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HEADLINE: Local Scallop Business Has a Wide Following

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BODY:

GOOD scallops are hard to find, said Ben Opitz, a chef in Washington, D.C., explaining why he made a trip to Stonington a few years ago to check out what he remembered as perfect scallops.

"I used to rant and rave at seafood purveyors," Mr. Opitz said. "I'd get two decent batches of scallops and the third would be terrible. I was never happy."

Mr. Opitz, head chef of the Phillips Seafood restaurant chain, became so fed up with the usual supply channels that he decided to meet with Bill Bomster, whose scallops Mr. Opitz bought when he worked at a Connecticut restaurant two decades earlier.

Soon, he was having Bomster scallops delivered to his chain's headquarters in Baltimore. Joe and Bill Jr. drive the truck themselves, loaded with up to 5,000 pounds of scallops, once a month.

Mr. Bomster and his wife, Venna Jo, own Stonington Seafood Harvesters with their three grown sons, Bill Jr., Mike and Joe. The scallops they bring back from 10- to 12-day trips out into the Atlantic are so good and so fresh that the Bomsters have built a cultlike following through word of mouth over the last 30 years.

Seafood lovers head to their shop on the town dock to buy the scallops right from the Bomsters. And dozens of restaurants from as far away as South Carolina buy those scallops, with some local restaurants bragging on their menus that they serve Bomster scallops.

"We've developed a following of people who come to our restaurants for Bomster scallops," said Jon Kodama, the owner of several restaurants in the area, including Go Fish, Ten Clams, and Steak Loft. "The scallops are so fresh that you could eat them raw. You can't say that about most scallops."

The Bomsters' business is family run, and their tiny shop operates on the honor system. Customers can take vacuum-packed one-pound bags of scallops anytime from refrigerators in front of the shop and put payment through a mail slot. The bags are \$15 each.

Unlike bay scallops, which are harvested from October through April in the waters

around New York, sea scallops are harvested year round. The Bomsters search for them from Newfoundland to North Carolina in their twin 90-foot scallop trawlers.

What sets Bomster scallops apart is the way they are processed. According to Bill Jr., the captain and six-person crew haul up a load of scallops every few hours. The crew works rotating shifts for days at a time -- seven hours on, five hours off -- cutting and rinsing the scallops in seawater, vacuum-packing them and flash-freezing them, all within three hours after they are hauled out of the water, he said.

"The business is hard," Bill Jr. said. "You're out there for 10 days and you work like dogs."

The process differs dramatically from the conventional or "wet" process used by most scallop operations, where the scallops are shelled and iced in denim bags, then treated with chemicals at a processing house. In the wet process, scallops are soaked in sodium tripolyphosphate, which promotes water retention, and chlorine dioxide, which bleaches them.

The added water can make up 20 percent of the wet-process scallops' weight, according to Seafood Choices Alliance, a Washington-based nonprofit trade association.

The market for dry-processed scallops is growing, driven by demand at white-tablecloth restaurants, said Joey Brookhart, a spokeswoman for the alliance.

"Chefs are really concerned about the purity and quality of their ingredients," she said.

While dry-processed scallops cost more than other scallops, the quality is superior, Mr. Opitz said. Since he began serving Bomster scallops three years ago, sales of scallop dishes have shot up at his restaurants.

"The flavor is sweeter than anything you ever ate," he said.

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GRAPHIC: Photo: One of the trawlers the Bomster family uses to harvest scallops. (Photo by C. M. Glover for The New York Times)

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