

MOLLUSCS

It's all about the vongole

Italy is Europe's top producer of clams and in most years it will consume more of these small molluscs than any other European country. What is more, local consumption is increasing, writes Eric Lyman.



Head chef Bruno Barbieri believes that you get the best results from clams if you keep the recipe simple.

In 2005 (the latest statistics available), Italy produced about 85,000 tonnes of the three major clam species in the country: grooved carpet shell clams or *Ruditapes decussates*; Japanese carpet shell clams (*Ruditapes philippinarum*); and striped Venus clams (*Chamelea gallina* or *Venus gallina*). This figure is a 15% increase on the 72,000 tonnes produced a decade earlier, but not enough to keep pace with growing demand from Italian diners.

The country consumed just 30% of its overall catch in 1995, according to statistics from the Italian fishing industry association Federpesca, and it consumed 45% last year. Federpesca predicts Italian consumption of the overall clam production will surpass 50% in 2008 or 2009.

It has been mooted that Italy could even start importing significant quantities of clams in the not too distant future.

'Aside from the striped Venus clams, most production now comes from farms, and there isn't a great possibility for it to increase much more,' Tonino Giardini, a Federpesca official tells *Seafood International*. 'But demand for clams keeps climbing.'

Spain is the only country in Europe that consumes anywhere near as many clams as Italy; clams are a staple of Spain's famous rice-based paella dish – and about 80% of Italy's total exports head to this nearby country. The rest is split among Europe, with the UK and Germany the most important recipients.

The popularity of 'vongole', as clams are known in Italian, has been underpinned by the fact that every one of Italy's 21 regions and provinces has a culinary tradition that includes dishes

made with clams, though their use is much greater in the coastal areas of the country's north and across the central and southern parts of the Italian peninsula. Plates range from pasta dishes to risotto and from cold salads in the summer to hearty soups when the weather is cool.

'Clams are really a wonderful part of Italian cuisine, because they can be used in so many different ways,' says head chef Bruno Barbieri, who always has clam dishes on the menu at his Michelin two-star Ristorante Arquade at Verona's Villa del Quar Hotel. 'Different kinds of clams bring different flavours and textures to a meal. It's a very important ingredient for many restaurants of all levels.'

Vongole have a long history in Italy, with ancient texts showing they were served as feasts dating back to Roman times. But for most of their history in Italy, clams were considered far from

haut cuisine.

'It was a poor person's meal,' explains Mr Giardini. 'People couldn't afford to buy food in markets, and so they dug around in the sand and discovered they could eat the clams. And fortunately, they've been a staple of Italian cuisine ever since.'

Part of Italy's love affair with clams is a marriage of convenience. The country's long, uneven coastline provides thousands of perfect environments for clams to thrive in the wild or to be farmed. There is hardly a part of its coast where clams do not thrive.

The result is a level of production that makes Italy the only European country among the world's top ten producers of clams, according to statistics from the Rome-based United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). It ranks seventh behind world leader China, the USA, and five other Asian countries.



The Michelin-starred Ristorante Arquade.

Verona's Ristorante Arquade focuses on large meaty Japanese carpet shell clams, known as 'vongole veraci', and the smaller and more delicate striped venus clams. Chef Barbieri says he uses the former in dishes where texture is more important, such as salads and cold pasta, and the latter in soups and hot pasta dishes, where the small clam's more intense flavours can take centre stage.

He says that even more than with other kinds of seafood, freshness is essential when it comes to clams. They should still be living when purchased, meaning they will be closed or will close quickly when moved a little. He reveals that there is a specific kind of solid sound that a fresh clam makes when tapped, and if a deep inhalation of the clams reveals a fishy smell, that is a bad sign.

And what is the chef's favorite way to cook clams? At first he laughs at the question, mostly because he says there are so many delicious recipes that use clams. But eventually he settled on a simple dish that is on Ristorante Arquade's summer menu.

He starts by boiling small clams and then setting aside the clam-flavoured water to cook the pasta in. Then he separates and heats the clams and scallions in olive oil under low heat - to keep them from frying - and then mixes the clams, scallions, and cooked pasta with finely-diced and lightly-steamed carrots, celery, zucchini, and tomatoes, olive oil, garlic, salt, pepper, and parsley. Let it all cool down and serve it on separate plates with a crisp Sauvignon Blanc.

'It's delicious,' Mr Barbieri says. 'True, it's very simple. But with a quality ingredient like fresh clams, you don't need something complicated.' ■