

# Rhode Island: King of squid

More pounds are brought to shore than any other seafood

By **BRYAN ROURKE JOURNAL STAFF WRITER**

An ugly, slimy Rhode Island secret has surfaced: Rhode Island is the East Coast capital of squid.

Squid is to Rhode Island what lobster is to Maine; cod is to Massachusetts.

"It was surprising to me, and I work in the fishing industry," said Peg Parker, executive director of the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation. "We're the squid capital of the world. The guys in Point Judith knew that, but not the rest of us."

Cornell University researchers completed a study last month, commissioned by Saunterstown-based Commercial Fisheries.

They concluded that more pounds of squid are brought to shore in Rhode Island than any other seafood. And Rhode Island accounts for 54 percent of squid landings in the Northeast.

Who knew?

"It's not a surprise to anyone in the fishing industry," said John Scotti, senior researcher for Cornell's Cooperative Extension Marine Program, located on Long Island.

In early November, Scotti visited Rhode Island to discuss his findings with fishing industry members and some other people, too. The fishermen nodded. The other people gasped: Squid? Yes, squid. Rhode Island had 7 million pounds of it last year. "There was giggling," Scotti said. "The fishermen found it surprising no one knew." "I knew," said Chris Roebuck. "I'm one of the fishermen." Roebuck is owner of Salt Pond Fisheries in Point Judith, a second-generation squid fisherman. "This is what we've done historically," Roebuck said. This is fishing in Rhode Island, although, technically squid isn't a fish. It's a mollusk, related to clams and oysters.

Rhode Island can trace its squid dominance to several factors: limited federal commercial fishing licenses for squid, of which Rhode Island has a disproportionate number; stricter federal catch restrictions on other fish, making squid fishing more attractive; the fact that Rhode Island's in the middle of the squid-rich water between North Carolina and Canada; and Rhode Island's dominance as a squid processor – taking in squid from out-of-state boats, too.

"The people who do this are low-profile," said James Fox, owner of the Handrigan Seafood fishing operation in Point Judith and the Sea Fresh processing operation in North Kingstown. "That's the personality of squid processors."

Catching squid's one thing. Selling it's another. ket has emerged.

"Fifteen years ago, you didn't see calamari on the menu," says Glenn Goodwin, co-owner of Seafreeze in North Kingstown, a seafood freezing facility. "Now you see it everywhere. It was a low-cost item that was plentiful. It took some time for people to try it."

Americans, it seems, are squeamish about squid.

"People don't like to buy it in the supermarket and cook it at home," Fox says. "They're a little intimidated."

Pretty, squid isn't. In fact, it's ugly — an eight-armed, two-tentacled, tube-bodied, backward-swimming, beady-eyed mollusk that looks like an octopus, squirts ink in self-defense and has three hearts.

"They're attractive to me," Roebuck says. "But I like squid."

Most Americans who like squid want it to look like onion rings.

"People go to the docks and buy lobster, and it's a cultural experience," says Mark Gibson, the Department of Environmental Management's deputy chief of marine fisheries. "And they know what cod looks like. But squid is something with peppers and marinara sauce."

Calamari is how most Americans consume squid. But the rest of the world consumes squid many other ways, and in far greater volume.

In Asia, South America and Europe, says Frank Terranova, associate culinary instructor at Johnson & Wales University, people eat squid filleted, stuffed and fried, and in sauces and in soups.

He, too, admits squid has an appearance problem.

"It's not a handsome-looking fish," Terranova says.

Even when the most objectionable parts of a squid are removed, namely its head and tentacles, it still has problems. Cook it improperly, Terranova says, and you end up with edible rubber.

"If you overcook them, they become chewy," Terranova says. "If you undercook them, they become chewy."

Soak squid in lemon and baking soda beforehand, he says. That will soften them. And cook three small trial pieces of squid at three time intervals — maybe 3, 5 and 7 minutes. "It shows you the cooking time and the flavor profile," Terranova says. "If you cook the squid all at once, you may ruin the whole batch." If you're frying squid, Terranova says, when it floats, it's done.

Squid comes into Rhode Island by the millions of pounds. And since Rhode Islanders aren't consuming millions of pounds of squid, most of it is leaving the state.

"All the stuff we freeze onboard is shipped directly to Europe," Roebuck says. "They eat a lot more squid than we do here."

Roebuck fishes squid year-round, traveling the Eastern seaboard, going where the squid are at given times of the year, between North Carolina and the Canadian border, from two miles to 250 miles offshore.

In May, the fishing's easy. Squid are two miles off Charlestown's coast.

"Historic migration patterns are the same year after year," Roebuck says.

Roebuck uses a 158-foot net with federally regulated 2-1/8-inch mesh opening. Using sonar, Roebuck can not only tell where fish are and what species they are, but he can also distinguish within a species: loligo vs. illex squid.

Illex is for bait. Loligo is for food.

"Rhode Island is the center of the loligo squid industry," Scotti says.

Loligo fetches five times the money per pound as illex. This past year, Roebuck says, the price of loligo for fishermen rose 15 percent, to \$1.20 a pound.

