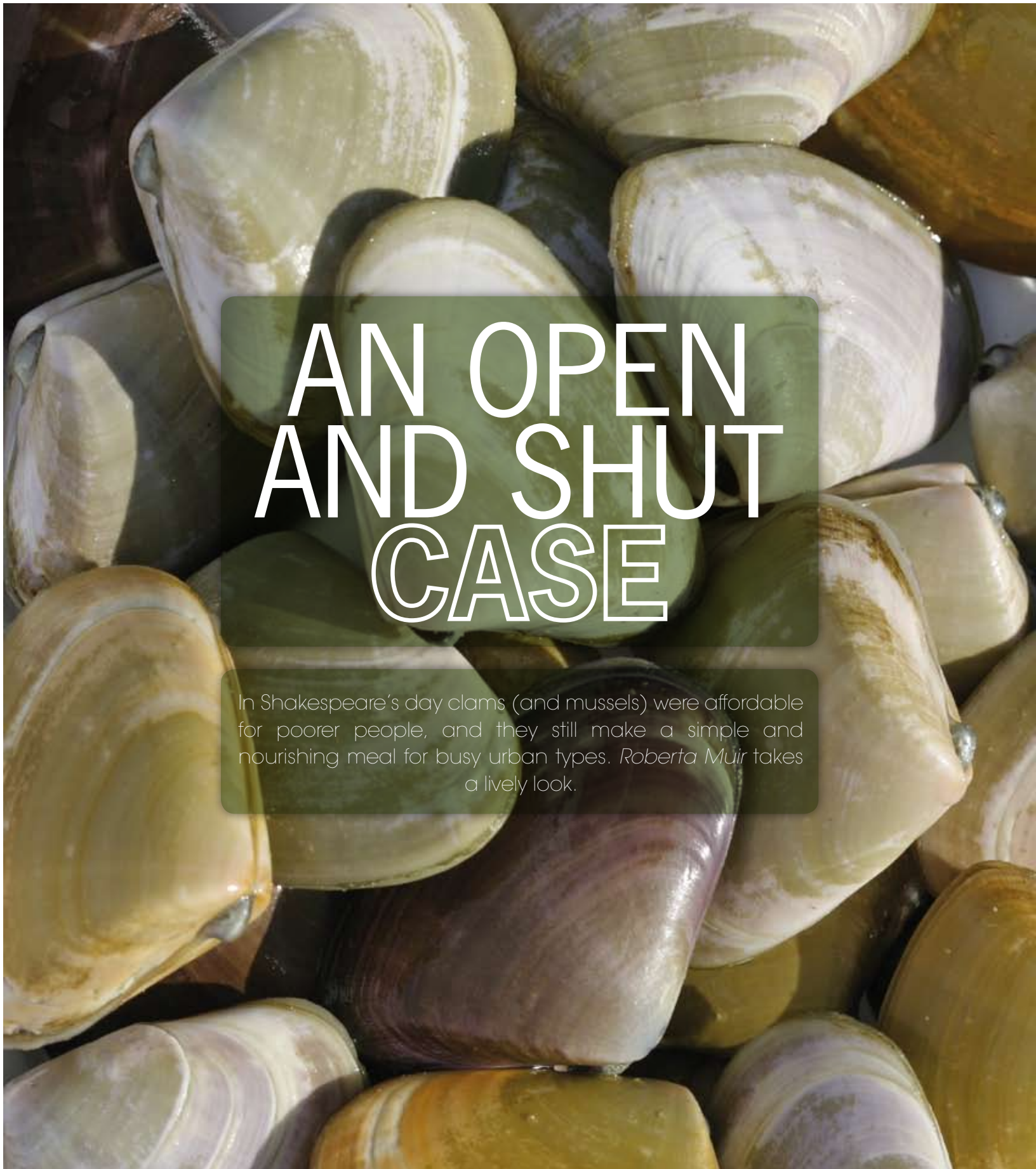


in the buff



AN OPEN AND SHUT CASE

In Shakespeare's day clams (and mussels) were affordable for poorer people, and they still make a simple and nourishing meal for busy urban types. *Roberta Muir* takes a lively look.



The traditional call of shellfish sellers as they wheeled their barrows through the markets, “cockles and mussels alive, alive-oh”, was immortalised in the Irish folk song *Molly Malone*.

It reminds us that cockles, along with oysters and other bivalves, were once an inexpensive snack for the working class.

Bivalve molluscs are any shellfish with a double-hinged shell, many of which are commonly referred to as clams. The word clam once meant shut, and these creatures can shut their shells tightly to protect themselves from predators. Many popular shellfish, such as oysters and scallops, are bivalves. But there are also some equally delicious, less commonly used (therefore less expensive) bivalves, such as blood clams, surf clams and razor clams.

Blood clam or **blood cockle** (*Anadara granosa*), also called strawberry clam and granular arkshell, is named for the reddish liquid released when it is opened and the reddish tinge to its tissues. It has a yellowish-brown shell, usually about 6cm

in diameter (although it can grow to 9cm), with bumpy ribs radiating out from the hinge. It is found on muddy bottoms in bays, estuaries and mangroves as well as being cultivated in many areas of the Indo-Pacific. This clam is known as xue han in China, hum in Hong Kong and kerang in Malaysia.

