

Jersey Shore Reels in Visitors With Major Seafood Business

JACQUELINE L. URGO, The Philadelphia Inquirer

BARNEGAT LIGHT, N.J. (AP) — It was like Christmas morning, solving a Rubik's cube, and the movie Groundhog Day all rolled into one as soon as the Grand Larson III docked at Viking Village.

A seven-man crew — the maximum allowed under strict government regulation — returned Wednesday from five days on the 80-foot steel-hulled trawler, which had gone to a managed scalloping area called the Delmarva, about 50 miles off the coast of New Jersey, and pulled 12,000 pounds of scallops from the deep.

Currently, boats like the Grand Larson III, licensed by the National Marine Fisheries Service, are permitted to harvest scallops in controlled growing areas only 15 days of the year, said Kirk O. Larson, the boat's owner, who is also the mayor of Barnegat Light.

"People wonder why seafood is so expensive . . . but it involves boats that cost lots of money to build and outfit, and \$35,000 in diesel every time you go out," Larson told [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#) [1]. "It's not an easy business."

While the boat was still at sea, each scallop was shucked and cut — by hand — before being stuffed into a muslin bag and cold-stored in the hold.

And then it was a race against the clock to get the precious bounty — scallops sell for about \$25 a pound retail — to the dock so it could be officially weighed, packed in shaved ice, and distributed to various fishmongers, supermarkets, restaurants, and other outlets as far away as San Francisco within a matter of hours. Much of this particular batch was headed to the Great American Seafood Cook-off being held in New Orleans.

"It's like a big puzzle leading up to this moment. . . . So many factors go into it, good fisheries management, timing, a good crew, a good boat, regulations . . . everything," said the ship's captain, Kirk Larson Jr., as he directed the dockside "pack out" that had about a dozen people scurrying between the deck and the dimly lit, wet-floored receiving area. "And it's an in-demand commodity."

For nearly as long as the Jersey Shore has been a vacation destination, there has been a desire by visitors to enjoy a "seashore dinner" in such places as Long Branch, Atlantic City, and Cape May.

These days, whether a vacationer's plans include staying at a beach house and cooking a big fish feast for friends and family, or simply heading to a restaurant, most would agree that dining from the deep should be required eating at the Shore.

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"The harvest is bountiful here. . . . It's part of the heritage of the Shore," says Ernie Panacek, general manager of Viking Village, who is in charge of scheduling and operating the "pack outs" for the boats in the marina's fleet.

Quality and consistency are achieved, according to Panacek, through strict state, national, and international regulations that have helped develop sustainability strategies.

On this day, it was the scallops — a catch that has to be just the right size to meet regulations, but not too small or too large that chefs would turn their noses up at the sight. A spot check into one of the bags showed regulators the high quality - meaty-looking, but not too meaty, plucked from the sea at just the right age and size. And with a delicate white opaqueness and a lovely briny, but not-too-fishy, aroma, all of it speaking to the obsessive care Larson and his crew had taken to deliver them.

On other days at the commercial marina, which operates year-round, the diesel-powered trawlers like the Grand Larson III arrive at the dock carrying their various catches: the long-liners and their tuna, tilefish, swordfish, and mako; the netters with their bluefish, croakers and monkfish. The scene is repeated: quality checks and a quick icing down of the catch before it is packed and shipped.

For the scallops, almost as soon as the ship arrived, a dockside human conveyor belt formed, quickly assembling a makeshift bridge between the boat and dock, and setting up a weigh station where the catch could be examined.

Panacek said even the ice is a delicately choreographed part of the operation. Several years ago during a remodel, the family-owned business decided to build its own ice plant so it could have plenty when it was needed. It used to be trucked nearly 70 miles from an ice plant in Vineland to the marina.

"There's a lot that goes into getting a scallop from the bottom of the ocean onto a dinner plate," said Larson, grinning the wide smile of a man who had successfully completed yet another voyage out of the thriving marina of a Barnegat Light fishery cofounded by his grandfather John Larson.

With Atlantic City, Belford, Cape May, Point Pleasant, and Port Norris, Barnegat Light is part of New Jersey's network of six major commercial fishing ports. Commercial fisheries in New Jersey land about 108 million pounds of fin and shellfish worth more than \$187 million annually, according to the state Department of Agriculture.

The most lucrative marine fishery in the state is sea scallops, valued at \$60 million annually. New Jersey is also the nation's leading harvester of surf clams, and produces more than 70 percent of the clams processed worldwide, according to the state.

Commercial fishing and its related industries produce about 50,000 jobs in New Jersey, of which about 3,000 commercial fishermen operating about 1,500 vessels

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are employed to supply the 15 seafood processing facilities and 81 wholesalers operating in the state. About 100 varieties of seafood are caught in the waters off New Jersey, in both wild and aquaculture harvests, with the largest-value harvest being sea scallops, according to Joseph Atchison, a marketing specialist for the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, which oversees licensing and regulation of the state's aquaculture.

Of the state's fishing ports, Barnegat Light's may be among the most nondescript. Viking Village's fleet of 45 commercial fishing boats is tucked away near a residential neighborhood on Long Beach Island's northern tip behind a complex of little shops and a casual restaurant.

"It's an amazing heritage that we work hard every day to preserve," said Kristine Panacek, who is married to Ernie Panacek and is the daughter of Viking Village's cofounder, John Larson. Viking Village had been a marina since 1922, and her father purchased it with another local fisherman, Lou Puskas, in the 1970s.

Down at the southern tip of the state, the Port of Cape May is ranked 11th in the nation for its value of landings, totaling \$72 million in 2012, the latest year for which statistics are available, Atchison said.

That is no surprise to Keith Laudeman, whose family owns the Lobster House restaurant in Cape May and keeps a fleet of its own boats at the dock there.

"It is one of the most thriving ports in the country," said Laudeman, whose own family's work in the wholesale fishing industry dates to the 1920s, when his grandfather Jess would buy the catch from fishermen coming into the docks at Schellenger's Landing, just outside where the landmark restaurant stands today.

Jess Laudeman would have the seafood loaded onto train cars, which used to arrive at Schellenger's Landing twice daily, and ship such delicacies as lobsters, clams, oysters, and various fin fish to markets in Philadelphia and New York, to be sold to the restaurants there.

Keith Laudeman now oversees that management of the Lobster House complex, which includes a large restaurant, outdoor raw bar, café, and one of the most impressive fresh fish markets on the East Coast.

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