"It's not a big bonanza of money," Roebuck says. "But we're making money on it."

Squid requires thorough cleaning. And because of Rhode Island's location in the middle of squid waters and its processing facilities, most of the East Coast cleaning occurs here.

"The primary processing of loligo squid in the Northeast is occurring in Rhode Island," Scotti says.

In the 1980s, 15 percent of the business at Seafreeze was squid, Goodwin says. Since then, the business has expanded three times and now stores 10,000 palettes, each accommodating one ton of seafood. The

facility is so big it takes boats with 700,000 pounds of cargo and distributes much of it by refrigerated railcars at its own loading dock. Squid is now 50 percent of Sea-freeze's business.

"One of the nice things about squid is it has a high reproduction rate," Goodwin says. "So it's a renewable resource. A cod could be compared to cutting an old-growth forest. Squid would be closer to mowing your lawn."

Supply and demand makes its mark. While squid is Rhode Island's biggest catch, it's not its most lucrative. Lobster is.

Squid had six times the volume of lobster last year in Rhode Island, but both brought the same revenue: \$12.4 million.

Rhode Island's squid dominance was established decades ago when squid, as Scotti says, was "valueless," and Rhode Island received almost as many federal commercial squid fishing permits as much larger states: New Jersey, 83; New York, 56; and Rhode Island, 52.

"Most permits are in a moratorium state," Roebuck says. "If you want one, you have to buy one from someone who has one."

As federal restrictions on other fish became stricter, Roebuck says, squid, which is comparatively unrestricted, became the "default" catch.

"There has been a shift in species because of the regulations," Roebuck says.

"Squid is one of the few species we can catch without ridiculously low trip limits," Goodwin says.

One of the most curious aspects of Rhode Island's squid dominance is its squid-management impotence. Rhode Island is a member of the New England Fishery Management Council, which manages ground fish: haddock, cod, flounder, etc. The Mid Atlantic Fishery Management Council manages, among other species, squid.

"Even though Rhode Island has half the squid, we have no seat in the management process," Goodwin says. "That's troubling for us."

The trouble goes both ways. Mid-Atlantic states have no say in the management of ground fish, which is New England's job.

To take the federal fishing management system to the absurd, Goodwin points to Pennsylvania. Except for an estuary, the state has no access to the Atlantic Ocean and no squid fishing. Yet it has a voice in squid management; but Rhode Island doesn't.

"It's pretty archaic," Goodwin says.

So now the Rhode Island squid secret is out, assuming people outside Rhode Island know where Point Judith is. Perhaps there might be a mission to promote that. The Cornell study found 72 percent of Rhode Island commercial fishermen would welcome a state seafood marketing campaign.

Parker, who commissioned the Rhode Island fish industry study, knows about squid's place in the state. She went to Washington last month with two fishermen to brief a congressional committee about the study. On the way back, they shared a meal in a restaurant in Ronald Reagan National Airport.

"On the menu was 'Point Judith squid,'" Parker said. "I said to the fishermen, 'I guess we'll get the squid.'" broucke@providencejournal.com

(401) 277-7267



Fishing vessels in dock at the port of Galilee, in Narragansett, where squid is one of the major catches. It comes into Rhode Island by the millions of pounds.



**THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / JOHN FREIDAH**

Crew members of the Rhonda Denise offload some 14,000 pounds of squid at Handrigan Seafood in Galilee.

---

## Top 10 seafood landings (by pounds)

In 2010, more pounds of squid — illex for bait and loligo for dining — were brought ashore in Rhode Island than any other seafood.

Squid (Illex)	12,423,611	16%
Atlantic herring	8,279,065	11%
Little skate	7,616,857	10%
Squid (Loligo)	7,446,094	10%
Mackerel	4,355,810	6%
Scup	4,300,039	6%
Skates (unclassified)	3,428,067	4%
Hake	3,406,119	4%
Lobster	2,927,790	4%
Jonah crab	2,909,247	4%

Source: R.I. Division of Fish & Wildlife

---

## Top 10 seafood landings (by value)

In 2010, the values of the state's squid and lobster catches were about equal, even though the volume of squid was six times greater than the volume of lobster.

Lobster	\$12,394,242	21%
Squid (Loligo)	\$7,512,831	12%
Summer flounder	\$5,560,038	9%
Squid (Illex)	\$5,159,934	9%
Quahog	\$3,280,986	5%
Goosefish	\$2,980,052	5%
Scup	\$2,837,339	5%
Sea scallop	\$2,153,711	4%
Hake	\$1,954,207	3%
Mackerel	\$1,885,702	3%

