

On Island Tables

Chowder Queen; Mirin Lies the Difference

By CHRIS FISCHER

My Aunt Marie turned 70 this past August. She is still slender, young in most every way and very strong. To celebrate we roasted a whole pig her son Josh had raised on a spit and had a celebration on the farm. The pig was the centerpiece, with all guests and family members contributing to an epic pot-luck meal eaten at picnic tables placed where my grandfather's butterfly weed had bloomed only weeks before. My father documented the whole thing and took a picture of a young, blonde cousin inspecting the head of the hog. Smoke makes its way to the sky in the background and a cleaver used to disconnect the spinal chord from the neck vertebrae is perched next to the head.

My father dug clams and steamed them in a huge pot set over a propane burner with sausages and potatoes. He loves the process of clamming. Putting on your waders, making sure the inner-tube around your clam basket is inflated and most importantly making sure you have a knife on you to open your haul. Last spring he and I dug what must have been a three-pound clam. When our attempts at opening it with a knife failed, he slammed it onto the ground, shattering its shell and proclaimed "Now you can eat it!" I didn't. But the meat of the clam was so large you could have almost made a chowder from it alone.

My dad makes a mean chowder and loves a special occasion to take three days to prepare his masterpiece. I am always impressed at the quality of ingredients my dad uses for his chowder but they pale compared to what Christine Larsen has to work with at Larsen's fish market every day of the season they are open. She has the fresh clams and shellfish, as well as an array of broths to choose from coming out of their bustling take-out window. Her chowder is light and rich at the same time, not so thick as to make you regret consumption of it. She uses some dairy to give it body and character, but the starch from the canned potatoes she uses brings everything together for a perfect chowder every time.

She uses fish scraps so fresh it is insulting to call them scraps, to form a base seafood taste in the chowder that is enhanced by the clams and their liquor, added just as the pot is taken off its heat



Christine Larsen ladles a cup of liquid gold.

Pictures by Albert O. Fischer

and taken to the walk-in to cool. She has spent her whole life preparing for this task. The daughter of a fisherman and later a fish market owner, Christine grew up eating her mother's chowder and other delightful cooking. She has gone on to run the same fish market as her father did, with her sister Betsy, who is militant about cleanliness and



oftentimes shows up for work in the high season at five a.m. to scrub down the place before anyone else arrives to clean again. The market doesn't smell fishy, like all other fish markets I have ever been in. It smells like Menemsha Pond in its current tide, because it sits

15 feet away from its water, separated by massive pine docks built and rebuilt many times over the years after hurricanes.

Christine's secret ingredient in her chowder has nothing to do with quality of seafood. After sweating the onions for about five minutes in butter, she adds an unknown quantity of Japanese sweet wine called mirin to the pot to cook off and reduce before she adds her choice of mussel, clam or lobster broth from the previous day. The mirin adds a sweetness that is embraced by the fish and shellfish as they get to know one another, like coworkers having a drink after work. The alcohol loosens things up, as it always does, and the lobster broth finds out it has much in common with the odd cuts of swordfish. The lobsters that made the broth were from the outer banks and one of their lobster cousins went to boarding school with the daughter of the swordfish that was harpooned to produce those odd cuts. Now they swim together, in different simmering waters, making their individual selves better once they began to collaborate with each other.

Christine Larsen is a poet, a sculptor and a painter all in one when it comes to making chowder. Her well-crafted chowder speaks in so many different mediums, from the sensual warmth deep in the belly to the overwhelming sense of joy taken from a waft of its aroma. She is like Michelangelo plucking granite from perfect quarries in the mountains of Italy to make his masterpieces. She is a master and is surrounded by all she needs to create perfection. But she is much more modern than Michelangelo, who used only one medium at a time, either granite or oil paint; her style celebrates basic vegetables, vibrant stocks and varied raw seafood ingredients put together at the exact moment they will shine their brightest. She is an artist who has honed her craft through years of practice.

When Marie's daughter Malia was married about 15 years ago, my father volunteered to make chowder for the reception. He spent his usual three days harvesting and preparing all the ingredients, putting together what he hoped would be his masterpiece in his niece's honor. A nor'easter ensued during the wedding and my father walked away from his simmering chowder asking someone to watch it for him. The chowder boiled, then burned and was ruined. To this day family members recall fond memories of that adventurous wedding, while my father dwells on the burned chowder and the one that got away.

From Page One-A

able on the Island, where red carpet events are few and far between, but that's okay with her.

"It's about using your hands and making things," she said. "I don't want to be disconnected from what I do."

As long as you feel good in what you have on, she said, you'll look good, no matter what.

"What I've found growing up here is that if you let it be, the Vineyard can be a very accepting place and accepting of all places and styles and cultures," she said.

SeaLove swimwear designer Ashley Chase feels a bathing suit is one of the most comfortable outfits.

"I'm always inspired by traveling," she said. "I've seen so many different women on beaches around the world that you get a feel for their take on what they think is beautiful . . . everything from simplicity to elaborate fashion, you can pull what you want from that."

SeaLove swimwear was formerly Ulu Swimwear, founded in 2009, and has now merged with a luxury beachwear brand. Ms. Chase will begin doing major trade shows this winter. She has added new beachwear and cover ups to her collection this year, including a top you can wear five different ways.

"I'm trying to make my pieces more versatile and it's probably because I do live in a bathing suit the majority of the time," she said.

Hand-cut lace, beach dresses and tunics are all also new this year, designs which have "really turned me into a lifestyle brand rather than just swimwear," Ms. Chase said, something that translates well to the Vineyard aesthetic. For her, a simple black dress and 10 pairs of cowboy boots go a long way.

