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Coronavirus Report March 2020

BY NANCY SOLOMON

As I write this column, we are currently in isolation due to the coronavirus. This means that many restaurants are closed, including those that specialize in seafood. Many of our local baymen and fishermen can no longer sell their fish and shellfish to their primary customers—restaurants and bars. In addition, distributors are no longer able to sell their fish at a decent price. Distributor Doug Rodgers of Oyster Bay posted, on March 18, the following on Facebook: “With most restaurants closed and the ones that are doing take-out having a limited menu... Most baymen are out of work till this epidemic is over. If anyone needs clams or oysters for your Friday (or any day) no-meat meals, please let me know. Clams and oysters available! Local delivery available.”

Unfortunately, most baymen cannot sell directly to the consumer as a result of state health regulations. As bayman Chuck Tekula wrote, “It’s illegal for the holders of the diggers permits to sell to anyone but licensed dealers.” I am fortunate that I could buy from some of the people we work with at my own risk.



Clams, courtesy of an oyster bayman. Photo by Nancy Solomon.

There are some places that are coping with this situation. As former state senate staffer Brian Culhane wrote on March 25, “On Long Island, many of our markets carry locally caught fish. Local governments are also lifting restrictions on farm stand and direct sale. Support our local fishermen and farmers if you can. With prices collapsing, it’s not worth leaving the dock.” Other fishermen are donating their catch to families in need. According to *Newsday*, Chucky Morici and his fishing partner, James Foley of the Montauk-based charter fishing vessel, *The Hampton Lady*, donated several hundred pounds of fish to local residents, including Tom Connor of Farmingville, the owner of an automotive shop in Bethpage, who had to lay off his employees. He appreciated the assistance when Foley delivered six big bags of fluke fillets.¹

Some fish markets, such as Braun’s on the North Fork of Long Island, are accepting orders and will deliver them or have them available for pick-up. Some seafood restaurants are also doing the same, such as Rachel’s in Freeport. However, the situation is drastic, comparable to the experiences of fishermen after Superstorm Sandy, when baymen were unable to work for several months. The stimulus package approved by Congress will provide \$300 million for fishermen, who will be able to apply for grants for lost income.

At the same time, party and charter boats are able to go out, but with social distancing measures, can only take a fraction of the people they can accommodate. As a result, many boats are sitting at the dock. Most of our school trips on board these vessels are in limbo, but most likely will be cancelled, a situation that is taking place in many school districts. It’s also sad



Baked clams, courtesy of Rachel’s Seafood in Freeport. Photo by Nancy Solomon.

to see the likely elimination of the fishing trips, the culminating activity of our school programs. Many students have never gone fishing, and this trip introduces them to this traditional activity.

I hope that by the time you read this column our fishermen and baymen are back at work, making a decent wage, that party and charter boats are taking boatloads of people fishing, and that we can all enjoy fishing again. ▼

¹ Cribblez, David J. 2020. “Great Catch! LI Anglers Donate Fish to Feed Hungry.” *Newsday*, March 26.

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