

RUN, SHAD, RUN

A Connecticut specialty makes its way from our rivers to your plate

By Carolyn Wyman
Register Staff

Maine has its nationally renowned blueberries. And who doesn't like fresh blueberries? Rhode island has its john-nycake, corn bread pancake made on a griddle and sweetened with syrup.

But Connecticut's most famous native dish — shad and the eggs of the fish, the roe — is a matter of greater controversy.

Harry Root, a commercial fisherman and owner of Old Lyme Seafood in Old Lyme says, "I know of people who'll have it 20 times in the space of the 11 weeks it's in season."

Others seem to hate it only slightly less than anchovies.

Whether you're trying to find it or avoid it, you should know that Connecticut is now smack dab in the middle of shad season.

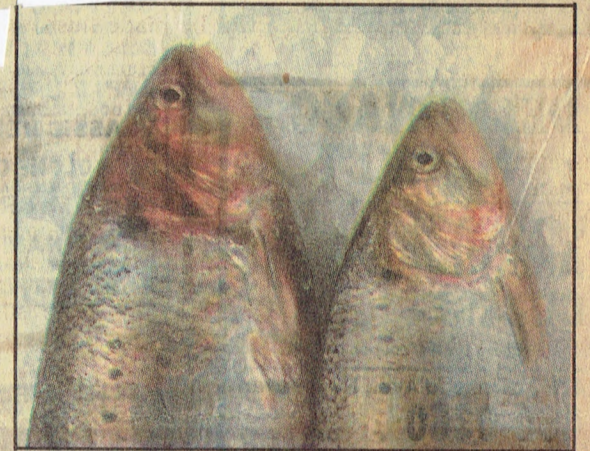
In fact, this past weekend the town of Windsor practically shut down for the Shad Derby Day street festival, the culminating event in a two-week festival of events honoring the fish. And the Essex Rotary Club's annual shad bake is coming up in just a couple of weeks.

Shad is a blue-green-and-silver relative of the herring with spawning instincts that causes it to swim north up the Connecticut River each spring.

While the fish can be found in waters as far south as Florida and as far north as New Brunswick, Connecticut boasts one of the largest commercial and recreational shad catches, says Peter Minta, a fisheries biologist with the state Department of Environmental Protection.

In 1991, the last year for which Minta has figures, state fisherman caught about 87,000 of the estimated 1.6 million shad that swam through Connecticut.

According to Minta, Connecticut shad was also voted the best-tasting by a group of National Marine Fisheries Service staffers who did comparison eat-



Vern Williams/Register

Bony shad goes for about \$2 a pound for the whole fish. Do yourself a favor and buy fillets.

Fish: Shad run runs a few weeks more

ing of shad caught up and down the East Coast a few years back.

Minta says shad like to migrate up the river as the water warms. Southern Connecticut's cold spring means that the shad run, which typically begins the first week in April, got a late start and that the early catches were not as big as usual. Fisherman Root complains the catches have not gotten any better even with the recent spate of summerlike temperatures.

Root predicts a June 1 end to the season and no lowering of local fish market prices that average about \$7 a pound for the fillets and \$4 to \$5 per pair of roe.

Even at these prices, Dominick DeGennaro of Quality Fish Market in New Haven says he easily sells all the shad he can get.

DeGennaro says he has some customers who only come into his store once a year to buy shad. He compares its appeal to native strawberries.

"They're fresh and local. People can buy these foods from elsewhere but the local product tastes that much better," he says.

As early as March, the phone at Fiddlers Seafood Restaurant in Chester begins ringing with calls from people asking when the shad will be in, chef Steven Allain said. During shad season, the restaurant prepares almost 12 pounds of it each Saturday evening.

Allain, a Culinary Institute graduate, describes shad as "an oily, full-flavored fish" like bluefish and swordfish but with its own distinctive flavor.

Since fans of that flavor want it to come through, and not be hidden, most local fishmongers suggested simple preparations.

DeGennaro recommends baking shad fillets for 10 minutes in a 350-degree oven, then broiling them for five minutes with only butter, margarine or olive oil, and salt and pepper as seasonings.

Most people recommended par-boiling shad roe for a minute in salted water (to prevent the eggs from exploding), then to broil, bake or saute them until firm.

For every person who hates shad fillets, there are two who hate the eggy texture of shad roe, fish store owners and restaurateurs say.

In addition to straightforward pan sauteed, broiled, baked and mesquite grill preparations, Fiddlers also offers several shad specials: one stuffed with pate, the other garnished with a basil-garlic-and-mustard paste.

The Rotarians in Essex follow the time-honored tradition of nailing the shad fillets to planks that have been seasoned with salt pork. After being dusted liberally with paprika, the shad-adorned boards are propped up in a circle surrounding a large open fire.

In their travel book "Connecticut: Off the Beaten Path" (Globe Pequot Press), David and Deborah Ritchie write that "some natives feel spring isn't spring in Connecticut without . . . shad baked on a plank." But that sentence is followed immediately by the admission that "others maintain . . . you should throw away the shad and eat the plank."



portioncontrol

By Carolyn Wyman

YOU SHAD ME AT HELLO

➤ **FISHTOWN'S SHAD FEST** is only a couple of days away from being a two-year institution, but Paul Kimport says his idea of fêting the fish — with music, crafts, talks, displays and a booth actually serving the stuff — initially had lots of critics.

"It's such a fishy fish. Why honor that?" people asked Kimport, the Fishtown Area Business Association president who serves shad at his Standard Tap and Johnny Brenda's. His reply? Because shad is why Fishtown is called Fishtown. From the 1700s through the early 1900s, catching shad as they made their way up the Delaware for springtime spawning was the neighborhood's main industry. "This fish is central to the history of Fishtown," says Kimport.

Overfishing and pollution eventually reduced swarms of shad in local waters to a trickle. Still, to many, spring is not spring without a taste of this oily, bony member of the herring family.

Oyster House's Sam Mink, the third generation of Mink family restaurateurs to serve shad, says those who ask after it typically "remember it from their childhoods." Younger customers who order shad are asked if they like bluefish. "If they say they hate full-flavored fish, we'll steer them in another direction," says Mink. "There's no point in wasting good fish." First-time shad roe orderers are rarer, especially the way Oyster House cooks it, which is only partway (well-done upon request).

Oyster House is typical of the venerable eateries that serve shad and shad roe, says Sam D'Angelo, CEO/shad pusher at seafood wholesaler Samuels & Son. Young chefs at trendy places "don't know what to do with it," says D'Angelo, recalling one who skinned a shad fillet and was left with a pile of flakes. The quick trip from East Coast states that still boast viable shad catches makes shad "a great value," D'Angelo says. Still, the short season and limited supply area, coupled with the fish's strong taste, make some restaurants wary.

Kimport shares their concern about supply. At last year's Shad Fest, it took him only two hours to run out of the 50 pounds of shad he got to make sandwiches. Of course, many of his customers were first-timers. This year's line should be shorter now that more people know what they're in for.

(cwyman@citypaper.net)

• **Fishtown Shad Fest**, Sat., April 24, 11 a.m.-6 p.m., free, Penn Treaty Park, 1341 N. Delaware Ave., 215-427-0350, ext. 120, fishtownshadfest.org.