by John Grossmann

Big, Beautiful Mussels

Is there something new under the sea? A shellfish fan learns how to turn large, luscious Mediterranean bivalves into tempting, tasty fare

FRANKLY, IT SOUNDED LIKE HYPE: a seafood company dubbing its Mediterranean mussels "Peaches of the Sea" because they were so plump and sweet. The description hooked me. A lifelong seafood lover with an overriding fondness for shellfish, I made it my mission to check them out—both in their home waters in Puget Sound and on the plate. They would be a worthy catch, indeed, for this typically overlooked bivalve is the last great steal at the seafood counter: delicious, nutritious and, at around $3 a pound, downright cheap.

SIMPLY DELICIOUS Traditional steamed mussels and French fries make for a hearty meal. Top: Mediterranean mussels.

America's culinary horizons have expanded greatly. We've come to know what a good crusty loaf of bread tastes like. We've learned to love (many of us, anyway) sushi. But as a nation, we're still missing the boat when it comes to mussels, a shellfish much prized by the rest of the world.

The Spanish adore them as tapas and deem them essential in paella. A French bistro menu without *moules*? *Impossible!* The Belgians are crazy for these dark-shelled mollusks. In Belgium, *moules frites* (mussels and French fries) is nothing short of a national dish—as popular as hot dogs in the United States—and, accordingly, also served by sidewalk vendors.

Why are Americans less enthusiastic? For one thing, it's only fairly recently that

TOP: COLIN COOKE; BOTTOM: JON HICKS/CORBIS

mussels have been extensively cultivated in North America, and thus become widely available. Nor have they benefited, like a certain bivalve, from a starring role in dishes like New England clam chowder and festive affairs like clambakes. Americans line up at clam shacks, not mussel shacks.

"The traditional view here has been that mussels were something that clung to pilings and rocks," says Bill Taylor of Taylor Shellfish in Shelton, Washington. "Most people never thought of them as food."

Taylor knows his mussels. As vice president of the fourth-generation company, he oversees its production and shipment of clams, oysters, geoducks and *Mytilus galloprovincialis,* the mussel of Mediterranean origin that was described as being sweet as a peach. For more than a decade, Taylor Shellfish has been farming this species of mussel in the southern reaches of Puget Sound and has now built production to the point where its bivalves are becoming known and loved on the west coast of North America, and by mussel lovers nationwide, via mail order.

"From May through October, when they're at their best, we harvest and ship 35,000 pounds of mussels a week," says Taylor, steadying the boat he's readied on a narrow bay at the southern end of Puget Sound not far from Olympia. On a beautifully clear September afternoon, he steers it out to some of the 30-by-30-foot rafts where Taylor Shellfish grows its mussels on weighted ropes that hang down 10 to 12 feet in the nutrient-rich water.

In France, mussels are farmed differently, harvested from stakes in the seabed called *bouchots* in a manner that dates from 1235 and a fortuitous discovery by an Irishman named Patrick Walton. Shipwrecked off the coast of France, Walton attempted to capture seabirds in nets he strung above the water on poles. He netted few if any birds, but he did make a considerable catch beneath the waves: Mussels clung to the poles below the high tide mark.

MUSSEL BOUND Taylor Shellfish in Washington State grows its bivalves on ropes (left), which are then stripped at harvest time (above).

"We didn't invent this system," says Taylor, tying up to one of the rafts. "Spain grows mussels on rafts. So does Japan. Our farm manager is from New Zealand, where they suspend ropes from barrels."

LEANING OVER, he pulls up one of the ropes far enough to display the column of living creatures bunched about six inches in diameter around it. The glistening mussels are an inch or so long, still a half year away from harvest. Come spring, each rope will weigh nearly 25 pounds, and hauling these mussels will require other muscles. Every six inches on each raft crossbeam hangs another rope.

The mussels that are most often on ice in American markets arrive from either Prince Edward Island, off Canada's northeast coast, or New Zealand, known for its green-lipped variety. They typically run 20 to 30 per pound, and they are excellent prepared any number of ways, especially as the classic *moules marinière,* cooked with white wine, garlic and parsley.

Mediterranean mussels, now farmed in British Columbia as well, are harvested twice as large. At 10 to 15 to a pound, they're more versatile in the kitchen, doing nicely baked on the half shell or fried.

Mussels are the last great steal at the seafood counter: At around $3 a pound, they're downright cheap.

