

A how-to guide for mussels, clams and cockles

Out of the shell

MEDIA BAKERY

By **Kate Parham Kordsmeier**

IT'S SUMMERTIME, AND perhaps no ingredient is more appropriate for your next cookout than meaty mollusks, such as mussels, clams and cockles. "Quick to prepare and easy to pair with a wealth of ingredients, they are a time-pressed cook's friend, as well as crowd-pleasing fare," assures Kathy Hunt, food writer, cooking instructor and author of *Fish Market* (Running Press, 2013; not available at Costco). More good news? They're environmentally sustainable, so you can feel good about every bite.

Bivalve basics and benefits

Mussels, cockles and clams are all bivalves, which means that their bodies are protected by two hinged shells. All three are low in fat and mercury, and are high in zinc, omega-3 fatty acids, iron and vitamin A. Both farmed and grown in the wild, they vary in shell shape, color and meat flavor.

"Cockles possess a mild briny taste and beautifully ridged, heart-shaped shells," says Hunt. Cockles are actually small, edible salt-water clams, adds Nathan De Atley, seafood buyer at Costco.

Not all clams are cockles, Nathan notes. Clams have smooth, grayish shells and a sweet nutty flavor, says Hunt.

Mussels have a rich, sea flavor, and are usually black or dark blue in color and oblong in shape, says Hunt.

Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch (seafoodwatch.org), which rates the sustainability of seafood, cites clams, cockles and

The Costco Connection

West Coast Costco warehouses carry farmed mussels (Penn Cove and Mediterranean species), Manila clams (November through July) littleneck clams and wild cockles; East Coast warehouses carry farmed blue mussels and farmed and wild littleneck clams.

mussels as a Best Choice or Good Alternative, their top rankings, based on fishing method and origin.

Selection and storing

The smaller the bivalve, the more tender the meat will be, says Hunt, who recommends avoiding any shellfish with broken or damaged shells, or any with strong odors. Nathan says if they are moving slightly, slowly opening and closing to breathe, then they're alive. A good rule of thumb is to toss any cooked mollusks with closed shells, as they were probably dead prior to cooking.

At home, keep bivalves on ice in your fridge and use them within a day or two. Access to air is critical, so do not store them in airtight containers. If you'd like to cover them in the fridge, use a damp cloth, advises Bill Mardon, assistant general merchandise manager of seafood at Costco, and never store them in water.

Prepping and cooking

You can rinse bivalves under fresh water so that they purge, or release sand that can find its way into the meat, but it's not always necessary. "Everything we carry goes through

a cleaning and purge process, so they don't need to be cleaned," says Nathan. "You can rinse them under fresh water, but you really don't need to as almost all are defect-free."

Bill adds, "The beards [the thin threads by which mussels attach themselves to rocks and piers] have already been trimmed to make prepping easier."

Mollusks don't need a complicated recipe to shine. Nathan recommends steaming them for 10 to 15 minutes, or until the shells have opened. "They're safe to eat once they've reached 140 degrees. Just add a little butter, garlic and acid—it could be lemon, lime, wine or beer—and serve them with baguettes, dipped in the sauce they're cooked in."

Hunt recommends adding the bivalves to stews and grilling littleneck clams, which she drizzles with lemon-basil butter. Mussels are great grilled or smoked, or stuffed with an herb-based stuffing and broiled for a few minutes. "The most important thing is not to overcook bivalves," Hunt says, "or you'll end up with rubbery meat." 🍴

Kate Parham Kordsmeier (kateparhamkordsmeier.com) is an Atlanta-based food and travel writer, and cookbook author.

Grilled Clams with Lemon-Basil Butter

8 tablespoons unsalted butter
Juice of 1 lemon
Grated zest of 2 lemons
3 tablespoons minced fresh basil
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
5 dozen medium-size hard-shelled clams, scrubbed

Preheat the grill on high.

In a glass bowl in the microwave or in a small pan on the stovetop, melt the butter. Allow the butter to cool slightly, about 10 minutes, and

then add the lemon juice, zest, basil and pepper. Stir together and set aside.

Place a layer of foil on the grill and then place the clams on top of the foil. Cover the grill and allow the clams to cook for 8 to 10 minutes. After tossing out any unopened clams, place the grilled clams in a bowl or on a platter and drizzle with the lemon-basil butter. Serve immediately. Makes 6 servings.

Adapted from *Fish Market* (Running Press, 2013; not available at Costco)