"There's a sense of practicality and sensibility here . . . we go to the beach all the time and then you could end up on someone's farm at night," she said. "However you dress, it's important to bring your own character into it and have fun with it."

The phrase "all dressed up and nowhere to go" comes to mind for many, Ms. Chase said.

"People here have such artistic minds that there is actually a really great fashion scene here," she said. "Because we don't have as much access to stores as other people, we become more creative."

Designer Chrysal Parrot agreed. She hopes more people will stop looking for an excuse to dress up and relish in the opportunity for self-expression.

"There are all these people on the Vineyard wishing that they could dress up more," she said at her Vineyard Haven store, Demi Monde. "We can express ourselves in our style and wear something else besides Carharts and Muck Boots and cutoffs." That said, she did admit to purchasing a pair of the all-purpose boots at the Dumptique, a thrift shop at the West Tisbury dump.

"I really appreciate the fact that I can throw on a pair of sweatpants and go to the supermarket, but I would like to steer the Vineyard toward having more dress-up events and making that be okay," she said.



Ashley Chase and her assistant at work in her Balinese studio.

Pictures Courtesy Ashley Chase

Ms. Parrot is known for her Victorian and Edwardian recreation pieces, intricate and dazzling in their own right. But her collection for fashion week this year is "much more contemporary" with "fun hip party dresses, all the way up to gala event gowns." She shows her collection on Monday.

"I want people to see the other side of me, that my work is wearable by women of all sizes and shapes. I really design for the female body, not for skinny models," she said.

This winter she'll begin to widen her reach off-Island through a new website and several trunk shows lined up in New York city.

"Down the road I see my line going somewhere," she said. "New York is where I keep gravitating toward. I see a lot more interaction there." The Vineyard fashion scene is "very individualistic," Ms. Parrot said. "Vineyard fashion is casual and I really don't fit into that most of the time," she said, but added "I really do appreciate the fact that my children can go to school in whatever they feel like putting on and there is no judgement based on their clothing."

The one piece of advice she gives to people is "know your body type."

"Have a realistic picture of what your positive and negative body qualities are and dress for that," she said.

Like Ms. Parrot, stylist Michael Hunter urges his clients to embrace fashion on the Island.

"When I have clients who say, where am I going to wear that? I tell them State Road Restaurant on Thursday night for dinner — what's the big deal?" he said. "Oh, but I have nowhere to wear any of this stuff. Well you better shake that — wear it to Cronig's."

When Mr. Hunter isn't styling clients he runs his boutique PiKNIK, both in Edgartown and in Oak Bluffs. Mr. Hunter



Emma Lovewell models a swimsuit by designer Ashley Chase.

is most interested in the process of creating a look.

"My main objective is to entertain," he said. "I always like telling stories, I like to illuminate the process of building a look . . . I hope to overlap each model with the next model, helping to complete the predecessor's look but I'm also interested in the interaction between the two people. A hug or a kiss, the relationship that's implied."

"Oh, and stay away from trends," he added before turning to a customer. "Make your own."

Vineyard fashion pushes beyond "subcultures" that people frequently fall into, added Mr. Hunter.

"A lot of times it's about decisions, conscious or unconscious," he said. "I love wearing three different kinds of

plaid . . . if I like certain fabrics and see some through line, that works for me." Mr. Hunter believes in complete looks, which frequently means adding a scarf or a hat (ladies, let your fellas wear the hat if he insists, Mr. Hunter said).

"Martha's Vineyard Fashion Week runs Sept. 17 through Sept. 22 with an opening party and fashion show at Dreamland in Oak Bluffs on Monday. For a full list of events and venues visit myfashionweek.com.



Andrew Fischer gives a can't say no invite to the main ingredient.

Steamed Clams with sausages and potatoes.

- 5 pounds littleneck clams, scrubbed clean
- 2 pounds pork sausage, poached and cut into 2 inch pieces
- 2 pounds new potatoes, boiled and salted
- 1 beer
- 2 handfuls parsley

In the biggest pot you can find that has a lid, pour the contents of one beer and place over high heat. When the beer has begun to boil vigorously, add the clams, sausage and new potatoes, place the lid on and allow to steam until the clams have opened, which should take about five minutes. When all clams have opened, remove from heat and toss in the parsley, toss vigorously to mix all ingredients and juices and serve immediately, remembering bowls for the empty shells.

Whole Spit Roasted Pig

- 1 whole pig, cleaned, hair removed, weighing between 70 and 100 pounds.
- 3 heads garlic
- As much rosemary as you can find
- 2 pounds lard
- 1 box kosher salt

To roast a pig whole, first you have to skewer it on to a spit. Once the pig is in place, rub it down with salt all over its body inside and out. A little heated lard is helpful here because it helps to give the salt something to adhere to on the pig's skin when rubbed all over the animal. I build a hug fire about 15 feet from the spit using oak logs and let it burn down, using the embers and coals to spread out around the spit. Spit roasting is always different depending on the situation, but I try not to place any direct flame under the animal so as to avoid flare up from dripping fat. I then spend an entire afternoon rotating the animal every 15 minutes, making sure heat is being distributed evenly throughout the cooking process. The day is spent shoveling coals from the larger fire to the surrounding pig. Throughout the day baste the skin and the inside of the pig with rosemary and garlic that has been simmering by the animal in lard. The process can go rather quickly or as slowly as you like. I generally start an animal slowly and will cook it as low and slow as I can for as long as I can to render the fat and to make cracklings from the skin. It should take about six to eight hours to spit roast a whole pig. Once you have deemed it done, remove it from the heat and place whole on a cutting board to rest for 20 minutes and carve. Keep the fire going near by in case the animal is underdone in its shoulders or butt. Serves a lot of people.

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