BY BRIAN HALWEIL

RETURN OF THE MOLLUSK

Can reviving a legendary shellfish help revive a culture?

SOUTHOLD—Seafood lovers keep your fingers crossed. In a few weeks, assuming all goes as planned, baymen will begin pulling bushels of scallops out of Long Island's Great Peconic Bay. After nearly two decades of dismal harvests, expectations are anxiously high that this year will bring a good haul. This past spring, baymen, naturalists, and hobby anglers all noticed significantly more baby scallops than in recent years.

Perhaps no group of East Enders is as closely connected to this revival as the horde of hobby gardeners that gathers at Cedar Beach State Park in Southold on cool fall mornings when the scent of clam flats is noticeable on the slack tide. Like any other community garden, this one excites the particular buzz associated with edible rewards. But there are no compost piles anywhere and the only plants in sight are the wetland's spartina grass and phragmites. These gardeners aren't tending tomatoes, lettuce, or beans. Instead, they have each purchased a supply of baby shellfish, enclosed them in a plastic mesh cage to keep out predators, and anchored the cage to the bay bottom or the shore. Their harvest will be clams, oysters, and scallops.

Some gardeners have located their cages up Cedar Creek, and paddle away in kayaks and canoes. Others reel in their cages with ropes attached to the park's public docks. Once they hoist the contents to the surface, the gardeners "weed" algae, crabs, and other debris, count and measure their mollusks, and return the cage to the water. Throughout the morning, they debate the fate of the Peconic Bay scallop or the best way to cook oyster stew.

These are members of the Southold Project in Aquaculture Training, and they call themselves "SPATsters." SPAT, itself named after the term for baby bivalves, has accomplished one of the nation's most successful restorations of wild shellfish populations. Not coincidentally, it is also one of only a handful of such initiatives to involve local residents—currently more than 200 volunteers from 41 towns in the region, the largest army of volunteer-aquaculturists in the world.

Unlike similar programs in places like Chesapeake Bay, SPAT

Photographs: Kim Tetrault and J. Michael Dombrowski

provides an attractive gastronomic incentive: gardeners get to eat half of their harvest, fresh mature shellfish. But those gardeners themselves say the other half provides the real attraction. That share goes to Cornell University's marine center and hatchery in Southold, which in turn distributes the mollusks throughout the region "to bring back the glory of the Peconic Bay," said SPATster and educator Mary Morgan. The hope is that SPAT's seeding could revive a storied local economy based on the tastiest, most lucrative mollusk: the bay scallop.

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Compared to oysters or clams, scallops are shorter-lived and more vulnerable to fluctuating weather or water conditions, so they are rarer and more sought after. And bay scallops are the true prize—much more sweet and tender than their larger, more common sea scallop cousins.

Until recently, the Peconic Bay scallop was the pride of the East End. (It's New York State's official shellfish.) The signature mollusks filled tables throughout the nation. In season from late September through March, when most other local foods and work were scarce, the bay scallops could account for 30 to 50 percent of a bayman's annual income. Hundreds of boaters would hand-dredge the scallops' sand nests, conversing as they drifted on the bay like neighbors at a town meeting. "People were involved with each other," said Brad Lowen, president of the East Hampton Baymen's Association. "It was kind of like hunting without the guns."

After a day's harvest, neighbors would gather at private homes or fish houses to pry open the shells and cut out the large muscles or "eyes." ("Always a scallop in the air" was the compliment paid to people who could quickly shuck and toss the scallops into a pile.) It was a lucrative activity. "Lots of women did their whole Christmas shopping and clothed their school children opening scallops," said Lowen. The shucking even put some people's kids through college.

Two decades ago, Josephine Smith, a Shinnecock Indian and native chef, regularly gathered a bushel of scallops that had been washed up on the shore of Shinnecock Bay after a strong Nor'easter. "My youngest son doesn't know what it is to scallop after a strong east wind," Ms. Smith said recently.

In the mid-1980s, the scallop culture all but vanished. Exotic algae known as brown tide, probably a secondary consequence of nitrogen fertilizer and untreated sewage runoff, took hold in the bay. It not only squeezed out the algae that the shellfish preferred for food, but also choked the eelgrass beds where scallops nested. Landings of the shellfish plummeted from an average of 270,000 pounds annually from the 1960s to the 1980s—worth several million dollars—to just 250 pounds in 1988. "Nobody goes scalloping anymore," said Lowen. "There's no scallops to go for."

(The threats to the East End's shellfish are sometimes unexpected: a recent petition to list the eastern oyster as an endangered species in an effort to protect the Chesapeake Bay's stock could remove local oysters from our tables and prevent Long Island fishers from harvesting it here.)

In 2000, Kim Tetrault, a marine ecologist who had been hired a few years earlier to direct Cornell University's hatchery, had an idea: volunteers from the local community could provide some additional firepower for the shellfish restoration effort. Such recruitment was done nowhere else in the nation at the time. Tetrault's rough hands, cable knit sweater, and occasional salt-and-pepper beard mark him as a salty dog. He is also an engaging speaker and the author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Oceans*. After he announced the program in a formal open house, neighbors began pouring into the hatchery, seeking a way to seed shellfish along their bayshores. With word-of-mouth and some favorable press attention, the program took off in 2001.

