



Life's Great Journey in a Clam Boat

The brisk business of bivalve mollusks

BY TOM SOBOLESKI

About 6:30 every morning, Patty King pulls the *Robert Marie* from its dock on Harbor Street and navigates through Branford Harbor out to Long Island Sound. Surrounded by assorted logbooks, depth charts, and maps, in addition to the buckets, ropes, and nets of her trade, King is in her comfort zone—fishing for clams.

Ten-plus hours a day, six days a week, year-round, King and her small crew harvest up to 50 bushels of clams a day for a variety of restaurants from Madison to Norwalk. “We have beds all up and down the shoreline between Greenwich and Stonington,” she says. Her catch’s distinct briny flavor is in demand by finicky customers and discerning chefs alike.

While she may belie the image of a salty sea captain, the depth of knowledge King displays about Long Island Sound could only be achieved by dragging up uncountable dredges through bobbing and rolling waves, facing wind-driven salt spray, in rain, snow, or sunshine.

She gained her knowledge the old-fashioned way—watching and learning as a deck hand with various captains. But that didn’t begin until well into her adult life. Throughout her youth and early adulthood, fishing was just a hobby.

“I grew up in Branford on the shore and always went out clamming with my dad.” She says her parents “couldn’t keep me off the water. Mom was always putting me in a life jacket because she was afraid I was going to slip off the dock.” It was a wonderful way to grow up, she says; the sea and salt got into her blood early.

With no one in the family in the fishing business, she studied to be a veterinary assistant in college. After graduation, she worked as a VA at Yale and in Branford. She also had four daughters along the way. All the time, King felt the salt in her blood pulling her back to the sea.

In 1992, she began to fill in with the crews of her brother’s lobster business. “I’d get a babysitter and go out as the kids got older,” she says.

“That’s how it started.” Now, it’s a career.

A typical day’s catch of clams is 50 bushels. But that struggle isn’t the end of her workday. When King pulls back in at 4 p.m., there are regulatory forms and reports to fill out. Every trip must be documented, including start time, number of crew, what lot you’re fishing in, amount of catch, time returned to dock, time it takes the product to get to the refrigerator. The state makes a boat inspection twice a year and can arrive unannounced any day to check on the shellfish.

King’s boat is one of 15 belonging to her employer, Norm Bloom and Son in Norwalk. Bloom harvests up to 200 bushels of oysters a day, mostly around Copps Island off Norwalk. King says the Sound’s salinity is more concentrated and, combined with the deeper, clearer water of their beds, imparts their oysters with the distinct flavor and texture that people have taken notice of. “The Sound is cleaner than when I was a kid,” she says. “Ospreys and eagles I never saw. The oysters have made a comeback.”

In this very competitive business, maps and charts are King’s lifeblood. A map of offshore fishing grounds resembles abstract artwork of acute and obtuse geometric shapes, all defined by buoys. “Buoys made from bamboo stakes with flags on top mark the corners of your lots,” she explains. The U.S. Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) mandates this as a method to control and police everyone’s fishing rights. Lots can range from 2 to 500 acres.

Years ago, shoreline towns controlled offshore waters and you bought beds from the town, King says. Just as with land property, eventually someone may get out of the business and put their beds up for sale. “Some beds we own rights to, some are leased by the state.”

The fishing life can be very physically demanding, but King has no doubt this is the right way for her to make a living. “I grew up on the water, was always on a boat. Being out on the water, I love that.”