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# My One & Uni

From prickly pest to lucrative export to spine-tingling domestic delicacy, it's been a long, strange trip for the Maine sea urchin. **BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER**

**A**t Yosaku on Danforth Street, an order of uni sushi arrives on a narrow wooden tray: a tiny, orange, volcanic eruption of sea urchin roe heaping from a single vertical cylinder of nori seaweed. The sushi-bar garnish trinity of shaved ginger, dab of wasabi, and tiny saucer for soy are arranged alongside. This minimalist, two-inch, two-bite masterpiece is \$4.

Fuji on Exchange Street has a similar uni presentation; Eventide Oyster frequently offers urchin specials served in the shell. King of the Roll on Congress has a “sake

shooter”—a lobe of uni with a raw quail egg yolk at the bottom of a stemmed pony glass of chilled sake. Not for the timid!

There's much to love about this low-calorie source of protein and omega-3s that's low in fat and cholesterol—the silken texture, the sweet, faintly briny, ethereal flavor.

“I like to make an emulsion of urchin with cream and sautéed shal-



Atchan Tamaki of ISF Trading; uni sushi in & out of the shell; a fancy dish of uni & scallop crudo; fresh-caught green urchins.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MEAGHAN MAURICE; HTTP://WWW.SUSTAINABLESUSHI.NET/; SPOONFORKBACON.COM; MEAGHAN MAURICE



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## HUNGRY EYE

lots and toss it with fresh pasta,” says Chris Miller, general manager at Browne Trading Company. Browne carries urchins—both whole and cleaned and packed in trays—at its retail store on Commercial Street. It supplies restaurants—Hugo’s, Eventide Oyster, Benkay, and Sapporo in Portland, for example—and around the country, particularly in Boston and New York.

## CHECKERED PAST

“In the 1970s, a few Maine divers were exporting sea urchins to France,” says Margaret Hunter at the Maine Department of Marine Resources (DMR). “Much earlier, there was a small seasonal market for them,” in Boston and New York for European tastes. My father-in-law used to fish for them back in the 1940s using a long-handled rake with a bag attached from the back of a skiff in the Boothbay area. He could get a couple of bushels on a low tide, earning \$3 per bushel, pretty big money back then.

“Things took off in 1987, shipping urchins whole to Japan and then shucked shortly after, when urchin processors opened up on the East Coast for the market in Japan.” Why Maine? “It had to do with a combination of the decline of stocks in other parts of the world, an overabundance of them in Maine, and very importantly, an improved yen/dollar rate that suddenly made shipping them to Japan profitable.”

In the early 1990s, media coverage of the Maine urchin industry marveled at the ‘gold rush’—an unbelievable Japanese market for what was considered a useless, spiny nuisance full of squishy, unappealing roe here. Urchins harmed kelp beds and snagged fishing nets. Until 1992, a commercial license to harvest urchins with essentially no restrictions was just \$20.

## BUT THEN...

“The depletion began almost immediately,” says Hunter. “Landings peaked in the 1992-1993 winter season. Casco Bay was probably...depleted by then. This was masked as harvesters moved to other areas.”

In 1993 and 1994, the DMR began regulating, which continues today, dividing



MEAGHAN MAURICE

harvesting grounds into zones; increasingly restricting the season every year; and requiring surcharges on harvesters, buyers, and processors. "But the horse was out of the barn." By 1994, "1,725 divers and 1,000 draggers were already licensed." In 2013, this dropped to 114 licensed divers and 83 draggers. From annual harvests spiking to 40 million pounds in the early '90s, the take in 2010 was less than three million.

In the intervening years, "American chefs discovered urchins as a delicacy," says Hunter. "Maine's green urchins are smaller than the West Coast reds and purples, and much better tasting." Maine urchin shells must be no smaller than two inches and no larger than three before they can be snapped up and sold.

"Prime time for urchins pretty much matches day-boat winter scallop season—the coldest winter months. We are so lucky here to have access to these delicacies," says Chris Miller at Browne Trading. "As the water warms in spring, urchins are harvested farther north in Canada. In summer they're harvested in Chile." Browne sells four-ounce packs of urchin roe for \$16.99. They carry whole, live, prickly urchins, but most demand is for the cleaned roe, since neatly removing the meat from the delicate shells takes skill.