MEDITERRANEAN MUSSELS BY MAIL

Taylor Shellfish Co.
360/426-6178
taylorshellfish.com

But what about taste? Are they as sweet as the claim? Pointing the boat back to shore, Taylor says a table awaits us at Xinh's Clam & Oyster House in Shelton.

Xinh (pronounced Sin) Dwelley, 55, is a five-time oyster-shucking champion and former Taylor Shellfish packer. She came to the U.S. from Vietnam in 1970 and wowed Taylor management and crews by cooking many of her native dishes and adapting them to the abundant West Coast seafood.

BEFORE SHE TURNED PRO, Xinh won the gold medal in the amateur cook division of the West Coast Seafood Festival for her Mediterranean mussels in curry sauce (see box). Ten years ago, she moved from the packinghouse to a corner restaurant in downtown Shelton. The place has been jammed ever since.

Her menu features impeccably fresh shellfish in many Asian guises—Manila clams in hoisin sauce, panfried Pacific oysters, a hot and spicy seafood soup, black tiger prawns in curry sauce. But, of course, I ordered mussels. Dish after dish arrived: mussels on the half shell, Xing's award-winning mussels in curry sauce served over jasmine rice, also mussels in a tamarind sauce with carrots and celery.

The mussels came in two colors. White ones, Bill Taylor explains, are male. The orange are female. Both taste the same—briny and, yes, very sweet. No question about it: the best mussels I've ever eaten.

Thank goodness for mail order. Even though I'm 3,000 miles from Puget Sound, I can answer the front doorbell and find 10 pounds of Mediterranean mussels awaiting me. Yes, they're more expensive than those at my local market. Shipping charges for 10 pounds run about $25 to $40. But since the mussels cost only $2.95 per pound and will feed four or five, the total cost is reasonable.

I cooked my most recent shipment two ways. First, I experimented with absolute simplicity—mussels in a hot skillet. While your skillet is heating, clean the mussels. Remove exterior debris with a scrub brush and pull off the beard, or byssus. Then add a handful of mussels to the skillet. Nothing else. No oil, no butter, no wine.

After a few moments, the mussels will pop open one by one. When several have opened, dump in the rest, with some minced garlic and chopped parsley. Cover and steam the mussels till they all open. (Those that don't should be discarded.) At this point, most varieties will be ready to serve. Give the larger Mediterranean mussels an extra couple minutes. Then plate.

I next sautéed sliced onion, celery, fennel and roughly diced red potatoes in a bit of olive oil till the potatoes were nearly tender. Then I added some red pepper flakes, a bit of saffron, two cups of white wine and my remaining stash of mussels. When the mussels were done, I spooned the stewlike dish, shells and all, into the biggest bowls I could find and set out some good crusty bread.

If you have any left over, here's what I suggest: Remove the uneaten mussels from their shells and reserve them. Also refrigerate what's left in your steaming pot. The following day, purée the pot vegetables and broth and reheat the mixture with a bit of cream. Add the mussels just before serving to rewarm them. Second-day mussel soup: an easy way to prolong the sweet feast.

MEDITERRANEAN MUSSELS IN CURRY SAUCE

SERVES FOUR—OR TWO *SERIOUS* MUSSEL LOVERS

The following recipe is from Xinh Dwelley, chef at Xinh's Clam & Oyster House in Shelton, Washington.

- **5 pounds mussels**
- **3 cups water**
- **¼ cup butter or olive oil**
- **1 teaspoon finely chopped garlic**
- **¾ cup coarsely chopped onion**
- **1 can (8 ounces) of coconut milk**
- **1 tablespoon curry powder**
- **1½ tablespoons soy sauce**
- **½ teaspoon sugar or honey**
- **½ cup ground peanuts (dry roasted and unsalted)**
- **salt and pepper to taste**
- **cayenne pepper to taste**

1. Steam the mussels until open. Drain and remove the meat from the shells. Set the meat aside.
2. In a frying pan, lightly brown the garlic in the butter or olive oil. Add the onion and sauté until softened.
3. Add all the remaining ingredients except the mussels. Mix well. Add the mussels and bring the mixture to a boil to reheat the mussels. Serve over steamed rice or noodles, and garnish with chopped green onion and chopped cilantro.

John Grossmann has written about food and restaurants for *Gourmet, Saveur and Cooking Light.*

COLIN COOKE