

# A Bushel Full of Fun

It's kind of a surreal scene, at least as far as family vacations go. Two of my old college buddies, their wives and our combined nine children are standing ankle deep in Pamlico Sound about a quarter mile from the terminus of Hatteras Island. The Ocracoke ferry is steaming north (or is it east?) a couple hundred yards away with a load of cars and tourists. The Carolina Skiff we rode over on is gently bobbing in the sound, barely straining at the anchor we set in the shoal.

Steve Jones, another old friend from my days in Chapel Hill, has the kids' attention as he coaches them up before the day's adventure begins. We're all going clamming, an activity our families have adopted when vacationing together in the summer on the Outer Banks.

Clamming checks all the boxes for what our extended clan looks for in a group activity. It's easy (for both young and old alike), outdoors (beats a round of mini-golf), relatively inexpensive (our day always ends with a clam dinner) and educational

(plenty of teaching moments for the kids). Sure, clamming lacks the thrills of hooking a largemouth bass or working a spring gobbler, but it also lacks mosquitos and sweat—and I picked nary a tick off a carcass when we were done.

"I like that you have to search for them, it's not like finding shells on the shore," my middle daughter, Olivia, 15, says. "I also like the environment. You don't just see clams; you see skates, blue crabs, dolphins and horseshoe crabs. You don't see that every day. It's becoming a tradition for our families."

My youngest daughter, Nicole, 14, adds: "I like how you get to eat the clams, because I love seafood. Looking for clams is a nice activity to do with your friends."

## *A Little History*

It would certainly be stretching the truth to suggest that my buddies and I dreamed of the day we would take our families clamming together, but it



Clamming is the perfect activity for lazy days of summer

written by *Mike Zlotnicki* // photographed by *Melissa McGaw*



is just another in the many fond memories that date back several decades.

I met Steve in the late 1980s during a game of Trivial Pursuit (which also happened to be my second date with my wife, Renee). Later he poured beers at The Henderson Street Bar in Chapel Hill, a favorite watering hole. I made my

---

Clams are not the only animals around. An occasional blue crab is spooked from inside its eelgrass hideout, scooting sideways to startle someone. At one point, a skate glides by, and those who can see it stand still, while those who can't come running, which spooks it even more.

---

first offshore forays with Steve and he later owned and ran the Chaser charter boat out of Oden's Dock in Hatteras before selling the hull years later when the economy went south. With

Steve, I caught my first mahi, yellowfin tuna and wahoo, and lost my only billfish. He killed his first couple of deer with me. He is one of the most knowledgeable saltwater anglers I've met, and our various outdoors adventures cemented an already fast friendship.

Christopher "Kit" Strickland and I went to high school and college together, and lived in the Kappa Sigma house with Keith Wood. Petra Strickland, Jodie Wood and my wife Renee enjoy each other's company and put up with most of the "good ideas" the guys come up with. The Strickland girls—Megan, Kirsten, and twins Tessa and Jill, team up with my girls and Edie Wood. Xander Wood is a good sport with all of this female company. All the kids get along, making for great vacations when we can time it right.

Steve first suggested a clamming trip a few years ago as a way to include all the children in a fun, safe and consumptive activity. Steve, 50, runs the bar at Dinky's Waterfront Restaurant in Hatteras, but maintains his captain's license and does inshore charters along with his brother, Rick, who works for the ferry service. He's been guiding for 34 years, subs as a mate for hire and also captains for the famed Albatross charter fleet when Ernie Foster needs him. Steve is able to borrow Rick's skiff, take a day off and is nice enough to take us clamming.

We meet at Oden's Dock in Hatteras on a Wednesday morning, then wait impatiently for a squall west of us to pass. We had rented enough life preservers in Avon to make sure everyone had one that fit. A 20-minute boat ride puts us on a shoal within sight of a dredge island.

Steve gives the children a quick demonstration, dragging or pushing the clam rake through the hard sand. "When you feel something hard or feel a 'thunk,' rake it up and see if it's a clam," he says, while the parents eye the upturned clam rakes in the kids' hands with some alarm. Several are standard commercially-made rakes with little catch baskets at the base. But a couple others are homemade from butter knives welded to a crossbar. Parents keep watchful eyes on the rakes, lest there be an unplanned trip to the local urgent care facility.

The kids split into groups and share the rakes, with a parent tending to the youngest. It's like an aquatic Easter egg hunt with a frequent "got one" punctuating the soundscape. Mercifully, the kids are sharing the rakes and being careful. Two laundry baskets lashed to ring buoys serve as floating harvest containers.

### Scratching the Surface

Clams are not the only animals around. An occasional blue crab is spooked from inside its eelgrass hideout, scooting sideways to startle someone. At one point, a skate glides by, and those who

can see it stand still, while those who can't come running, which spooks it even more. Skates lack the venomous spine of the stingray, but have hard projections along the back and tail for defense. Like any wild animal, they are best left alone.

