

# Downeast cioppino highlights the area's food harvesters

BY TINA ODDLEIFSON

On a recent Saturday morning I set out to meet the people who catch, harvest and process the ingredients I needed to make a seafood stew called cioppino. The day started off at the farmers market in Blue Hill and brought me to the docks in Stonington. It gave me the chance to watch crab pickers in action and ended with me face down in a mud flat on Deer Isle, but more about that later.

Cioppino refers to a tomato-based seafood stew that features several varieties of shellfish and finfish in one dish. Crusty bread and butter is served alongside or even put right into the bowl and makes a hearty and delicious meal. It is generally agreed that the dish originated in San Francisco, created by

immigrants from Genoa in Northern Italy, but after that the details get a little



foggy. Food historians say it originated anytime from the mid-1800s up until

the 1930s. Some say it was created by fishermen who shared their catch of the day in a communal meal. Still others attribute it to a particular restaurateur.

Around the same time that Italian fishermen in San Francisco were sharing a pot of cioppino, stone cutters from Italy came to Stonington to work in the granite quarries. At the Deer Isle-Stonington Historical Society I found records showing that immigrants came from the Massa-Carrara province of northern Tuscany where the famous white Carrara marble is quarried. They came from small villages called Gragnola and Codiponte, that even today have populations less than Deer Isle. While we don't know specifically what the stonecutters and their families were eating, I like to imagine they created

an equally delicious seafood dish using local ingredients and Italian flavors.

Just like its vague history, it's hard to talk about cioppino without disagreeing on the recipe itself (take a quick look at the comments section of online recipes and you'll see what I mean). Anybody from San Francisco will tell you that it's not a true cioppino unless Dungeness crab is one of the ingredients. But as long as you cover the basics by using tomatoes, garlic, onion and wine, and some combination of seafood, the details are really up to you. Cioppino is a great dish to serve company because you can make the base a day before and then poach the seafood in the liquid just prior to serving.

## Meet the producers



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**Amanda Provencher of King Hill Farm in Penobscot restocks supplies after a busy morning at the Blue Hill Farmers' Market.**

### Vegetables

I began the day at the Blue Hill Farmers' market, which takes place from 9 to 11 a.m. on Saturdays at the fairgrounds. I wasn't sure I would find the fennel I needed, but was delighted to find that Amanda Provencher, co-owner of King Hill Farm in Penobscot, had the fennel and fresh parsley I was looking for. The long line and hectic pace at her farm stand made it hard to talk, but I later learned that King Hill Farm is a diversified, MOFGA-certified, organic family farm that grows produce along with chicken, eggs, pork and beef. The farm is a member of the Blue Hill Heritage Trust's Farmland Forever program, which promotes farmland protection in Hancock County.



COURTESY OF TRACI BOYCE

**Fisherman Johnson Boyce baits hooks for halibut on his F/V Catch 22.**

### Lobster & Halibut

After the farmers market, I headed down to the Stonington docks to meet up with Johnson Boyce, who fishes for lobster, and halibut during the season. Johnson grew up on Deer Isle and first started fishing with his dad when he was eight years old. He got his first boat when he was 11 and today is the owner and captain of the 45-foot F/V *Catch 22*. Johnson comes from generations of fishermen and is proud to be carrying on the family tradition. His favorite part of the job is the freedom he feels being out on the water and working for himself.

While lobster is fished year round, halibut season in Maine lasts for just over a month and closes about the third week in June. But halibut freezes well and you'll still be able to find it at most fish markets.



BY TINA ODDLEIFSON

**Ava Lowrey picks a large pile of crab for Coldwater Seafood in Stonington.**

### Crabmeat

My go-to source for fresh picked crabmeat in the area is Coldwater Seafood in Stonington. On any given day you'll find employees hard at work cooking, then picking, the flavorful meat, which can be purchased in the store. It is tedious

work requiring a great deal of patience and attention to detail. Coldwater uses a black light to help them find any shells before packaging and sells over 600 pounds a week. They also sell halibut, mussels, steamers, and even cooked and picked lobster if you are feeling lazy.

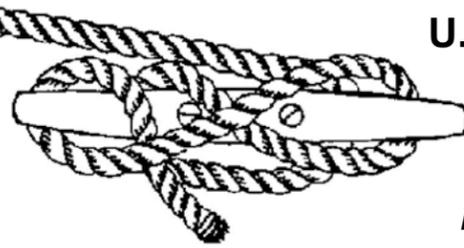
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her person just died, she's looking for her next home



*Sweetie was feral in 2009, and adopted her person Jim by deciding to live under his cabin that winter. Jim fed her, got her spayed, and provided a straw shelter for 2 years until he finally managed to coax her into the cabin. For 6 years they have been enjoying each other's company, until Jim passed away recently. Sweetie is about 12 years old, doesn't like being around dogs, prefers being indoors & outdoors, is shy, but loves affection, and is healthy.*

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BY TINA ODDLEIFSON

Sixteen-year-old Drew Wendell digs for clams near his home on Deer Isle.

