

Bay of plenty

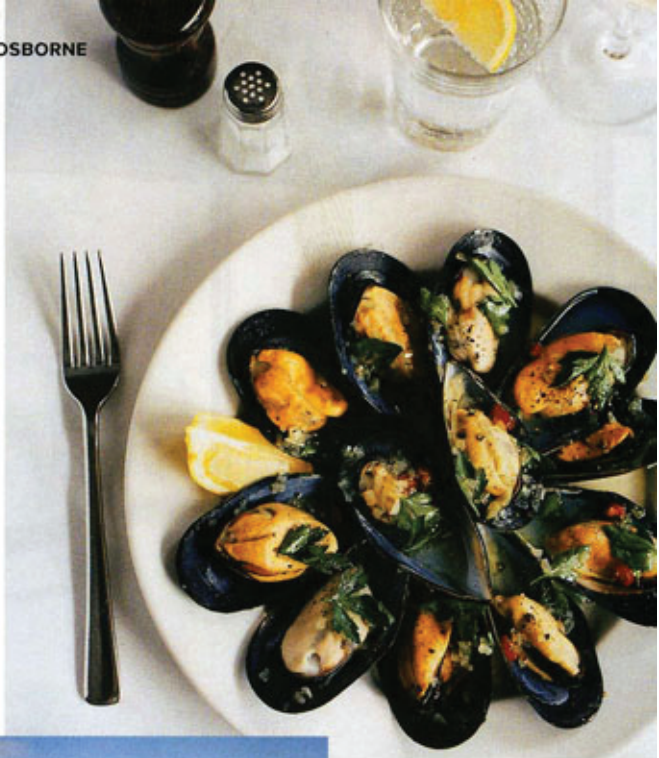
As producer of some of the world's best mussels, Tasmania's Spring Bay Seafoods is fostering a richer appreciation of the 'poor man's oyster'.

There's some native Australian produce that just isn't being used to its full potential. But, before you turn the page, let me assure you I'm not talking about wattle seed, warrigal greens or any of the other indigenous products foisted upon us by well-meaning but usually ill-advised cooks. I'm talking about mussels. Not only are blue mussels native to our waters, but we're producing some of the best in the world. Yet we eat kilos fewer mussels per head than France, say, or the UK or even New Zealand.

The passage between Spring Bay and Maria Island on Tasmania's south-east coast is one of the prime spots for mussel production in Australia, and the branded Spring Bay mussels sold by Spring Bay Seafoods to restaurants and fishmongers around the country are fast becoming the best-known premium mussels in the land. But the path to success for this company has been far from direct. For a number of years the company dredged and cultivated top-quality scallops that were seen everywhere from Tetsuya's in Sydney to Melbourne's Pearl. Then, in 2002, disaster struck. The submerged cages in which the scallops grew turned out to be the perfect growing environment for an uninvited guest: the sea star *asteria amurensis*. They floated into the cages while in their larval stage, then grew at four times the rate of the scallops, eating them when they matured.

An enormous amount of money, time and effort was lost. But as the fishermen were pulling up what they thought were worthless cages, they noticed, in a serendipitous twist, some other freeloaders on the lines: mussels were growing wild on their scallop equipment. About 12 months after the initial discovery of the sea star they decided to switch the focus of their business. "Mussels grow on ropes and the star fish don't like them," says Spring Bay managing director Phil Lamb. "We found we were getting good grow-out rates, great meat-to-shell ratios and high-quality meat; we experimented with it a bit, added a bit of marketing and ended up where we are today."

Where Spring Bay mussels are today is on some of Australia's best menus (often with their region or origin name-checked, too), wok-fried with black bean and chilli at Pearl, in a curry laksa at Palm Cove's Nu Nu, or with harissa and flatbread at Flying Fish in Sydney. But they're also appearing elsewhere. Pots of mussels with beer at pubs are becoming commonplace, and they're proving popular with the home cook. Apart from the health benefits (mussels are a great source of iron and omega-3 fatty acids), they're well priced and are very straightforward to cook, needing, at the most basic, a bit of garlic and chilli, a splash of white wine and some herbs. They even tell you when they're ready – just pull them off the heat as soon as they open. If only John Dory were so forgiving.



MUSSEL MAN
Phil Lamb. Above: steamed 'boat shed' mussels dressed with olive oil, lemon, garlic, chilli and parsley at Bacash, Melbourne.

Professionals prize Spring Bay Seafoods because of the consistency of its product and supply – borne of the company's deepwater lease, which keeps temperatures low and spawning to a minimum. "We sold mussels every day last year," says Lamb. "In mussel farming, that's unique."

Mussels used to be called the poor man's oysters, says Michael Bacash, chef and owner of landmark Melbourne seafood restaurant Bacash. "They have all the flavour, that intense bottom-of-the-sea freshness, of oysters, but you can do so much more with them. And, apart from being cheap, they're a lot easier to deal with." Spring Bay Seafoods recently invested in a de-bearding machine, but Bacash says it's quality control that really sets the Spring Bay mussel apart. "They're very meticulous about the cleaning."

The other distinction is size. "We're finding that our Spring Bay blue mussels might be the biggest in the world," says Lamb. "Leases in sheltered areas can't match the size of the Spring Bay mussels because once they reach a certain weight, they fall off the ropes." The strong current in the waters of Spring Bay encourage baby mussels to braid themselves more securely to the ropes – hence fewer larger mussels fall off before they can be harvested. "We get eight or 10kg of mussels per metre of rope, where other farms get half that."

Spring Bay is just the tip of the mussel iceberg in Australia. Boston Bay's mussels – a smaller, sweeter proposition – from near Port Lincoln are starting to appear on menus, and there are leases producing quality shellfish in other South Australian and Western Australian waters. The time has definitely come for us to flex our mussels. *