

Seafood blog post – Mariners Menu  
Michael Starks, Bettie, NC  
Hard Clam Grower  
Interviewer: Pam Morris  
Interviewee: Michael Starks

**PM: What is your name and when were you born?**

**MS:** Michael Starks, Long Island, NY, 1953

**PM: How did you become a commercial fisherman?**

**MS:** By observing friends growing up on Long Island, NY and enjoyed being on the water, thought that was what I would like to do for a living. Joined the US Coast Guard for a four-year stint and decided to work the water on my own terms.

**PM: Is any of your family involved in the commercial fishing business?**

**MS:** My Dad has been a crab-potter since 1980, when he moved to Carteret County. My brother is a lobsterman in Long Island, NY, but is gradually getting out of it. Since the State of New York sprayed for the West Nile Virus several years ago, the lobster stock biomass has become depleted. A direct correlation has been established between spraying for West Nile and decline of lobsters by scientists in New York.

**PM: What are some of the species you harvest throughout the year?**

**MS:** For personal use, oysters and bay scallops ;clams are the source of my income. When I first got involved in the clam business, I worked for three companies, now just one. We used to buy from the public as well as produce and raise our own clams.

When I moved to Carteret County, I crab-potted like my Dad, did that for 13 years. Saw the “handwriting on the wall” for the crab industry and started looking into other sources of commercial fishing income. I went online and found a job listing for a clam farm in Harkers Island and applied, along with 25 other guys.

To find out more, I visited the business. They had a lease nearby that two guys were planting clams on so I walked out to see what they were doing, shoes, socks and all, and they asked me to help. That put me at the top of the hiring list! In two years, I was moved to management and a salary with benefits, where I worked for six years until they closed. From there, I worked for Coca-Cola for one year, decided it wasn't for me and began working for another clam growing company, where I have been for the past nine years.

**PM: Are clams raised on leases any different than wild-caught clams?**

**MS:** We raise a different species from what is found in the wild, although they look and taste very similar. Our clams' shells are slightly darker and have faint stripes on the shells. Farm-raised clams grow slightly faster, which helps with production, and the differences in shell appearance helps with security, as related to theft.

Farm-raised clams can be sold at any size, unlike wild-caught clams that have to be one inch thick before taken to market. This is because seed clams are about the size of your fingernail (or less) and are bought, sold and shipped to and from many shellfish growers throughout the state and region.

Farm-raised clams are grown on clam leases, which are portions of sea-floor in the Carolina sounds that are rented or “leased” from the state for this purpose. There are requirements that we have to meet to be able to do this. Leased areas are small and defined and there are a maximum number of clams that can be grown on each, as determined by what Mother Nature can provide food for.

Through years of experimentation, we have become very good at what we do and have fine-tuned our operation to produce the maximum number of clams. We are particular in how we handle our product and comply with HACCP guidelines for food safety.

**PM: What is your favorite style of fishing?**

**MS:** Crab-potting. I loved the independence of it, being out on the open water, from sunrise to sunset, on my own. At that time, I fished the waters of Turnagain Bay, West Bay, West Thorofare Bay, Long Bay and Neuse River and every day was different. I felt at one with the environment.

**PM: What is on your mind?**

**MS:** The State needs to get water quality under control. Where I grew up, on Long Island Sound, development and pesticides ruined the quality of the environment. Gradually, local watermen were moved out by rich people and regulation. I feel closer to this area than many natives who were born here and see the same kind of thing (as happened in Long Island) happening in Carteret County.

Also, the difficulty of obtaining new shellfish leases is a problem. Current leases become unproductive as changes in the environment occur, such as after Hurricane Ophelia.