

History of seafood marketing in the Port of New Bedford, Massachusetts



Arthur P. Motta, Jr.
New Bedford Whaling Museum

In August 2014, the Massachusetts Legislature passed a law aimed at creating a “coordinated program to market seafood landed in the commonwealth and to take other actions to increase consumer demand and preference for local seafood products, to support the commonwealth’s fishing and seafood industry and the residents and communities that benefit from these activities.” More than seven years in the making, the promotional effort officially kicked off on August 7 at the 2016 Boston Seafood Festival. This is welcome news for the state’s seafood industry. As the state’s efforts gear up, it may be useful to review briefly a few of the public/private seafood marketing initiatives of the past, which were developed to address specific consumer preferences.

Promotional efforts in the Port of New Bedford have periodically been undertaken over the years to position the city’s various seafood products for greater consumption in existing markets and to stimulate growth of new markets. These initiatives have variously been tried by municipal officials and their harbor agencies, industry groups and regional business organizations. These initiatives were enthusiastic but limited by the financial resources available, which restricted market penetration beyond the immediate region. Only the multiyear effort during the late 1950s and ‘60s to increase the retail market for scallops had a transformative effect, which continues to sustain New Bedford’s working waterfront to the present day. It was conducted in part by the recently late John F. Linehan, a trailblazer in seafood marketing. Due in part to his early efforts and others that followed him, New Bedford ranks as the top commercial fishing port for the 15th consecutive year with a dollar value of \$329 million for the landed catch (Standard-Times 10/29/15).

Although the scallop fishery was known to exist in New Bedford as early as 1883, its localized consumer base was limited by product life and seasonality due to weather conditions, which affect harvest. With the introduction of refrigerated trucking in the early twentieth century, new markets began to develop in New York and New England. However, seafood consumers who were more accustomed to buying cod, haddock and other ground species as well as traditional shellfish such as lobster and clams, were reluctant to try scallop “meats,” due in part due to their shape, which looked to some like a strange byproduct of the catch. A 1939 article in a New York newspaper noted “Even those who have eaten scallop with a smacking realization of their goodness have harbored a vague belief that the small, soft round scallop, which bears no outward likeness to crab or oyster, fish, lobster, shrimp or clam, was punched in a faintly deceptive dodge out of some fish or other with a circular metal device.”

Renowned marine biologist and ocean conservationist Rachel Carson took the issue of scallop underutilization further in her 1942 seminal report titled “Food From the Sea: Fish and Shellfish of New England” for the Department of Interior’s Fish and Wildlife Service Conservation Bulletin. She noted “Only the large muscle that controls the shell movements is eaten. This muscle (called the “eye”) comprises only a small proportion of the total weight of the meat. The remainder is discarded or used as bait or fertilizer, although it is good, edible meat. In Europe the entire scallop is eaten, and there seems to be no good reason why it should be wasted here.”

In the early 1960’s an advertising campaign funded in part by the New Bedford Seafood Co-Op included the production of a film documentary titled “The Pearl of the Atlantic” which introduced markets beyond New England to the scallop with comparisons to meat, extolling it as “an



PEARL OF THE ATLANTIC

Of the Atlantic Ocean scallop it can truly be said, “Here is the perfect gem of seafood.”

Scallops grow plump, sweet and flavorsome in the coldwater beds of Georges Bank where New Bedford fishermen, proud of a long tradition of harvesting quality seafoods, sustain the ocean freshness of each catch with tender, loving care.

August is SCALLOP FESTIVAL month . . . a time when tribute is paid to this succulent shellfish in New Bedford, Mass. If you can’t join us in this festive event, have one of your own . . . back-yard style . . . along with other scallop lovers throughout the land. *New Bedford Seafood Council.*

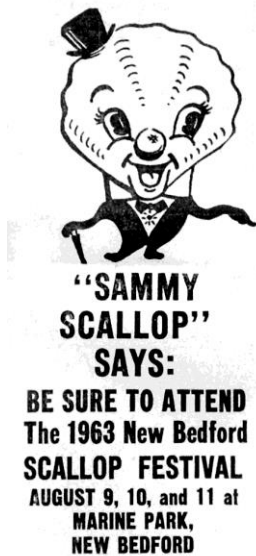
CURRIED SCALLOP KABOBS

Thread scallops on skewers (or use foil lined broiler pan). Brush scallops generously with the following, well-mixed: ¼ cup honey; ¼ cup prepared mustard; 2 teaspoons curry powder and 1 teaspoon lemon juice. Broil, turning frequently, 5 to 8 minutes, or until nicely browned.



6TH ANNUAL SCALLOP FESTIVAL • NEW BEDFORD, MASS. • AUG. 9, 10, 11

excellent buy because there is no fat or bone to be weighed and paid for. High in protein and minerals; low in fat, low in calories and sodium. They're a fine nutritious food for a



balanced diet." The Seafood Co-Op with the New Bedford Exchange Club launched in 1958 the New Bedford Scallop Festival as a major promotional vehicle for the fishery. Large tents were erected at Marine Park on Pope's Island for the annual August event, due to the island's high visibility to motorists and vacationers via US Route 6, the major interstate artery to Cape Cod and the Islands. The marketing included a cartoon mascot, Sammy Scallop, who boasted a top hat and pearl tiepin. Festival publicity subcommittee co-chairs, Charles E. Sharek and Otavio A. Modesto along with John F. Linehan – general manager of the New Bedford Seafood Producers Association – worked with a Hartford,

Connecticut advertising executive Tom McFarlane to develop the Sammy mascot, which was joined by Susie Scallop. Festival expenses were underwritten in part through the advance sale of certificates, "shares purchased by festival boosters," which could be purchased in denominations of \$5, \$10, \$25, \$50 and available at multiple banks and businesses throughout the city. Mathias Bendiksen and Robert Selig comprised the Festival Certificates subcommittee, promoting them as a community minded effort to "help defray costs of putting on the effort." The names of businesses and individuals who purchased certificates were published in the newspaper and on festival programs.

