

Heaven in a Half Shell
by Ceridwyn Gipson

Heaven in a half-shell; no, I don't mean Botticelli's Venus, but the west coast's own tasty sea treat that can rival the east coast's lobsters. Not as frighteningly gooey as oysters, mussels aim to please the palate.

As a child, I never was a fan of bivalve marine life on the dinner table. I was nearly brought to tears at my first meal of clams during which I begged my father to remove the what I scientifically called the "poop sack." He obliged as he told me that the more commonly known "stomach" was the best part. A few years later, my father once again broadened my culinary knowledge by introducing me to Oregon's orange bearded friend, the mussel. More specifically, the *Mytilus edulis* which make rocky tide pools their home along the Oregon coast. We harvested a few from the rocks, carefully choosing tightly closed shells, probably as the local tribes have done over the centuries. Wrapping them in tin foil, we smoked them over our camp fire and served them up with melted butter. Wanting to appear brave, I closed my eyes and ate a mussel whole, poop sack and all. I was converted instantly and could not believe what I had been missing all the twelve years of my life.

So, next time you're at the Oregon coast, pick up a local tide table, and go mussel hunting. There are some guidelines that you do need to follow that are issued by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. The catch limit is currently 72 mussels a day and while there is no permit required to gather mussels, you do need to be aware that there are certain beaches off limit. The best "hunting" grounds, in my opinion, are between Yachats and Newport. You'll need thick gloves (the shells can easily slice) and a cooler filled with ice. Take the necessary precautions while gathering - watch out for sneaker waves and rabid sea lions (you never know). The removal of mussels by hand tools and even power tools are allowed, however I have never had any trouble by just using brute strength and workman's gloves. You'll also want to be aware of any environmental concerns. Mussels are particularly sensitive to pollutants as they are filter feeders. Use common sense; obviously don't harvest near an oil spill or during a red tide.

SIDE BAR

For more information on tides, visit <http://www.tidesonline.com/> or pick a tide table in the local tourist office at your chosen coastal town.

For more information on Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife guidelines and maps of acceptable gathering areas, visit <http://www.dfw.state.or.us>

SIDE BAR

Mussels can be served up many ways but do best when they are the feature of the recipe and aren't over-powered by extensive use of herbs and heavy sauces. Keep mussels cool and moist; in a bowl in the refrigerator works perfectly. To prepare the mussels for cooking, scrub and debeard them by pulling out the weed-like scraggly threads hanging from between the shells. Discard any mussels with open shells as they are dead. Follow the recipe below provided by

chef-extraordinaire (and my good friend) Nancy Boyett, a Eugene caterer, for your own heaven in a half-shell.

Ingredients:

2 cups of white wine

½ cup minced shallots

4 medium garlic cloves, minced

1 bay leaf

4 pounds scrubbed and debearded mussels (Your catch of the day.)

4 tablespoons unsalted butter

½ cup chopped fresh parsley

Simmer wine, shallots, garlic and bay leaf for three minutes in a large stockpot. Increase heat to high, and add mussels. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally for four to eight minutes, or until shells open. Remove opened mussels to serving bowl and continue cooking unopened shells for a few more minutes. Remove all opened mussels and discard closed ones. Stir butter and parsley into pan juices to make a sauce. Serve mussels over angel hair pasta with finely cubed Roma tomatoes and julienned basil along with a hunk of crusty bread.