



# Purchasing Shellfish

## Introduction

Maine is one of many states across the US experiencing increased demand for fresh, locally-sourced seafood. In response, many restaurants are purchasing shellfish directly from harvesters or growers as a way to participate in the local food movement and to secure higher quality products, which can benefit the producer, the restaurant owner, and the consumer. While local shellfish markets provide opportunity for restaurants, bivalve

shellfish have specific food-safety risks of which the restaurateur should be aware.

When bivalve shellfish such as Eastern oysters (*Crassostrea virginica*), hard clams (*Mercenaria mercenaria*, usually referred to as quahogs, cherrystones, littlenecks, etc), and other shellfish are not handled properly after harvest, a marine bacterium called *Vibrio* can grow inside the shellfish to dangerous levels. People who are exposed to the bacteria from a cut (during shucking, for example) or from eating shellfish can experience stomach cramps, vomiting, and diarrhea. Generally, cooking the meat kills the bacteria, so while all bivalve shellfish need to be handled with care, those that will be served raw deserve the most attention.

This document is intended to help Maine restaurant owners and staff understand the risks of handling shellfish, and how to manage them safely and effectively.

## Purchasing oysters or hard clams for your restaurant

**When purchasing live shellfish, restaurateurs have several choices:**

### **A. Buy your shellfish from a Certified Shellfish Dealer.**

Shellfish dealers certified by the Maine Department of Marine Resources are required to adhere to strict handling procedures for their products, and to keep detailed records. Careful handling limits risk. In the event of an illness, the records can help investigators understand potential sources. You can find a list of Certified Shellfish Dealers on the Maine Department of Marine Resources (DMR) website: [maine.gov/dmr/shellfish-sanitation-management/programs/certification.html](http://maine.gov/dmr/shellfish-sanitation-management/programs/certification.html)

### **B. Become a Certified Shellfish Dealer**

Restaurants and retail outlets can become Certified Shellfish Dealers, which allows the purchase of shellfish directly from the harvester or grower, and enables the business to sell shellfish to other restaurants and wholesalers. Becoming a certified shellfish dealer requires a licensed, inspected facility, training, an approved HACCP plan, and detailed paperwork. Restaurant owners will want to weigh the various aspects of becoming a certified shellfish dealer. Technical assistance is available through the Bureau of Public Health at Maine DMR (email [DMRPublicHealthDiv@maine.gov](mailto:DMRPublicHealthDiv@maine.gov)).

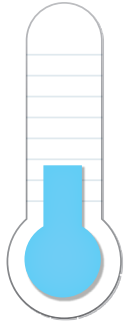
### **C. Acquire an Enhanced Retail License**

The Enhanced Retail license allows restaurants and retailers to purchase live bivalve shellfish directly from the harvester or grower, but within a set of rules that exist to maintain product safety. Requirements include that the facility is inspected, that proper records are kept, that the shellfish are received properly, and that proper temperature control is observed. The regulations guiding Enhanced Retail can be found in Chapter 22 of *Maine Marine Resource Regulations*, listed at: [maine.gov/dmr/laws-regulations/regulations/documents/22.pdf](http://maine.gov/dmr/laws-regulations/regulations/documents/22.pdf)

# Tips for restaurant owners, chefs and staff

Regardless of how bivalve shellfish are purchased by the restaurant or retailer, there are some requirements and best practices to protect both the quality of the shellfish and the health of the consumer. Below are some tips to follow when dealing with shellfish products.

- ✓ **Keep it cold!** Bacteria thrive at higher temperatures, so the shellfish should be stored at or below 41°F. When receiving shellfish directly from a harvester, take note of the condition they were received in: Is it from an approved source (open harvest area)? Is it cold (a laser thermometer can be very helpful here)? If yes, make sure it stays cold, and don't let shellfish warm up, ever. If it is not cold already, can you cool the shellfish to 50°F or less within 2 hours of the time of harvest (indicated on the tag)? If the shellfish is not cold and you can't get it cold within 2 hours of the time of harvest, reject the product. It isn't worth the risk!
- ✓ **Keep it clean.** Packaging and the shellfish should be free of debris.
- ✓ **Do not allow the shellfish to sit in water.** Clean ice may be used, but any water melting on or through the shellfish should be drained.
- ✓ **Be sure the shellfish look good.** Gaping or open shells for live oysters or clams, or a noticeable smell are indications that the shellfish is of poor quality and should be rejected.
- ✓ **Check the shellfish tags that must accompany each shipment.** Are you receiving the shellfish from harvesters or growers within the allowable time (two hours from time of harvest unless it is adequately iced)? Is all the information on the tag complete and legible?



Restaurants and retailers must retain all shellfish tags for 90 days and note the date of the last sale on the tag. You are responsible for providing tags in the event of an illness investigation.

## Maine Department of Marine Resources Contact info

[DMRPublicHealthDiv@maine.gov](mailto:DMRPublicHealthDiv@maine.gov) or 207.633.9515



- ✓ **Keep shellfish cold**
- ✓ **Inspect each shipment of shellfish upon receipt**
- ✓ **Consider your purchasing options when buying bivalve shellfish**

