

In Pursuit of A Most Delicious Fish Loved by Locals



As Scientists Try to Unravel the Mystery of Fluctuating Populations of the Fish, A Dwindling Number of Connecticut Fisherman Carry on a Connecticut Tradition

By Pem McNerney
Living Editor

In the spring, when the shad start to run, Collette Lukas has noticed that her younger customers rarely, if ever, ask for the stuff at her Star Fish Market in Guilford. Shad, and shad roe, it's for the older folks who are in the know about the official Connecticut state fish that has a Latin species name, *sapidissima*, that means "most delicious." Even in this age of localvores and always-looking-for-something-new foodies, she finds the fish, among her customers, is loved only by the die-hards. But, as for those die-hards?

"They wait all year long for it," she says. "They purchase it every week until the season ends."

Her husband Mike says Star Fish Market gets shad from a fisherman named Frank Clark from Chester, who knows everything there is to know about shad.

A Cold Night on the Connecticut River

Clark, a commercial shad fisherman, says that there are times he doesn't mind shad fishing. Say, on a warm spring evening on the Connecticut River, just below the gentle glow coming from the lights of the Goodspeed Opera House and the East Haddam swing bridge. He likes this stretch of the river because, on a night when things are going well, he can tie up to the dock and get a pizza delivered.

But on this chilly night in early May, it's not going that well. Clark and his fellow fisherman from Chester, Joe Cirillo, wait until just after sundown, as required by state regulations.

Clark then positions his boat upriver from another shad fisherman, Amos Swain from Old Saybrook, working the same reach. Clark, while piloting the boat from the front, tosses out a lantern buoy connected to the driftnet, and starts tossing out the cork line of white plastic floats, while Cirillo in the back of the boat drops the heavy metal rings connected to the foot line of the net. When set, the 1,000 foot long net, made of fine mono-filament mesh, hangs down in a semicircle from the cork line to the foot line, across the river, trapping the shad as they travel upriver, having traveled up the east coast in the Atlantic Ocean and then through Long Island Sound, intent on reaching their spawning grounds in the Connecticut River.

After the net is set, Clark and Cirillo talk, have a smoke, talk some more, and keep their eye on the white plastic floats. Some of the floats bob, suggesting something might be caught below.

On a good night, Clark and Cirillo might pull up enough shad to fill several big plastic tote buckets, piled neatly up inside the circa 1974 27-foot Stamos pleasure boat that Clark cut down and retrofitted to make a fishing boat. On a good night, particularly in the old days, they might get a boat load of shad in an hour.

When Frank Clark headed out to go shad fishing one recent May evening, he saw one of his commercial shad fishing competitors, Amos Swain, and his crew of one, just downstream. Clark and Swain are two of about five or six commercial shad fishermen left on the Connecticut River, down from about 20 in the early 1990s. Photo by Pem McNerney/The Source

But it's raining here tonight, which does not bode well.

"They don't like it when it rains," says Cirillo. "And it rained up north, and that screws it up."

The water temperature in the river is in the low 50s. Shad don't like cold water. It's been cold for days, another bad sign. And it's been years since they had a night so good that they could fill up the boat in one drift.

This Year's Run Has Been Slow

Stephen R. Gephard, who lives in Essex and works Old Lyme, is a supervising fisheries biologist with the state Department of Energy & Environmental Protection who studies anadromous fish like shad that are born in fresh water, spend most of their lives in the sea, and then return to fresh water to spawn in the spring.

Shad were once abundant in the Connecticut River and other rivers in Connecticut, and favored by Native Americans and Colonial settlers alike, but during the industrial age, populations of the fish declined statewide, due to the construction of dams needed by paper mills, textile mills, and other manufacturing concerns.

"You build dams and you block access to spawning," Gephard says.

But the first really big dam in the Connecticut River, which runs all the way up to the Canadian border, isn't until Holyoke, Massachusetts, "which leaves about 90 miles of the Connecticut River to spawn in," he says.

Still, there also was municipal sewage pouring into the river, which affected fish populations as well.

Starting in the 1970s, the state put a big effort into cleaning up the river, and creating fishways so that the fish could make their way up the river again to spawn.

"And then their numbers went up and up and up, until about 1990, then it went down and down and down and down," he says.