Sharek, a city pharmacist and active Exchange Club member, advanced the idea of jointly "holding a seafood fiesta to salute the fishing industry" with the New Bedford Seafood Producers Association. Sharek noted to the



press, "After approval from the club aims committee we met with John Linehan... and we agreed adoption of the general theme, "Scallop Festival," would be the most appropriate and have the best promotional potential." He added that scallops were the chosen focus because "At that time, the Seafood Council was devoting most if its energy promoting this particular commodity.

By 1963, the 22-member committee was headed by John Carew, vice-president of the Goodhue Lumber Company and a past president of the Exchange Clubs of Massachusetts. Roy F. Mason and Patrick L. Sweeney were vice-chairs. Melvin E. Fryer was site director and Omer E. Raymond was festival advisor. The large group included business leaders from almost every sector of the community. Subcommittees included Finance, Food Procurement, Equipment Procurement, Supplies, Utilities, Tents, Tickets, Certificates, Publicity, Beauty Pageant, Entertainment, Boat Rides, and Dismantling & Storage.



As John Linehan explained in a recent interview for this article, “In 1957, the New Bedford Seafood Council and the then New Bedford Seafood Co-op were off-shoots of the Seafood Producers Association, which was comprised primarily of the boat owners. The business of seafood was multilayered – with a company operating multiple subsidiary companies, which, due to the tax advantages realized, handled the buying, processing, and selling of seafood separately.”

Until the Scallop Festival, little in the way of cooperative promotional campaigns to stimulate overall sales or grow new markets for the port as a whole was undertaken. In many instances the various fish processors and producers of seafood were fierce competitors. An early attempt to simply brand all port products with a byline was initiated by the New Bedford Seafood Council. “Sea Harvest of the Great New Bedford Fleet” was a slogan, which the Council invited all local processors to include on their packaging and promotional materials. This effort was not widely adopted.

Many New Bedford seafood companies pursued individual branding. The New Bedford



Fillet Co. dispensed their product in printed wax paper wrappers while extolling the convenience of ready to cook fillets. The 1950s was a decade

of rapid growth for the New Bedford scallop fishery and several promotional activities were orchestrated to promote scallops through the New Bedford Seafood Association, according to John Linehan. “The first year there was \$12,000 for advertising and we had to prove that it would work, but the budget was not enough to enter the New York City market, so it was launched in Hartford, instead. There we saw a 500% increase in sales. The next year they had \$40,000, which allowed them to break into the New York market. Promotional activities included direct outreach to food editors via luncheons in Manhattan. French chef André Surmain was hired as a consultant and with James Beard arranged the gourmet scallop dishes for these parties. After that, scallops really took off,” Linehan said.

The other major challenge was price stability, Linehan explained. “We tried to establish a flat market rate of around 45¢ because scallops were about 30¢ a pound in the summer and 60¢ in the winter.”

In the 1980s a new branding campaign was initiated by the New Bedford Seafood Council with the slogan “The New Bedford Fisherman – He brings out the best in seafood.” The effort included print advertising and collateral such as decals, labels, bumper stickers and billboard graphics, created by artist Clement E. Daley. In a broader way, the 1980s also saw a statewide campaign touting the value of Massachusetts products coupled with community pride messaging under the umbrella slogan “Make it in Massachusetts.” Funded by the Massachusetts Department of Commerce during the Governor Edward J. King



Administration, the campaign included 30 and 15-second TV commercials featuring large Massachusetts-based corporations such as Polaroid, John Hancock Insurance and State Street Bank with voiceovers proclaiming they were “Making it in Massachusetts” and accompanied by a jingle soundtrack. The spots also included aerial footage of communities with large urban renewal projects underway, such as Fall River’s Battleship Cove district. While these efforts did not rise to the level of branding, they set a precedent for state-funded promotional activities for products and services.

Developing new consumers for currently underutilized species as a sustainable growth strategy harkens back to Rachel Carson's concerns more than 70 years ago, and points to a comprehensive marketing approach with all the producing ports of the Commonwealth.

In 2009, the Standard-Times reported a "proposal, put forth by Rep. James Cantwell, D-Marshfield, would create a 13-member panel that would be tasked with investigating the feasibility of a statewide coordinated seafood marketing program... The commission, he said, would be made up entirely of volunteers and would require no state funding." Near the end of 2013, it again reported: "The bill calls for a seafood marketing program to be set up within the state Division of Marine Fisheries. The lawmakers say the goal is a coordinated approach that will increase demand for seafood and consumer preference for products from the state's own commercial fishing and seafood industry.... The legislation reflects the recommendations made by the Special Commission on Seafood Marketing in its July 2013 report." (Dec. 27, 2013)

In the 188th Massachusetts General Court (2013-2014), the bill (S.1979) sponsored by Senator Bruce Tarr, Antonio F. D. Cabral and others called for the program to "be established within the division of marine fisheries (DMF) a coordinated program to market seafood landed in the commonwealth and to take other actions to increase consumer demand and preference for the said local seafood products and support for the commonwealth's fishing and seafood industry and the residents and communities that benefit from these activities." A new draft of the bill was substituted (S.2422) on December 31, 2014. According to Rep. Cabral's office, "Language to create the Seafood Marketing Program was included in an Economic Development Bill passed by the Legislature... Chapter 287 of the Acts of 2014." The work of the state's new seafood marketing initiative should ensure that New Bedford is a primary beneficiary.