

# Blackbook

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WHERE TO GO & WHAT TO KNOW

THE PERIPATETIC GOURMET

## WHAT IS A GOOSENECK BARNACLE?

Off the jagged coasts in British Columbia's Clayoquot Sound, fishermen fight for the chance to harvest a prized delicacy.

BY SYLVIE BIGAR

**W**e got *percebes!*” yelled the chef. I had no idea what he meant, but I nodded. I was in Spain reporting on paella and open to anything a Spanish cook would put on my plate. But when he brought a steaming bouquet of dark tubes attached to what looked like prehistoric claws, I froze.

I watched my dining companion hold one repulsive claw between two fingers, pull a foreskin off, and mouth the remaining stem.

“Hmm,” he moaned. “Ocean.”

Harvester Billy George scrapes gooseneck barnacles off a cluster of rocks off Vancouver Island.

One bite and I was hooked.

Percebes, or gooseneck barnacles, are crustaceans related to crabs and lobsters that have been prized in Spain for centuries, fetching upward of \$100 per pound. In the northern region of Galicia, along the well-named Costa da Morte (Coast of Death), fishermen called *percebeiros* brave the pounding surf and, seeming acrobats on rocks, dance with the waves to harvest these delicacies.

Back in New York and hungry for more, I reached out to Jonathan Harris, co-owner of La Tienda, a company that specializes in sourcing gourmet Spanish food. He explained that Spain consumes most of its Galician harvest, so he sources goosenecks from Vancouver Island in British Columbia, where members of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations tribe have been harvesting them on a sprinkling of rocky outposts for generations. With the help of forager Tyler Gray from Seattle-based Miikuni Wild Harvest, which imports the live beasts into the U.S., Harris sells a Spanish delicacy made in Canada.

It was enough for me to head to Vancouver and hop on a seven-seater to Tofino on the western edge of the island. As we rocked and rolled through dark cumulonimbus clouds, I closed my eyes and mulled over my epitaph. I had just settled on “barnacles claimed her” when we plunged toward the beach and touched down a minute later.

Summer wanderers and surfers head to Tofino—on the Clayoquot Sound, a UNESCO biosphere reserve—for the miles-long beaches, swells, and temperate rain forest. But the rains that rumble through the area have spurred a storm-watcher following and transformed the small town into a year-round destination.

The plan was to head to the rocks at low tide with a member of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nation, harvest goosenecks, and bring them to the kitchens of two celebrated local chefs who would turn the creatures into plats du jour.

Billy George, my spry guide, picked one of the lowest tides of the month. We were lucky. Sunny with little wind, the conditions were ideal for taking a rookie out, but I knew the truth. Men often crept along jagged bluffs, half buried by the surf, risking all for the

thrust his homemade pry bar under clusters of barnacles, and lift them away from the rocks to which they'd attached themselves.

He'd told me that the stronger the surf, the bigger the barnacles got because they ingest more nutrients, which explained why harvesters choose the most dangerous spots. “We lost three gooseneckers recently,” George recalled. I would learn later that his brother, a fisherman, had drowned in the same waters.

A few feet from the boat, a fin and the round back of an orca pierced the surface, circling around us slowly. I was safe, but the silence felt ominous.

For local harvesters like George, who studied culinary arts and also worked as a chef, a way of life—and livelihood—has come under threat in recent years. In the '90s, a commercial fishery here employed more than a hundred men, who collected and shipped goosenecks to Europe. (Although Spain's Galician goosenecks share the same genus, they are, in fact, a different species.) The Nuu-chah-nulth, who prefer to pick and share the returns communally, felt squeezed out, and the Canadian government was concerned about overfishing.

The government eventually closed the commercial operation, and in 2006, some Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations groups sued lawmakers to have their aboriginal commercial rights to all sea resources recognized. The case is still pending, but today

Ocean Wise, a Vancouver Aquarium conservation program, is working to ensure the reopened gooseneck fishery, which is now owned by five First Nations tribes, remains sustainable. Goosenecks can live only in the wild and can't be bred.

After our harvest, George and I emptied part of our treasure onto a sheet pan in the kitchen of **Wolf in the Fog**, a restaurant where co-owner and executive chef Nick Nutting—shaved head, hipster beard, black apron—draws on the



A dish of gooseneck barnacles in tomato sauce at Wolf in the Fog restaurant in Tofino

## The taste was pure ocean, LIKE STEAMERS ON STEROIDS with the texture of delicate lobster.

prized sea jewels. In Spain, an average of five *percebeiros* die every year, and cliffs bear crosses in their honor.

“Ready, jump!” yelled George—charcoal-black mustache and angular face—as the boat bopped up and down, nearly crashing on the promontory. Suddenly he flew from boat to rock. I wavered one second too long, anxious my Wellies would betray me on the slippery rocks. I had flown cross-country, and now all I could do was watch George brave the waves,



From left: The pry bar George uses to scrape off goosenecks; a handful of fresh barnacles



Pacific Northwest landscape for inspiration.

This two-story chalet in the center of Tofino, with wall-mounted broken surfboards and a menacing driftwood sculpture of a wolf perched on the bar, seemed far from George's birthplace but was only miles away. Armed with scissors, Nutting clipped the rocky parts and blanched the barnacles' exposed insides. He peeled back the foreskin before heating up the tip of the gooseneck in tomato sauce, giving it a light Mediterranean flavor.

The next day it was pure ocean I inhaled, eating goosenecks simply poached in dashi broth by chef Lisa Ahier. The Texas native is co-owner of **SoBo**, another Tofino restaurant. Steamers on steroids, I thought, with a texture reminiscent of the most delicate lobster.

"They look like dinosaur's toes," Ahier said,

laughing in black overalls and a tie-dyed shirt as she whipped up yet another version, doused with leeks, garlic, sorrels, and white wine.

Later in the week, in Vancouver, I stopped at **Hawksworth Restaurant** in the Rosewood Hotel Georgia for a dish of goosenecks, seared squid, artichoke, olives, lemons, and puffed grains. There, the chewy but tender texture of the barnacles added a structured layer.

Bringing the barnacles alive to my own kitchen in New York City seemed appropriate to close the loop of my marine obsession, so I ordered some through La Tienda a week later. "Yuck, what's that?" shrieked Sophie, my 15-year-old daughter, as she peered into the fridge.

In a small casserole I simmered French but-

ter, lemon, and pepper, then separated and clipped the barnacles as best I could before dunking them in boiling water. As soon as the water boiled again, the barnacles would be ready, George had said.

"Quick! A *table!*" I yelled, scooping them up into a clean bowl and pouring the sauce into another. But when I tried to slide the bulging orange tube off, it literally exploded, splattering my shirt, the table, and the wall. We burst out laughing, dipped the percebe in the sauce, and sucked the whole thing.

It was delicious. There was no orca in sight and more skyscrapers than islands, but I closed my eyes, savoring the gooseneck's oceanic essence, and for one split second I thought I could hear the roar of the waves in the distance. ♦