The last three years have been pretty good years, but this year the run has started out slow, he says. "We've had all of this cold weather, but the run still has time to bounce back," he says.

'It's a Job'

Out on the Connecticut River, it's about 50 degrees and dropping. Still, Clark and Cirillo have been out in worse. There was the night it was about 30 degrees and there was ice on the side of the boat. Cirillo also once did a stint as an offshore fisherman.

"Thirty foot waves. In the dead of winter. Not for me," he says.



Frank Clark, a commercial shad fisherman from Chester, waits for the sun to set before heading out to fish for shad, as required by state regulations.

Photo by Pem McNerney/The Source

Does he like shad fishing?
Clark answers.

"No, I hate it. I'm right sick of it. I do it for the money. It's a job, that's exactly what it is," he says.

"We don't get no sleep," Cirillo chimes in.

"We don't sleep," Clark agrees. "Believe me, I'd rather be home, tucked in next to my pit bull dog."

They'll be lucky to be home tonight by 10:30. Then it's back up again at 5 or 6 a.m. to help prep the fish. Then it's out at 9 a.m. delivering the shad to places like Star Fish Market. Then it's back home to prepare for another night of fishing.

"I see 'em hitting everywhere," Cirillo says, looking out at the tiny white floats on the dark river, sounding hopeful. "They're nailing it."

They pulled up only 20 to 25 shad in their first week out. Last week they pulled up a couple of hundred. Some nights they might pull up a couple of hundred. Other nights, it's all sticks, and tree trunks, and twisted vines, and green gunk in the net.

As hard as the work on the river is, Clark and Cirillo give Clark's wife, Lynne, credit for the really hard work, boning the shad. An adult shad has about 1,300 bones. Boning a shad is a fine art, executed with an array of special very sharp knives, an art passed down from one woman to the next.

Dorothy Goss is the matriarch of shad boners in Connecticut, and her legendary work is immortalized in the Haddam Shad Museum along with Earle Brockway, the maker of inexpensive, sturdy

boats built in his backyard in Old Saybrook, Brockway scows ideal for shad fishing.

The men fish. The women bone. Take about 500 pounds of shad by way of example. With bones? You'll get about \$750. Without bones?

"About \$2,000," says Clark. "You gotta bone your own shad if you want to make the money. If my wife didn't bone the shad, I'd be out of business. Today she did 110 sides."

Four years ago, Clark's wife needed emergency brain surgery and almost died. It was a big blow to the entire family, what with the stress, and the worry, and the huge bills left afterward that threatened the family's hard-earned financial security. But, for whatever reason, Clark said, after the surgery, his wife was still able to do the intricate and demanding work of boning shad.

"Even better and faster," he says, shaking his head.

Tonight, the net drifts quickly toward the swing bridge, where it would get tangled, and so Clark and Cirillo start to pull it up. Clark moves back and forth between piloting the boat and pulling up the net. They're coming up on the bridge so they work quickly, Clark untangling each struggling fish as it comes up in the net, and tossing it in the tote. He also untangles the net when it comes up in a clump, sometimes twisted around a ring. He can take an impossibly twisted chunk of fine mesh, and figure it out in a matter of seconds.

The first drift that cold dark night in early May yields maybe 10, for sure less than a dozen shad, now flopping around hopelessly in the bottom of the tote. They did catch a lot of green goo in the net, making a mess in the boat that Clark washes down before heading out again.

About Five or Six Shad Boats Left, Down About 20 in the 1990s

Clark surveys the catch. "We need a couple of totes as least, to make any money," he says.

They head back down the river, past Swain and his crew of one, to set their net again. Swain and Clark run two of about five or six boats that fish shad commercially in the Connecticut River, down from 20 boats that were licensed by the State of Connecticut in 1990. In 1990, those 20 fishing operations made about 400 trips and pulled in about 260,000 pounds of shad. In 2013, the most recent year for which figures were available, there were five boats, about 85 trips, and about 41,000 pounds reported.

They set the net again. Wait. And worry about the tide running fast, and drifting the net up too close to the bridge. They pull it up again. About the same. The tote is barely full. It's about 10 p.m.

"It makes me sick we had to pull it up again," Clark says. "We gotta make one more at least, to make another tote."

He used to fish for oysters, scallops, white perch, catfish, shad, and conch.