### URBAN URCHIN

In a big gray warehouse behind Becky's Diner on Portland's waterfront, Atchan Tamaki's ISF Trading is where urchins and their shells part ways. The roe is cleaned, processed, and packaged for travel. Tamaki became Maine's first urchin processor "28 years ago," he says. ISF was the biggest U.S. exporter of sea urchins to Japan. "I still ship to Japan when they order it, but now most of my business is domestic."

Plastic totes full of dark, diver-caught, spiny urchins are everywhere in the processing work room within the brightly lit ISF facility. These are from Canada because Maine's season has just closed.

Workers in snug white rubber gloves face each other across long tables. Using metal tools like tiny golf putters, they quick-



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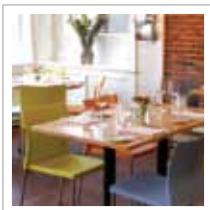
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## HUNGRY EYE



### UPS & DOWNS OF THE URCHIN TRADE

Year	Pounds landed	Price per lb.	Value (in millions)
1988	6,221,604	\$ 0.28	\$ 1.76
1995	34,268,592	\$1.04	\$35.6
2004	5,962,668	\$1.44	\$ 8.57
2013	1,813,977	\$2.92	\$ 5.29

Source: Maine Dept. Marine Resources / [Maine.gov](http://Maine.gov)

ly scoop lobes of urchin roe from the spiny shells. In minutes, empty shells pile up; plastic trays fill with roe. The trays are shallow sieves. At another work station, they're submerged in tubs of water so the clinging bits of shell and dark connective viscera can float away, leaving shiny, clean roe in shades of light and dark orange. "The female is lighter and yellower," says Tamaki. "The males are sweeter."

**A**t the final work station, a few women perform the finishing step: arranging neat rows of roe into 50-gram and 250-gram wooden boxes and capping them with raised plastic lids, ready to stack and ship. The spiny husks are dried outdoors, causing the spikes to fall off the dreamy green shells that are then sold into the gift shop and craft trade.

"Sea urchin pasta is so popular now it will probably turn up on the menu at the Olive Garden by the end of the year," wrote *New York Times* restaurant critic Pete Wells in a recent review of a new Italian spot in Greenwich Village. He's joking, in a snide, New York way. Sure, urchin's trendy, delicious, and no longer just for sushi, but it's hardly to everyone's taste.

"No, we don't serve it," says Dan at Old Port Sea Grill. "I think we have a sea urchin in our aquarium in the dining room, but that's about it." ■

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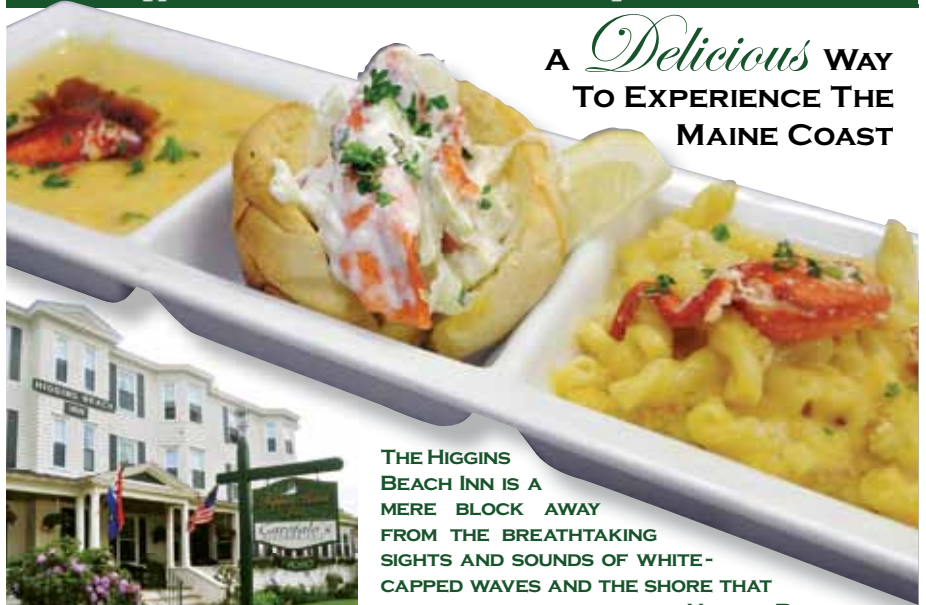
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