Giant clam (*Tridacna gigas* and the smaller *Tridacna maxima*) are found at depths of up to 20 metres, most commonly in very salty waters around islands and other rocky areas. The shell is black and white and the body is multi-hued. Gigas can grow to one metre in width and several hundred kilogrammes but are commonly harvested at 40-50 centimetres. Known as da che qu in China, wan man ho in Hong Kong and kimah or gebang in Malaysia.

Surf clam (*Paphia undulata*), **ridged sand clam** (*Circe scripta*) and **Venus shell** (*Meretrix meretrix*) also called Asiatic hard clam, are all members of the Venus shell family (all known as hin in Hong Kong). Surf clams have a yellowish-brown shell

with intricate dark brown markings and fine concentric ridges, commonly about 5 centimetres long. They burrow into sandy bottoms in waters up to 8 metres deep. They are known as remis in Malaysia. Ridged sand clams are found on surf beaches and in bays with strong tidal currents. They have a reddish-yellow and whitish shell usually just under 5 centimetres in length and are known as tepeh in Malaysia. Venus shells have a lovely smooth, yellowish-brown shell and are slightly larger than the other two (up to 7 centimetres). They are known as wen kuo in China and kepah gading in Malaysia.

Wedge shell (*Donax faba*) or bean clam is a member of the *Donacidae* family, related to the Australian Pipi, French Olive and Italian Tellina. They are small, no more than 2.5 centimetres long, with triangular or wedge-shaped shells striped in white, cream, yellow and black. They are found on sand in inter-tidal areas. Like surf clams, they are known as hin in Hong Kong and remis in Malaysia.

Razorshell clam (*Solen grandis*) is named for its

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long narrow shell, roughly the shape of an old-fashioned cut-throat razor. The light to dark yellow shells grow to 15 centimetres long and are very sharp and brittle. These clams burrow into sand or mud near the low-water mark in sheltered bays. They are called zhu cheng in China, chi kap law in Hong Kong and sumbun in Malaysia. A similar looking species, *Pharella javanica*, is also known as razor clam.

Buying

Clams are sold live. Look for brightly coloured, intact, lustrous shells that are closed – or that close when tapped or gently squeezed – with a pleasant fresh sea smell. Due to their sandy habitat they can contain a bit of grit. Ask the fishmonger if they have been purged (stored in aerated saltwater for at least 24 hours to eliminate sand). If they haven't, see below for purging instructions.

Storing

Live shellfish should be consumed as soon as possible after purchase. Place them in a container, cover with damp butcher's paper and keep in the warmest part of the refrigerator, which is usually the crisper (optimum 5 degrees Celsius).

Cooking

If they have not been purged, place them in a large bowl of cool water for several hours, or overnight, in a cool place. (If you refrigerate them they will close up and not eliminate the sand.) The shells yield an average of 20-30 per cent meat, so allow about 600 grammes of whole shells per person as a main course.

Blood cockles are said to be rich in iron. They can be blanched or steamed to loosen the meat, which

can then be removed and fried, used in curries or dipped in a sauce of vinegar, soy, garlic and chilli.

Giant clams are prized for their huge adductor muscle, which is commonly sliced, boiled and dried and then used in soups. The mantle on the border of the shell is also good eating, fried with strong spices to subdue its strong fishy aroma.

Surf, ridged sand and Venus shell clams are all good in soups, as the liquid inside them adds a delicious flavour to the broth. They can also be fried or used in salads.

Wedge shell clams are commonly boiled then pickled in soy sauce or fish sauce and the white meat from razor clams is delicious dusted in flour and deep-fried.

All clams go well with chilli, coriander, garlic, parsley, tomato, white wine, black beans, ginger, soy sauce and Worcestershire sauce. They lend themselves to a wide range of cooking styles, including steaming, poaching, stir-frying, baking, grilling, barbecuing (in the shell), smoking and pickling. And they are great served raw (sashimi). The firm flesh works particularly well in soups and curries.

Due to their similarities, many clams can be substituted for one another in recipes and are often a good replacement for mussels. Remember that they need very little cooking and are ready virtually as soon as the shell opens. When cooking a large batch, it is best to remove individual shells from the pan as each one opens, so as not to overcook them. (Discard any shells that don't open once cooked.) Remove the meat from the shells or serve them shell and all. If serving in the shell, remember to put a large bowl on the table for discarded shells with some finger bowls and big napkins. ■

SPAGHETTI VONGOLE

This Italian dish is a classic clam recipe. The sauce is prepared in the time it takes for the pasta to cook – true fast food.

Serves 4

Ingredients

500g spaghetti
175ml extra virgin olive oil
4 cloves garlic, chopped
2 small red chillies, seeded and chopped
175ml white wine
1kg small surf clams or ridged sand clams
2 tbsp chopped flat-leaf parsley
salt flakes and freshly ground black pepper,

Method

1. Bring a large pot of salted water to the boil. Add pasta and cook until al dente (tender but not mushy).
2. Meanwhile, heat olive oil in a large frying pan.
3. Add garlic and chilli and stir over moderate heat until garlic softens.
4. Increase heat, add wine and clams, stir and cover for a couple of minutes until they start to open.
5. Using a slotted spoon, remove open clams, placing them on a plate.
6. Cover for another minute or two to give the others a chance to open.
7. Remove pan from heat, return open clams to pan, cover and set aside.
8. As soon as pasta is cooked, drain and tip into the pan with the clams.
9. Add parsley, salt and pepper (remembering that the juice from the clams is already salty), and toss through spaghetti.