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A light buoy connected to a cork line made up of shiny, white plastic floats stretches out in the Connecticut River. Beneath the cork line is a span of mono-filament mesh, connected to metal rings that serve as weights as the foot line of the net. The nets are used by commercial fishermen to catch shad on the Connecticut River.
Photo by Pem McNerney//The Source

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“Everything’s about wiped out, I’ll tell the truth,” he says. “We’re down to two things, conch and shad. The others are just not there.”

In the off season, Clark takes on painting and carpenter jobs to make ends meet.

So why not just do that for a living?

Clark says he was 13 years old when first went out shad fishing. He moved to California for a bit, but then he made his way back to Connecticut. Clark makes his return to the family business sound a bit like a biological imperative, not unlike the one that drives the shad upstream to their place of their birth.

Why keep shad fishing?

“My father fished for shad. My grandfather fished for shad. And my great-grandfather fished for shad,” he says by way of an answer.

Scientists Searching for Answers

Scientists are trying to ascertain why some years are worse than others when it comes to shad. Gephard said populations of fish related to shad, such as alewives and blue back herring, have not bounced back like the shad.

“Alewives and blue back are found in all small streams. There are fish ladders in both the East and West Rivers in Guilford, and from Old Saybrook to Branford, for example, and other fish feed on these, important forage species,” he says. “I refer to them as the field mice of the ocean. Ospreys, eagles, seals, otters, striped bass all feed on them,” he says. “So it’s a cause for concern that these populations have not bounced back.”

Scientists are investigating whether it might be a result of by-catch by commercial fisheries, he says.

“The idea is that several fisheries, including the Atlantic herring fisheries, might be catching them when they are catching the herring,” he says. “When our river herring and shad go out to sea, they hang out with Atlantic herring. The concern is that as these netters net the Atlantic herring, they are also catching

the shad and the river herring. There is some evidence for this, but we don’t have solid proof yet. There’s a lot of research going on.

“It appears as though the shad are starting to recover, but right now I can tell you the state of Connecticut is having a horrible alewives run, maybe one of our worst. It’s about over, and it’s going to be very bad,” he says.

The key is additional research, he says, and communication with the fishery management councils that regulate fishing in the ocean.

As for the shad, “if we can put together a few sunny days, we might be alright. We do need the rain, but we also need the warmth. The water temperatures right now are comparable to what they usually are in early April. So we’re about a month behind. We need some normal, warm sunny May days, and maybe the shad will pick up a little.” The shad fishing season runs until June 15.

A Guilt-Free, Local Fish

In addition to caring about shad in a professional sense, Gephardt also has a personal reason for hoping the shad run goes well. He loves eating it, after grilling it at his home in Essex.

“Yes, absolutely. It’s delicious. I think it’s a well-kept secret. I don’t know.

Maybe people have something against local seafood. They think the Connecticut River is polluted. But the Connecticut River is not polluted and shad is delicious, and smoked shad is particularly delicious,” he says. “I will also add that our shad fishery in Connecticut is well managed, so the number of fish taken out is a minor percentage of the total run, so this is guilt-free, local fish eating.”

As for cooking it, “everybody has their own thing. I put it on the grill, and cook it, with salt and pepper and maybe a little bit of paprika. It’s an unusual fish, oily but mild, so it’s just great on the grill,” he says.

He does have this advice, “if you do buy shad, buy it all boned, so you don’t have to worry about the bones.”

Want shad? Check your local fish market. Call first to see if it’s available. Star Fish Market in Guilford, Bud’s Fish Market in Branford, Atlantic Seafood in Old Saybrook, and Saybrook Fish Market in Old Saybrook sometimes have it. Want to learn more about shad? Visit the Haddam Shad Museum 212 Saybrook Road, Higganum, on Sunday afternoons when the shad are running. Call museum curator Joseph R Zaiantz 860-267-0388 for hours. Visit www.haddamshadmuseum.com for more information, videos, and links, including several that will show you how to bone a shad.



On this night in early May, Joe Cirillo and Frank Clark, commercial shad fishermen, had to work fast so that they wouldn’t run the risk of having the net get caught up in the East Haddam Swing Bridge, in the background. The tides were running so fast, that they had to keep taking the net up and resetting it.

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