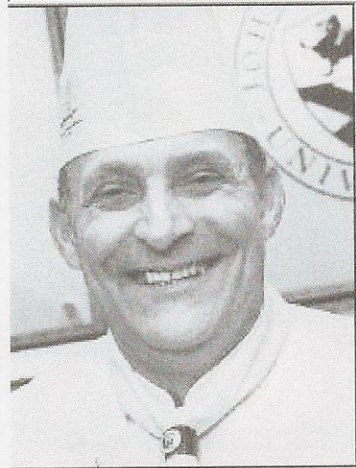
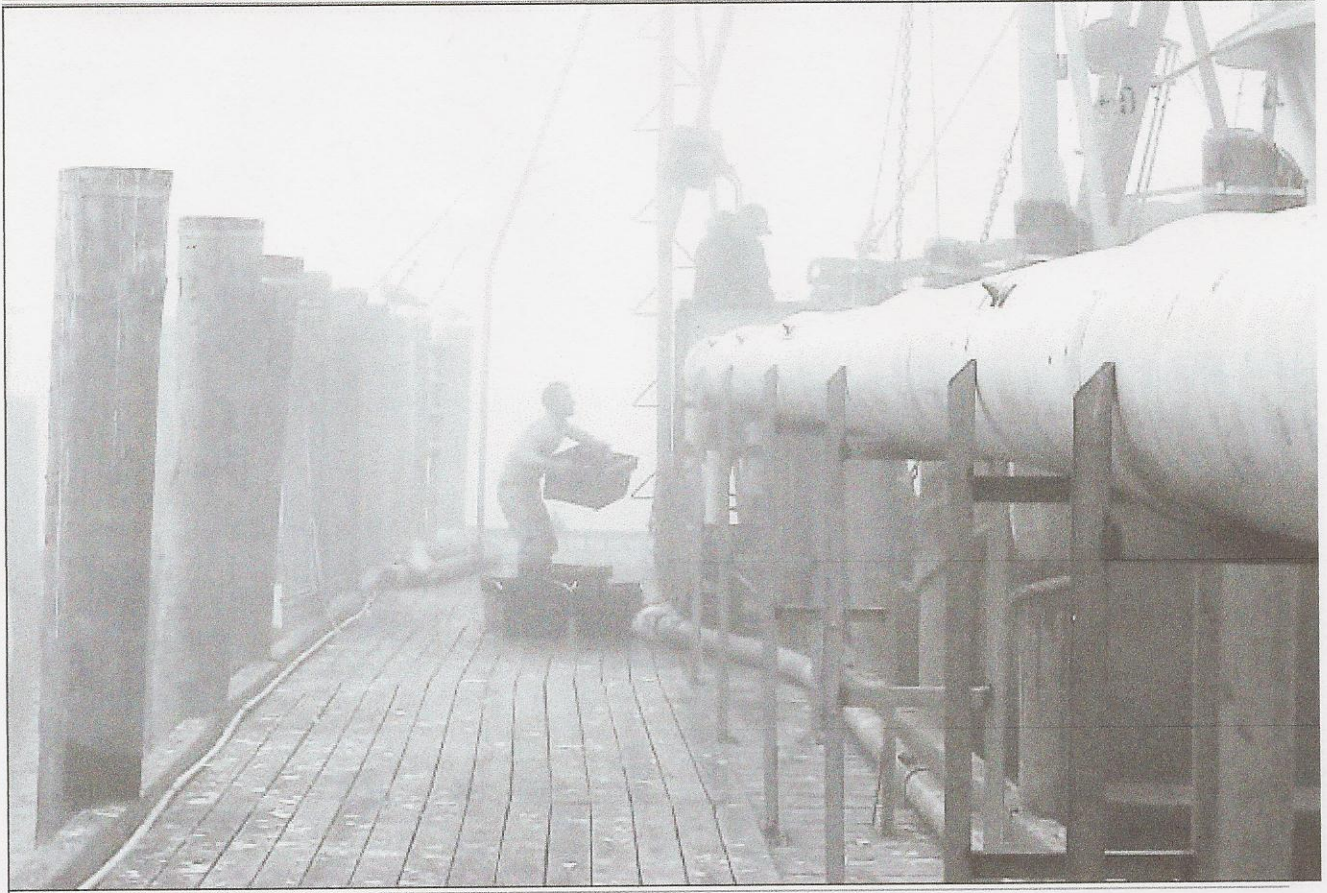
Source: R.I. Division of Fish & Wildlife



***THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / JOHN FREIDAH***

Jamie McCavanagh, above, Capt. Corey Harris, below, and the crew of the Rhonda Denise offload squid at Handrigan Seafood in Galilee. Rhode Island is a leader in processing, as well as catching, squid.

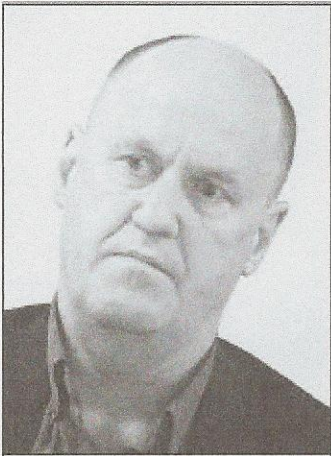






**MCT**

Squid is grilled on skewers. In Asia, South America and Europe, says Frank Terranova, of Johnson & Wales University, people eat squid filleted, stuffed and fried, and in sauces and in soups.







**KRT**

Calamari, fried so it looks like onion rings, is how most Americans consume squid. But the rest of the world consumes squid many other ways, and in far greater volume.