

Delights in Essex, Massachusetts

AAA's Northern New England Journey, January/February 2016

By Alexandra Pecci

As the mound of juicy, fat-bellied fried clams threatened at any moment to topple over the edges of the paper plate and onto the picnic table, I felt something that I don't usually feel at dinner time: doubt.

"I don't know if I can eat all this," I told my mom.

We were at Woodman's of Essex in Massachusetts, the birthplace of the fried clam, where the seafood dinners are so heaping and heavy that mere paper plates aren't hefty enough for the trek from the pickup counter to your table: A cardboard box is needed for reinforcement.

Twenty minutes earlier, we'd been standing in a line that snaked out the front door onto the sidewalk, waiting to place our orders. Around us were people who looked fresh from the beach, like we were: sundresses worn over bathing suits, lots of flip-flops, and even a patina of sand across the back of one woman's tanned shoulders.

Hungry after a day in the sun and surf, I scanned the menu blackboard for what I sought: Chubby's Original Fried Clams. Soon, we settled into our booth and tucked in.

"Mmmmm," my mom intoned quietly to herself, making me question my own dinner choice as I watched her.

As we ate, she eyeballed everyone else's food as they walked by.

"Oh, that looks good," she said, craning her neck at a bright-red steamed lobster or a plate of fried shrimp with house-made coleslaw. "Even though I love what I'm eating, every other plate that goes by, I want that too!"

But no matter how good everything else looked, she would never stray from her own dinner choice, because scallops, she said, "are not something I would usually buy and cook for myself."

That exact philosophy has made eating fried clams at Woodman's such a treat for 100 years. Woodman's fried clams are remarkable in their simplicity: They're plucked from local clam flats, unfussily dredged in evaporated milk and corn flour, and deep fried in lard to crispy perfection. For all their simplicity, though, "you just don't make these at home," says Maureen Woodman, who's married to Doug Woodman, the company's president and co-owner and the grandson of Chubby and Bessie Woodman, who not only founded the restaurant in 1914 but also invented the fried clam.

On July 3, 1916, Chubby and Bessie were frying potato chips when a local clam digger suggested they drum up some business by deep frying clams in the potato chip fat. So they threw in a clam, shell and all. Naturally, it exploded. But Chubby and Bessie knew they had

something, so they dredged and fried shucked clams instead. The next day, they sold their new creation on the street during the town's Fourth of July parade and made \$35.

July 3 is now National Fried Clam Day, and 100 years later, Woodman's is celebrating the birth of its famous culinary creation, welcoming anyone who's 100 years or older to eat for free. It's telling the fried clam origin story on potato chip bags, doing giveaways, and staging a reenactment in July.

Chubby always had a way with fish, his grandson, Doug, remembers. When Doug went fishing with his grandfather, people would follow them out onto the Essex River just to fish near Chubby's boat and ride his coattails.

"He was known as the best fisherman around," Doug says. "We would go down in his boat, and wherever he went, people would just show up."

Restaurants around the country rode Chubby's fried clam coattails too. Maureen even says that Chubby taught Howard Johnson how to make them.

Now, within a few miles of Woodman's, two other fried clam icons—the Clam Box of Ipswich and J.T. Farnham's—also ply their wares.

"They're all different," Maureen says. "And they're all good."

She's right. They are all good. I'm proud that I can attest to that.

And I'll end the suspense: I polished off Woodman's fried clam plate with alarming ease.

IF YOU GO

DO

Take in beautiful views and learn about local history and nature with **Essex River Cruises and Charters**, which run seven days per week, May–October. Cost is \$25 for adults; \$12 for children 4–12; free for children 3 and under. 1-978-768-6981; essexcruises.com. Considered America's Antique Capital, Essex's dozens of shops include **Andrew Spindler Antiques** (1-978-768-6045; spindlerantiques.com) and the **White Elephant Shop** (1-978-768-6901, whiteelephantshop.com). The **Essex Shipbuilding Museum** is open April–December. 1-978-768-7541; essexshipbuildingmuseum.org.

STAY

The charming 1830 Federal-style **George Fuller House Bed and Breakfast Inn** overlooks the salt marsh and Essex River. Rates start at \$125. 1-978-768-7766; georgefullerhouse.com.

The **Inn at Castle Hill** is located on the beautiful and historic 2,100-acre Crane Estate in nearby Ipswich, Massachusetts. Open seasonally. Rates start at \$195. 1-978-412-2555; theinnatcastlehill.com.

EAT

Which of three local clam shacks will be your favorite? **Woodman's of Essex** invented the fried clam and is open year-round. 1-978-768-2559; woodmans.com. Their friendly rival down the road, **J.T. Farnham's**, has a quaint dining room and stunning salt marsh location. Open seasonally. 1-978-768-6643; jtfarnhams.com. The iconic **Clam Box** in Ipswich is also open seasonally. 1-978-356-9707; clamboxipswich.com.