**Clams**

Hard shell clams like littlenecks or mahogany are preferable in a stew if you are going to put the shells directly in the broth to cook because they don't break easily and the meat is easy to extract. But little necks are not harvested in our immediate area and since Deer Isle has delicious soft shells I decided to use steamers in my recipe. I steamed them separately in white wine, then cleaned and rough chopped the meat before putting it into the stew.

To learn more about what it is like to be a clammer, I called up my neighbor, Andrew Wendell. His 16-year-old son, Drew, kindly invited me to go out with him at low tide on the flats below their home on Merchant Point. After heading out in boots that were too big, I promptly found myself stuck then tumbling forward into the mud and wondered what I had gotten myself into. After making several unsuccessful attempts to walk the long way out to the flats, Drew offered to pull me in his sled

the rest of the way out. I am not a small person but I gratefully (and sheepishly) took him up on his generous offer. Drew clams during the summer season when he is not in high school to help pay his car expenses and have some extra cash. His real passion is acting and he hopes to find a way to make a career out of it, while also remaining a member of the island community that he loves.

Meeting the people who fish, harvest, pick, and dig for the ingredients in my meal and seeing their hard work gave me a whole new level of respect and appreciation for all that they do. The small farms, independent fishing boats and individual gatherers that we have here in Maine, and especially on the island and peninsula give us access to fresh ingredients that many people just don't have elsewhere.

Tina Oddleifson was the owner of the former Whale's Rib Tavern at Pilgrim's Inn. She divides her time between Deer Isle and Portland and never met a vegetable she didn't like.



PHOTO AND FOOD BY TINA ODDLEIFSON

A Downeast version of Cioppino made from lobster, steamers, mussels, halibut and local produce.

**Downeast Cioppino**

This recipe has been adapted from several sources, too numerous to name. Adjust, change and make it your own. Other ingredients sometimes seen in cioppino are celery, carrots, peppers, basil, thyme, fennel seeds and Pernod.

Serves 6

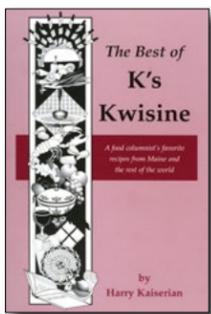
- ◆ 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ◆ 1 medium onion, chopped
- ◆ 1 medium fennel bulb, white part only, chopped
- ◆ 4-6 medium garlic cloves, minced
- ◆ 3/4 teaspoon red-pepper flakes
- ◆ 3 tablespoons tomato paste
- ◆ 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- ◆ 1.5 cup dry white wine
- ◆ 1 28-ounce can crushed tomatoes
- ◆ 2 bay leaves
- ◆ 1 8-ounce bottle clam juice
- ◆ 4 cups high quality seafood stock (chicken also works in a pinch)
- ◆ 1 lb. clams (with shell if a hard shell, otherwise picked and cleaned soft shells)
- ◆ 1 lb. mussels
- ◆ 1 lb. halibut or other flaky white fish
- ◆ 1 lb. shelled and deveined shellfish (like lobster, crab, or scallops)
- ◆ 1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley
- ◆ Salt and fresh ground pepper to taste

Heat oil in a large pot over medium

heat. Add onion and fennel, season with salt and pepper and cook, stirring occasionally, until very soft. Add the minced garlic and red-pepper flakes. Continue to cook, stirring frequently until garlic is golden and fragrant. Add tomato paste and oregano and cook, stirring, 1 minute. Add wine, and simmer uncovered until cooking liquid is reduced by about a third. Add crushed tomatoes, bay leaves, clam juice, and stock. Bring to a boil, cover the pot, reduce to a simmer and cook for about 30 minutes. Taste and adjust seasoning.

When ready to serve, heat the base to a slow simmer and add clams (if using hard shells) and mussels, cover, and cook until they begin to open (3-5 minutes). Next, place halibut or other white fish in the pot, cover, and simmer gently until fish is firm and opaque and begins to fall apart. Stir in cooked lobster, crab and softshell clam meat and continue simmering until heated through (just a few minutes). Discard bay leaves and serve immediately in large shallow soup bowl garnished with plenty of parsley. Serve with your favorite bread and butter, garlic bread. My favorite is toast with gremolata (butter mixed with lemon zest, garlic, parsley and coarse salt).

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