

Local Clams

by Edmund Gallizzi

Linguini con le Vongole (a.k.a. Spaghetti with Clams) which is the favorite dish of celebrity chef Mario Batali (Molto Mario) is an attractive meal for Bay area families because of an abundance of modestly priced, high quality fresh locally farmed clams.

In the past, Tampa Bay and other coastal waters of southwest Florida have provided an abundance of wild clams and oysters. In the early 20th century, the Ten Thousand Island area south of Marco Island was described as having “probably the largest bed of hard clams in the United States.” Unfortunately, these beds were destroyed by a red tide in 1945. Tampa Bay had a clam harvesting industry which used mechanical dredges that, by the middle of the century, decimated the clam beds.

As the wild clam population has dwindled, clam farming on the Gulf Coast of Florida has grown rapidly since its inception in the 1990s. Some of this growth has been fueled by the 1994 Florida gill net fishing ban which put many fisherman out of work. The center of Florida clam farming is Cedar Key. In our area, Joe Island Clams is located on Terra Ceia (just south of the Skyway bridge).

As with all meat and seafood, safe handling and preparation is important. Clams must be alive when purchased and used. Live clams have their shells tightly closed. Shells that are not closed or do not close when tapped should not be used. Clams should be kept refrigerated at about 45 degrees in a moist environment. Clams may be stored in the refrigerator in a bowl covered with a wet kitchen towel. Clams are best when used within a week of harvest and should not be used more than two weeks from harvest.

Linguini con le Vongole, serves 2 or 3

Recipe submitted by Edmund Gallizzi

18 clams, little neck or middle neck (size)
¼ cup dry white wine (or water)
3 tablespoons olive oil
2 cloves garlic, minced
½ teaspoon dry thyme
red pepper flakes (optional)
½ pound linguini
5 sprigs Italian parsley, chopped



Wash clams with a brush and check that each is tightly closed. If a clam is gaping a bit (not closed), set it aside for a few minutes to let it warm. Give it a few taps to see if it closes. If not, discard it.

In a large pot, boil salted water for the pasta.

Add wine (or water) and clams to a frying pan over medium heat. After a few minutes, begin removing the clams as they open. Place in a covered bowl. Some clams may take as long as 10 minutes to open. Unopened clams should be discarded. After all the clams have been removed from the pan, gently pour the clam juice into a bowl leaving any clam shell pieces or sediment in the pan. Optionally, remove the clams from the shells reserving a few for garnish.

Add linguini to the boiling water.

Wipe out the frying pan, heat the oil on medium-low heat and add the garlic. Sauté for a few minutes to soften, but not brown the garlic. Add reserved clam juice, thyme and pepper flakes.

Cook the pasta about one minute less than package instructions. After reserving about a cup of pasta cooking water, drain the pasta and place it in the pan with the oil and clam juice. Stir the pasta to coat with oil and juice and cook for a minute or two. If it seems a bit dry, add some of the reserved pasta water.

Add clams and parsley.

Plate and enjoy!