

# Tasting Table.

## Rhode Island's Clam Stuffies Feature Monster-Sized Quahogs

BY LISA CURRAN MATTE/OCT. 1, 2023



Anywhere else, a baked stuffed clam is a baked stuffed clam. In Rhode Island, it's a stuffie. No one knows for sure where or when the popular moniker became part of the local lexicon, but we have a pretty good idea why it stuck. As far as Rhode Islanders are concerned, a stuffie is a big clamshell filled to overflowing — in other words, stuffed — with a savory blend of minced clam meat, bread crumbs, and seasonings. As for that big clamshell, it's a quahog, the largest of variety a bivalve mollusk that happens to be particularly abundant along the shores of Rhode Island — it's so abundant that it's the official state shellfish.

Also known as Northern hard shell clams, quahogs average 4-plus inches in diameter. Other varieties include cherrystones, usually 3 to 4 inches wide (best for soups, chowders, and sauces) and littlenecks. The smallest, and sweetest, of the three at 1.5 to 2 inches, littlenecks are often served steamed or raw on the half shell. Like most clams, quahogs are reasonably easy to harvest. They thrive in salt-water shallows close to shore where they burrow up to 6 inches deep in stretches of sand usually revealed at low tide. So, if you happen to be in Rhode Island and feel like whipping up a few stuffies, pick up a clamming license, head to the beach, and dig in to find the big guys.

## Get to the meat of the matter



While colonial settlers who arrived in what is now Rhode Island took their cue from the established native population, learning how to harvest and cook clams of all shapes and sizes, the state's signature stuffies as we know them today are the result of European influence attributed to a wave of Portuguese immigrants who arrived in New England in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The filling often contains Portuguese sausage in addition to ground-up clam meat, bread crumbs, hot sauce, onions, and celery.

The local specialty is so entrenched in Rhode Island's identity that tourism officials recently unveiled a stuffie-centric campaign to showcase the state's bountiful culinary history. For the next few months, travelers passing through airports in Detroit, Atlanta, Baltimore, and Los Angeles are likely to come face to face with a giant stuffie — or at least a replica of the stuffed quahog so entrenched in the state's cultural identity. As Terry Gray, director of the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management noted in a press release, "This humble mollusk represents ... a vital part of our history, culture, traditions, and families."