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FOOD+WINE

## Clambake!

Restarauteur/chef Mark Stark creates a West Coast-style, hassle-free beach feast



CRISTA JEREMIASON / The Press Democrat

**Mark Stark, in white shirt, enjoys a clambake at Doran Beach with Tom and Adele Barnett, Steve Kerns, Terri Stark, Tayler Bailey and Kristen Kerns.**

**By DIANE PETERSON**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

**T**he traditional East Coast clambake at the beach can be pulled off without much cooking skill, but it does require a ridiculous amount of time and effort.

When Mark Stark, chef/owner of four restaurants in Santa Rosa and Healdsburg, came up with a West Coast-style version, he

tried to find an alternative that would be quick and easy, but just as tasty.

"I knew that was an all-day affair," he said of the technique the early colonists learned from the Native Americans, involving wood, rocks, fire and seaweed. "You dig a hole and line it with rocks. ... But you're on the beach, you're drinking. How hard do you want it to be?"

Stark, who grew up in the Chesapeake Bay region of Maryland, decided to try

steaming the seafood in a *Caja China*, a simple roasting box made out of plywood lined with aluminum sheeting.

*La Caja China* was first created in Florida in the 1980s as a way to cut the time and hassle of roasting meats, especially whole pigs. Why it's named "The Chinese Box" remains a mystery.

"It's based on the barbacoa tradition of South America, where they dig a hole in the



CRISTA JEREMIASON / The Press Democrat

**Mark Stark puts seaweed in the Caja China as his wife, Terri Stark, left, and Tayler Bailey help with clambake preparations last month at Doran Beach.**

ground,” Stark said. “All the heat is on top of it, so it works like a broiler.”

Mark and his wife, Terri, bought their own *Caja China* —the basic model costs about \$220 — with a few friends who also like to cook *al fresco*.

“It’s a box timeshare,” Stark said. “Chefs will call and ask to borrow the box for the weekend.”

For their West Coast clambake, the Starks put together a simple feast sourced from the coast’s fertile fields and water: fingerling potatoes, Brentwood corn, homemade chorizo, head-on shrimp from Monterey, Manila clams from Hog Island Oysters and mussels from Prince Edward Island.

The only ingredient sourced from the East Coast was the Maine lobster, a luxurious touch that adds both color and meaty sweetness to the late-summer feast.

With the help of Stark’s catering chef Tayler Bailey, the *Caja China* was transported out to Doran Beach in Bodega Bay on a hazy afternoon in late August for a test run.

“I’m calling it Box on the Beach,” Stark said while stoking the coals on top of the box. “Nobody has done this before.”

During the warm, fog-free days of autumn, the Sonoma coast provides an ideal setting for a clambake. To whet their guests’ appetite — Steve and Kristen Kerns of Santa Rosa and Tom and Adele Barnett of Healdsburg — the Starks had prepared a tasty assortment of antipasti packed in sturdy Mason jars.

“It’s a colorful and instant appetizer, and really easy,” Terri Stark said. “Just pack it all up ahead of time.”

The Mediterranean-inspired appetizers

included cheesy breadsticks from the Basque Boulangerie in Sonoma, mixed green olives, blanched cherry tomatoes, roasted red peppers, bocconcini cheese with homemade pesto and a selection of housemade salumi.

While the guests grazed through the appetizers and sipped rosé from Unti Winery, Stark and Bailey fired up the *Caja China*, lighting up an 18-pound bag of Kingsford charcoal while soaking the corn and some leeks in sea water for a half-hour.

The idea was to cook both the unhusked corn and the leeks on top of the coals, providing a nice char that would boost the clambake’s flavor.

“Once a year, Spain celebrates spring by charring leeks, wrapping them in newspaper and letting them steam,” Stark said. “Then they serve them with romesco sauce.”

Meanwhile, Stark wrapped up the clambake ingredients in foil packets, adding olive oil, smoked salt and chorizo to each packet for extra zip.

“The chorizo is going to flavor it all as it would in a paella,” he said.

Stark added the seaweed to the bottom of the box with teh packets, then laid the whole Maine lobsters on top of the seaweed.

The toughest part of the operation is timing. You want everything to get done at the same time, so that the clams are open but the delicate lobster is not overcooked.

A little more than two hours after the coals were lit, Stark and Bailey decided it was done. They spread the veggies and seafood out on the table, next to jars of whipped garlic butter and romesco sauce for dipping.

