

LOCAL PRODUCERS



NORTHUMBERLAND MUSSELS

Lisa Moore-Wilson catches up with self-confessed mussel nutcase Steve Oldale...

If there is anything you want to know about these tiny sea creatures he's your man – it appears that there is nothing he doesn't know about from the history of their harvest to the best ways to cook them. So how did this life long love affair begin? Steve himself attributes his early interest to his childhood in Sheffield when his Mum would regularly buy a stone of mussels for a treat on a Saturday teatime. "She would serve them up in a white sauce on hot buttered toast on the weekends when we weren't enjoying delicacies like tripe or chittlings!" Sadly perhaps tastes have changed; at the time Sheffield was consuming ten tonnes of mussels a week whereas now they are rarely seen at traditional markets.

By the seventies, Steve was based in Ireland working on managing the local lobster storage tanks. A chance conversation with a friendly chef at the Eurocrest Hotel in Killarney lead to Steve supplying their mussels and shellfish. While the country sweltered in the blazing hot summer of 1976, Steve had the not altogether unpleasant task of gathering mussels on the Dingle Peninsula. Life then took its usual twists and turns and it was 1995 before it brought him into contact with mussels again – by now located in Scotland, he tried to re-open the mussel beds in aptly named Musselburgh. However the beds were too close to the river mouth, making it impossible to gather good quality mussels and the project was abandoned.

In 2003, Steve came across the disused mussel beds off Holy Island - talking to one of the island fishermen, he discovered that when the fishing industry was still thriving Holy Island mussels were infamous. "At one time" Steve enthuses "people in Newcastle used to queue down the streets for their poke of mussels" No doubt they were a welcome taste of the sea in times of heavy industry. However as the fishing industry died out so too did the mussel market and the beds had not been used for twenty years.

Once he had decided to reopen the beds Steve was then faced with a lengthy legislation procedure to get permissions from various bodies including the EEC and CEAFAS as well as the Holy Island Fisherman's Association and the Sutherland family whose company Lindisfarne Oysters own the beds. It took a year to complete all the paperwork but eventually Northumberland Mussels was up and running and the rest as they say is history.

Steve very much believes that Holy Island mussels belong to the people of the North East and that he is their guardian; he takes his care taking duties seriously and works hard to bring his customers the freshest, best quality mussels they are ever likely to taste. Talking to Steve, mussels become more than small squidgey objects in a shell – the creatures take on an almost human personality with a life cycle dictated by the seasons and the pull of the moon. Mussels begin to spawn in the summer and through the autumn take on fat to survive the Winter, as you read this article they will be using up these reserves to survive the rough winter seas before they regain weight in February making them ideal eating for Valentines Day. Due to this cycle, mussels are best eaten between September and March when they are at their absolute largest.

The mussels are harvested by hand from a coble with the help of one of the island's few remaining fishermen. It's often a solitary life with only the seabirds and the constant braying of the seals for company but Steve admits he has never been so content. He's also privileged to see the island and its waters in a unique setting as mussels can only be harvested at low tide meaning they are often gathered in by the full moon. Once landed they are taken to Spittal where they are cleaned and

scrubbed with the help of another seasoned local. The catch is then purged in salt-water tanks for three days before being bagged and taken to market. Natural England continue to monitor the operation but the simple harvesting methods are in no way detrimental to the landscape and marine biodiversity of the area.

Due to the way they are managed, Holy Island mussels have a unique flavour, they truly taste of the sea and the Holy Island tangle – a mystical mixture of ozone and seaweed. It's not surprising that the taste of these bottom grown, hand harvested mussels is so different to other farmed varieties. Holy Island mussels are normally around five years old when collected compared to many supermarket mussels with an eighteen-month lifespan. This longer maturity gives them a larger, meatier texture and a brighter apricot colouring. A wholly natural diet also affects their taste – in the Autumn the mussels feed on zooplankton giving them a lobster like flavour whereas the vegetable plankton of Spring gives a tinge of seaweed. However although they take longer to mature, once caught, Northumberland Mussels are much quicker to reach the consumer; supermarket mussels can be as much as fifteen days old compared to Steve's catch which is taken from his tanks the same day so its no wonder they can't compete on the intensity of flavour.

Although it could be argued that Holy Island mussels are classic Slow Food in that the seasons and tides rather than the wheels of commerce dictate their growth and harvest, once purchased they are the ultimate fast food. Steve maintains that the best way to enjoy his catch is as simply as possible just steamed for three minutes and enjoyed with good bread and butter or at a push dipped in some garlic butter or mayonnaise. Mussels are packed full of goodness – they are low in a fat, a natural source of Omega 3 essential fatty acids and rich in vitamins and minerals including B2, B6, B12 Vitamin E, calcium, iodine, selenium and zinc. All in all, a pretty good dinner to have on the table in less than ten minutes. Mussel shells also have the added bonus that they can be crushed and used in the garden as a natural means of deterring slugs much better than slinging waste packaging in the bin.

Holy Island mussels are worth seeking out as well as being on sale in selected delis, Steve regularly attends farmers markets in Alnwick, Morpeth, Kelso and Tynemouth where he is happy to answer questions and pass on his infectious love of mussels. Happily his catch is also starting to appear on local menus. The Il Forno restaurant in Tynemouth first heard about Northumberland Mussels through the Newcastle Journal's Taste Campaign and now places a regular order, a huge boost to this tiny business. Once you try Northumberland Mussels, we guarantee you'll be hooked; nurtured by nature, harvested by hand in icy waters under moonlight, by eating them you'll be supporting a man who genuinely cares about what is on your plate and reviving an important part of our heritage.

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