At one point, 16-year-old Edie Wood rakes up something a lot bigger than a clam, a knobbed whelk. Almost a foot long, this predator of the clam was still alive and withdrew into its shell, sealing itself from harm with its hard operculum when retracted, but revealing a beautiful peach-orange aperture. Edie decides to keep the animal as a keepsake, which I think raises an interesting ethical question. So, I ask her if she's going to eat it—a possibility that she had not considered. Her mother, Jodie, a former Greensboro assistant district attorney, asks me if I've ever killed a deer because it had big antlers—certainly a fair question, but I'm also thinking 'here we go.' However, I'm not a trophy hunter and reply that I've eaten every deer I've killed. I don't want to argue with Jodie (and she doesn't lose many). So after some discussion, it is decided that the whelk would be consumed, and into the clam holder it goes.

The whelk reminds me of a previous clamming trip when my wife, Renee, was in waist-deep water and felt a sizeable thump at the end of her rake. "At first I thought I had the mother of all clams," she recalls. So, she pulls the rake out of the eelgrass and discovers a horseshoe crab—not necessarily the most pleasant of surprises. "When I got the rake out of the water, the crab was upside down and those little legs were flailing around. I freaked out a little and jumped back."

Yeah, just a tad. It turns out her rubber sandal came off and rapidly floated to the surface, nudging her in the backside, causing my normally unflappable wife to shriek again. I'm pretty sure this qualifies as the first documented Croc attack in Pamlico Sound.

After collecting about 100 clams (half of our legal vessel limit), Steve measures the smaller ones to make sure they are thick enough to be legal to harvest. We head back to the boat for a quick ride to a sand dollar sandbar, where we find some live sand dollars. It looks comical with the entire party on their hands and knees, like two basketball teams searching for a lost contact.

There are plenty of sand dollars, but greed is addressed quickly. Some are kept for conversion



PHOTOGRAPHS THIS PAGE BY MIKE ZLOTNICK



A family searches for clams on a falling tide. Opposite: These quahogs are headed for the catch basket and then the dinner table.

to Christmas tree ornaments, but most are returned to the water alive. “Going to the sand dollar area was a really educational experience for me,” recounts my oldest daughter, Caroline, 17. “I never knew that sand dollars were fuzzy and moved with legs like a sea star until I saw several moving in the gentle current. This sight makes me appreciate the aquatic diversity that calls our coast home that much more.”

On the way in, Steve talks about his infrequent clamming trips. “I only do two or three each summer,” he says. “My brother Rick does a lot more. As far as trips go, it’s just relaxing. There’s no pressure to find them. Also, we can mix in some inshore bottom fishing if they want. We also see dolphins on the ride in or out.”

Steve says interested parties can call Oden’s Dock or Teach’s Lair Marina in Hatteras to find local charters for clamming trips.

### Southern Outer Banks

Steve and Rick Jones are not the only Hatteras Island guides, and clamming is certainly not relegated to Pamlico Sound only.

Brian Goodwin operates Native Guide Service in Beaufort. I first met him in the mid-1990s when he hosted my wife and me on a flounder gigging trip for *Carolina Adventure* magazine. An eighth-generation southern Outer Banks waterman, Goodwin pilots his 2310 Bay Ranger around Cape

Lookout in search of light-tackle saltwater finfish of all types, but he also does eco tours, history tours and the occasional clamming trip.

“Clams and flounder gigging helped put me through college,” he said. “I love it when folks get to take fresh North Carolina seafood home with them, and clamming is a guaranteed way to do it. Families love sharing the experience.”

Goodwin targets sand and grass flats in Core Sound with water depths ranging from ankle to knee deep. His typical trips are midday and, for a guide, he says they don’t have the time pressure and searching of a finfish trip. To see Goodwin on a typical clamming trip, go to [www.deotv.net/NC-Seafood-Page](http://www.deotv.net/NC-Seafood-Page). In addition to his angling prowess, Goodwin is a professional videographer and outdoor show host.

### The Aftermath

Steve drives the boat back to Oden’s Dock, where the wives and children disembark and head to local fast food joint Hatterasman for lunch while Kit, Keith and I stay on the boat with Steve as he eases the big skiff back to a private launch off of a sound-side canal in Hatteras. His knowledge of businesses and people of the village add yet another layer to a great day on the water.

Once home, we put the clams in tubs with salt-water overnight to allow them to purge sand from their systems. Then they go into a cooler with

## Clam Facts

The subject of our clamming safari was the quahog (*Mercanaria mercanaria*), a hard-shell clam common from Canada to Florida. Clams fall into “hard shell” and “soft shell,” but that’s a bit misleading as soft-shells are hard, but thinner and brittle.