Rocks were collected to break the lobster shells, and fondue forks were provided to pry out the tasty meat. No sound system was needed

“You’ve got the sound of the waves and the smell of the charcoal,” Stark said. “You can’t beat that.”

For equipment, you’ll need a *Caja China*, the roasting box typically used for roasting suckling pigs. You’ll also need an 18-pound bag of charcoal, lighter fluid and lighter, newspaper (preferably the Wednesday edition of the Press Democrat, which has the food section) and a 4 to 5 gallon bucket. Next, you’ll need to gather your seafood and accompaniments. The seafood and seaweed can be ordered from Santa Rosa Seafood or your favorite seafood fishmonger.

### **Lobster Bake on the Beach**

*Makes 6 servings*

**6** fresh lobsters, about 1 ½ pounds each

**36** littleneck clams

**24** large shrimp (head on if possible)

**2** pounds linguica sausage, cut into 2-inch chunks

**2** pounds of small potatoes, such as fingerlings or butterball

**6** ears of corn, unshucked

**6** medium leeks, tops removed

**2** pounds lobster packing seaweed

— Good extra virgin olive oil

— Sea Salt

— Romesco Sauce (see below)

— Garlic Butter (see below)

Bread



Photos by CRISTA JEREMIASON / The Press Democrat

**The only ingredient sourced from the East Coast in Mark Stark's clambake was the Maine lobster. When it's in season, you can easily substitute Dungeness crab.**

**Getting started:** Prior to leaving for the beach or your backyard, precook the potatoes in some salted water. Place the garlic butter in a heavy mason jar that you can place near the fire to melt.

Make 2 foil packets containing equal portions of everything: clams, shrimp, boiled potatoes and chunks of the linguica sausage. Drizzle with olive oil and some salt then wrap up tightly.

**Firing up the box:** When you get to the beach, fill your bucket with sea water, then place the corn and leeks in the water to soak for about a half hour. Place the seaweed in as well.

Place the entire bag of coals on the top lid of the Caja China and light. When the coals are ready, spread out evenly on the top. Lift the lid of the box and place all the soaked seaweed inside as a base for the seafood. Add your foil packets and place the live lobsters on top of the seaweed. Close the lid. The packets and lobsters should take about 45 minutes to an hour to roast.

After they're done soaking, place the soaked leeks and unhusked corn directly on the hot coals until the corn is roasted and the leeks are completely blackened, about 20 minutes. Remove the corn to cool slightly. Take the leeks and wrap in several layers of the paper to steam. When the leeks have cooled, unwrap and peel away the blackened layers to reveal the smokey tender inside. When the corn is cool, take the husk off. Keep corn and leeks warm in tin foil, on the side of the fire, while the seafood finishes.

After 45 minutes, check the seafood. The lobsters should be bright red and the clams should all be open. If not, let them cook further. When ready, remove all the seafood

and place on table with the corn and leeks, on newspaper.

We recommend eating the leeks, potatoes and corn with the romesco and dipping the seafood in the garlic butter.

When done gorging, wrap all the shells in newspaper and dispose, then go jump in the ocean to clean up!

#### **Willi's Garlic Butter**

*Makes about 2 1/2 cups*

- 1 pound unsalted butter, softened
- 2 tablespoons fresh minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon minced shallots
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 1 1/2 teaspoons lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons chopped parsley

Place the soft butter in the bowl of an electric stand mixer with the paddle attachment. Add the garlic, shallots, salt, and lemon juice. Mix on medium speed until the butter is almost white in color and has the consistency of meringue. (Whipping a lot of air into the butter gives the butter a creamy consistency when melted). Add the chopped parsley and mix until just incorporated. Can be stored in several small ziplock bags in the freezer and brought to room temperature when needed. Melt to use as a dip for seafood or spread on any roasted meat to give a boost in flavor.

You can find harissa and piquillo peppers at local grocery stores such as Oliver's and Pacific Market.

#### **Romesco Sauce**

*Makes about 2 cups*

- 8 canned piquillo peppers
- 1/3 cup roasted hazelnuts
- 1/3 cup roasted whole almonds
- 3/4 cup roasted garlic, pureed
- 1/2 cup basil leaves
- 4 anchovy fillets
- 2 tablespoons sherry vinegar
- 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon harissa (Tunisian hot sauce)

Place all the ingredients in the bowl of a food processor and pulse until the consistency of pesto. Season with salt. Use as a dip for steamed vegetables, a sauce for seafood or a spread on sandwiches. Store in the refrigerator. May be frozen as well.

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