For a $150 start-up fee, participants receive spat and the necessary equipment to raise them. They anchor the cages at Cedar Beach Park (or at their own dock for an extra $100), farm on their own, and can join fellow members in the park thrice weekly each summer for "community-garden" open houses. Members take responsibility for delivering their promised shares to the marine center. In exchange, they get an entire year of graduate-level train-

Opposite: Arnold Leo and Elizabeth Schaffner scalloping in the Peconic Bay in 1982, just a few years before the browntide. "It was truly depressing," Mr. Leo recalled recently. "Coffee-colored water from Riverhead to Gardiner's Island." **Below, left and center**: SPATsters sorting and sizing spat. **Right:** Kim Tetrault shucking scallops.

BAY SCALLOPS WITH DELICATA SQUASH, CAULIFLOWER, AND BRUSSELS SPROUTS

From *Recipes from Home* by David Page and Barbara Shinn (Artisan New York, 2001)

2 delicata or acorn squash, about 1 lb. each
4 tbsp. (½ stick) unsalted butter
2 tbsp. salt
1 small head cauliflower, cut into small florets (about 2 c.)
2 c. small Brussels sprouts, trimmed
1 leek, cut into ¼-inch dice
¼ c. olive oil
1 tsp. minced serrano chile
1½ lb. bay scallops, tough side muscle removed
½ c. dry white wine
Juice of 1 lemon
2 tsp. minced fresh mint
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Preheat the oven to 350.

Halve the squash lengthwise and scoop out the seeds. Separate the seeds from the strings and season them with a little salt. Spread them on a baking sheet and toast them in the oven, stirring occasionally, for about 15 minutes. Remove them from the oven and set them aside.

Place the squash cut side up in a large baking dish. Dot with 2 tbsp. of the butter and season with salt and pepper. Bake until just tender, about 35 minutes.

While the squash is baking, bring a large part of water to a boil and add the 1 tbsp. salt. Blanch the cauliflower and Brussels sprouts separately for about 2 minutes each. Immediately cool them under cold running water and set aside to drain.

Heat the remaining 2 tbsp. butter in a 10-inch skillet over medium heat. Add the leeks, and gently cook until they are softened, about 3 minutes. Add the olive oil, chile, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts and gently stir the vegetables until they are just heated through, about 5 minutes.

Add the scallops and gently combine them with the vegetables. Add the white wine and simmer until the scallops are just cooked through, about 3 minutes. Add the lemon juice and mint and season with salt and pepper.

Serve the scallops and vegetables spooned into the warm squash halves and garnish with tossed squash seeds. Serves 4.

ing in the nuances of algae growth, marine ecology, and shellfish dynamics—and a chance to restore the popular scallop economy.

"I get to relive my childhood," says Warren Kalbacker, a freelance writer and full-time Manhattanite who commutes two hours to Southold to tend his SPAT flock. As a boy in the 1950s, Kalbacker watched scallopers work the cove in front of his house and accompanied his parents to a nearby garage where neighbors shucked and sold the morsels. He had paddled his eight-foot pram on the same Cedar Beach Creek where he now plants spats and weeds algae. "You don't need closure on stuff," he said. "You just keep doing it."

That's exactly the desire of the few remaining baymen, an insular clan who now supplement their fishing with other work. They say the real solution will require replanting eelgrass beds, restoring wetlands, and protecting the bay from illegal dumping of toxic substances like chlorinated swimming pool water. But seeding by SPAT, and by the East Hampton Town Hatchery across the bay, has helped boost and stabilize the baymen's harvest. And everyone agrees it is only a first step. So some baymen are beginning to warm to SPAT's efforts, lending a hand on occasion. "I wish them all the best of luck," said Lowen of the Baymen's Association, "because I certainly want to go scalloping again."

There are signs that will happen. Each of the past several years, SPAT has raised and seeded the bay with tens of millions of shellfish, many of which have evidently survived. And in 2004, Suffolk County awarded Cornell's marine center a four-year grant of $1.8 million, so now SPATsters have dramatically expanded the capacity of the school's hatchery and added a fourth work skiff to seed the bay. Dozens of communities, along shorelines from Cape Cod to Chile, have invited Tetrault to help them replicate the SPAT program.

Meanwhile, Peconic Bay appears to be responding favorably. In addition to filtering water, the planted mollusks and the stocked cages have provided food and habitat for fish, crabs, and other marine life. On Cedar Creek, SPAT boats drift through a bevy of horseshoe crabs, blueclaw crabs, and other once-depleted predators of shellfish.

Some SPAT volunteers have undergone transformations of their own. Paul Thompson, a private security executive who previously had little interest in ecology, began tending shellfish at his boat slip in Cutchogue five years ago. Because he lives and anchors his boat next to his "SPAT critters," he sought out nontoxic solutions for boat and lawn maintenance. It reflected a modest epiphany. "I thought that since the oysters, clams, and scallops filter the water, I would not use any chemicals near them," he explained. "It's nothing special. I'm just one person reducing chemicals in the oceans around the U.S.A. But it gives me a rewarding feeling." □

BE A SPATSTER

Have you ever wanted to raise your own shellfish? Now's your chance. The Southold Project in Aquaculture Training (SPAT) is one of the only projects in the country to involve citizens in restoring wild shellfish populations. And you get to keep half the shellfish you raise. You don't even need waterfront property. (Contact 852-8660 or www.spatcornell.org/index.shtml.)