parts of the skillet where the salt has not been disturbed. Sear just until you see the sides of the scallop become opaque, about 2 min. Transfer the scallops to heated plates. Cut the potatoes in half and put them on the plates. Drizzle everything with the remaining tablespoon of olive oil. Serve immediately with a spoonful of green sauce on each plate.

### SUAVE COCONUT SEAFOOD CHOWDER WITH WEST INDIAN ROUILLE

Aromatic fish stock is enriched with coconut and heavy cream to make the base of this flavorful chowder. Once the stock, or fumet, is made, the chowder comes together quickly. Serves six as a main course or eight as a first course.

6 cups fish fumet (see recipe below)  
 2 medium carrots, peeled and sliced ½-in. thick on the diagonal  
 1 medium onion, diced  
 1 lb. sea scallops  
 2 lb. medium shrimp, peeled and deveined (reserve shells)  
 1 cup heavy cream  
 2 Tbs. coconut cream (canned is fine)  
 ½ tsp. kosher salt, or to taste  
 8 slices toasted country bread  
 West Indian Rouille (see recipe at right)

Bring the fish fumet to a boil and add the carrots and onions. Simmer gently until the vegetables are tender, 15 to 20 min. Add the scallops, shrimp, heavy cream, coconut cream, and kosher salt. Remove immediately from the heat—the scallops and shrimp will cook in the heat of the broth. Serve the chowder in heated soup bowls garnished with a slice of toasted bread topped with a dollop of rouille.

### FISH FUMET

This aromatic fish stock can be made a day ahead. Use bones from nonoily fish, such as halibut, cod, or snapper, because oily fish, like salmon or trout, will give the fumet too heavy a taste. Yields 6 cups.

¼ cup olive oil  
 2 lb. fish heads, bones, and trimmings  
 Reserved shrimp shells  
 1 large onion, chopped coarse  
 2 medium carrots, cleaned and cut into 1-in. pieces  
 1 small fennel bulb, trimmed and chopped coarse



Scallops cook in the heat of the broth. To make sure the scallops and shrimp don't overcook and turn rubbery in the seafood chowder, they're added off the stove. Crusty bread topped with spicy West Indian Rouille completes this aromatic dish.

2 leeks, thoroughly cleaned and chopped coarse  
 1 sprig fresh thyme (omit if unavailable, don't substitute dried thyme)  
 ½ tsp. black peppercorns  
 2 cups dry white wine  
 3 tomatoes, peeled, cored, and chopped coarse  
 1 fresh chile pepper, seeded and chopped  
 2 pieces orange peel, 1x2 in. each, white pith removed  
 6 cups water

Combine all the ingredients in a stockpot, making sure that there's enough water to cover the fish and vegetables. Bring to a boil and skim any scum that rises to the surface. Reduce the heat, and simmer for 30 min.

Pour the fumet through a strainer to remove the bones and vegetables and return the liquid to a clean stockpot. Skim off any fat. Over high heat, bring the fumet to a rolling boil and reduce by one-third. Let the fumet cool to room temperature, cover, and refrigerate until ready to use.

### WEST INDIAN ROUILLE

You'll have plenty of rouille (pronounced roo-EE) left over. Try adding this spicy sauce to tuna for tuna salad, or serve it with grilled fish or chicken. Filé powder, made from sassafras leaves, is available in the spice section of supermarkets and specialty food stores. Makes almost 3 cups.

1 red bell pepper  
 2 egg yolks  
 2 slices country bread, moistened in fish fumet  
 3 Tbs. chopped fresh cilantro  
 ⅛ tsp. filé powder (optional)  
 ⅛ tsp. curry powder  
 1 habañero or jalapeño pepper, seeded and chopped  
 1 cup light-flavored olive oil

Roast the red pepper in a 425°F oven until charred, 10 to 15 min. Remove the skin and seeds. Chop the pepper coarse.

In a blender or food processor, process the yolks and bread until well blended. Add the cilantro, filé powder, curry powder, red pepper, and habañero. Purée until smooth.

While the blender or processor is running, add the olive oil, drop by drop, until the rouille is thick. Then add the rest in a thin stream. Transfer the rouille to a bowl and refrigerate until ready to use. Use within two days.

Johanne Killeen and George Germon, authors of *Cucina Simpatica*, look to Charlie Coppola to get fresh scallops for their restaurant, Al Forno, in Providence, Rhode Island. ♦



Searing on salt locks in the juices without using fat. A sprinkling of coarse salt keeps the scallops from sticking to the skillet.