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YOU

starting from scratch .. can you dig it?

CLAMMING FOR YOUR CHOWDER

BY DIANE LUCK CARTER

Although our local shores may not be abundant in such Eastern favorites as the cherrystone clam, we do have Pismo clams, which make up in size for what they lack in tenderness. There is no season for clams, but to be legally acceptable for taking, a Pismo clam must be at least 4½ inches in diameter; so it takes only a few to make a big pot of chowder.

All you need is a short-handled, long-tined fork (the kind you would use to move rocks in a garden), a bucket or mesh bag for your catch, a gauge for measuring and a salt-water fishing license, which costs \$4 a year (youngsters under 12 don't need one). Many clam diggers wear wet-suit tops during the winter, but these really are not necessary because you are usually moving too fast to get cold.

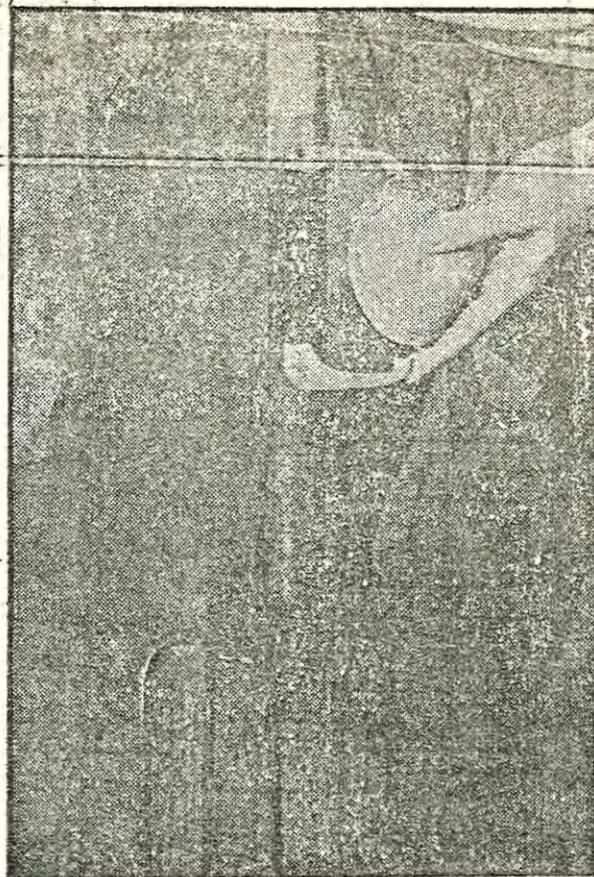
The technique is to push your fork into the sand at intervals of about 8-10 inches. Most clam diggers prefer to walk backwards, piercing the sand with every step they take. The clam, hiding just a few inches below the sand, feels like a rock. Once you locate one, dig underneath the clam and lift it up with your fork. If you are lucky, you won't have a wave crash on top of you just as you're bending over. When the clam is in hand, measure your catch. If it slips through the gauge, you'll have to rebury it.

The best time to dig for clams is during the lowest possible tides, those listed on the tide table as minus tides. Such tables are available at no charge at most stores where fishing tackle is sold.

LEGAL STIPULATIONS

California sportfishing regulations, published by the State Fish and Game Commission, list these other requirements for clam digging:

—It is unlawful to dig for clams earlier than a half



Fork with attachment to measure the catch—and a license—is all a clam digger needs.—PHOTO BY DOUG CARTER.

hour before sunrise or later than a half hour after sunset.

—The limit is 10 clams, 4½ inches or larger at the widest part of the shell (from San Luis Obispo County southward).

—Spades, shovels, hoes, rakes or other appliances operated by hand—except for spears or gaff hooks—may be used to take clams.

Though the Pismo clam can be found on any sandy beach from Pismo Beach south, the best digging in Southern California is probably at Huntington State Beach, where you can usually find 50 or more diggers during a good low tide. One of the advantages of that

beach (also those at Hermosa Beach and Manhattan Beach) is the presence of sand bars. These enable the digger to go farther out without getting overly wet.

SAFETY HAZARDS

Clam digging is not without its hazards, according to Larry Gibson, marine safety officer for the city of Newport Beach. "During every low tide, at least two or three people put clam forks through their feet," Gibson says. "And then there is the clam digger who insists on wearing wading boots. When a big wave comes along, these fill up with water, so that he might as well be wearing an anchor."

A third type of careless clammer, says Gibson, is the one who goes out to a sand bar with a bucket tied to his waist. "By the time he has filled his bucket with 10 clams weighing a total of about 15 pounds, the tide has started to come back in and he's too weighted down to get back to shore."

Gibson's advice is to forget the boots, leave your bucket on the shore and be careful where you put that fork.

HOW TO PREPARE CLAMS

Once you've caught your limit—or you're sufficiently cold, tired or wet—it is time to head for home and prepare the feast.

It is recommended that during the warm summer months any dark flesh be removed and the clam thoroughly washed. When that is done, soak your catch in a gallon of fresh water to which a third of a cup of salt has been added. Leave the clams there for at least an hour so they will spit out most of the sand in their shells. To open a clam, place it against a firm surface, such as a chopping block. Use a sturdy knife with a blade 4-8 inches long, inserting it near the back where the shells hinge (or at the front if the shells have started to open). Work the knife around the clam in a circular sawing motion, cutting through the abductor muscles that keep the shells clamped together.

Loosen the soft portion of the clam meat and chop fine; the tougher parts can be ground. Rinse the meat under cold running water before chopping or grinding. If you don't plan to use the clams right away, the chopped or ground clams can be frozen.

Although you won't want to eat your Pismo clams on the halfshell unless your teeth are particularly strong, you will find them very delectable fried, in a chowder or in linguini.



choice chowders

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