Quahogs (pronounced KWA-hog) are marketed by their size. The smallest are Littlenecks and are the most tender. They are about 1.5 to a tad over 2 inches across the shell. Cherrystone clams are under 3 inches across. The biggest quahogs are called chowder clams and are mostly rough-chopped and added to chowders and stews. On this trip we ate the smaller clams that night and froze the chowder clams whole for Hatteras-style chowder later at home. Like oysters, one consumes the entire animal, as opposed to just the adductor muscle as one does with scallops.

Quahogs are not the most mobile critters in the sound but they can move with the aid of a large “foot” muscle. With two siphons, quahogs filter water for plankton and oxygen, and the larger clams can filter about a gallon of water an hour. Through this filtering system they can also ingest pollutants and bacteria. The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries will issue Shellfish Polluted Area proclamations when an area is tested and found at issue. The clams will eliminate pollutants in due time and return to an edible state.

Common predators of hard clams include sea stars, whelks, crabs, birds, some fish and humans. The name “quahog” comes from the Native American name “poquaujock,” meaning horse fish. The Latin name is derived from a word that means wages, and was given to the quahog after learning that Native Americans used its purple inner shell, or “wampum,” as currency and for jewelry.

Source: Environmental Data Center; University of Rhode Island





Sometimes rakes are optional on a clamming trip, particularly for kids. If you don't want to invest in a clam rake, a garden rake or four-tined cultivator will work as well.

bagged ice for the day, and then they go to a party. The Wood family has a house in Avon, and Keith is a master of the Low Country Boil (or Frogmore Stew, to some). We all meet at their house where the smaller clams are mixed with the potato, corn, sausage, shrimp, copious amounts of Old Bay Seasoning—and “just a hint of sand,” Renee says as she’s eating. I sip a beer and watch the dinner unfold and the hunter-gatherer in me wonders if the children realize that they just killed and consumed a wild animal. I wonder if they even care. Either way, the clams taste good, a fact not lost on the crowd this evening. Keith’s parents Al and Betty Wood join for dinner, making a good night even better.

Keith and Jodie talk about their thoughts before the trip. “I thought someone was going to get seasick,” says Keith with a chuckle. “I didn’t think we would find any, because I’ve just never seen them,” Jodie says.

Both Keith and Jodie have known Steve for years, but have never been out on the water—or in the water—with him.

“He was sooo good with the kids,” Keith says. “He’s the best I’ve ever seen around kids. Or anybody, for that matter.”

Jodie nods and adds, “I think all the kids had so much fun. It doesn’t take much to find one. Everybody had success.”

The larger chowder clams are frozen in gallon Zip-Loc bags, and we relive this great time with old friends over Hatteras-style clam chowder (no milk or cream, and yes, it’s still chowder) later in the year at home in Garner.

Clamming may not be as exciting as catching finfish, but it’s something of a treasure hunt in the sound—buried treasure at that. We hope to do it every summer. ♦

Mike Zlotnicki is associate editor of Wildlife in North Carolina. He can be reached at 919-707-0175.



## Chorizo and Beer Braised N.C. Clams

Transform the results of your clamming outing—or even your quick trip to the fish store—into a tasty meal by following Chef Chad McIntyre’s simple steps for chorizo and clams. This dish does not disappoint, and whether you’re at the beach or at home, it is the perfect conclusion to a hot summer’s day.

### Chorizo and Clams (Serves 4)

#### Ingredients

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 tablespoons minced garlic
- 1 small red onion fine chopped
- 1/2-pound fresh crumbled Chorizo sausage (Mexican style)
- 2 12-ounce bottles of pilsner style beer (non-alcoholic beer can be substituted)
- 4 pounds fresh, medium-to-large North Carolina clams (approximately 40–45 clams)
- 1 lemon (quartered)
- 2 tablespoons chopped cilantro
- Toasted bread to serve (optional)

#### Preparation

To begin, wash and inspect the clams before cooking. Make sure all clams are closed tight and have a healthy weight-to-size ratio. Discard any opened, uncooked clams or ones that feel hollow or empty. Tap the shell of an opened clam; if it doesn’t close, don’t use it. These are dead and should not be consumed.

Heat oil on high in a heavy-bottomed pot large enough to cover all the ingredients. Add the garlic and red onion, and saute for roughly 5 minutes or until just browned. Crumble in the chorizo and cook until done, about 4 to 5 minutes. Add both bottles of beer and continue to heat on high until the beer boils, then reduce heat to medium high.

Add clams to pot and quickly stir a few times before covering the pot tightly with a lid. Steam the clams for approximately 6–8 minutes or until they open. Remove pot from heat and squeeze lemon onto the clams. Sprinkle half of the cilantro over clams, give the clams another stir and then sprinkle remaining cilantro over the clams.

Transfer to a large bowl or leave in the pot to serve. Serve with a toasted loaf of any type of crusted bread—or even a batch of cornbread—to help sop up the broth.

**Cooking Online:** Tune in to the Wildlife Resources Commission’s YouTube channel and Facebook page for our Wild & Tasty series and watch Chef Chad McIntyre in action cooking this recipe and others.

