

Chile battling to save a favorite clam

October 30 2017, by Giovanna Fleitas



A fisherman shows saltwater clams known as 'machas' (*Mesodesma Donacium*) after collecting them from the shore at a beach in La Serena, about 400 km north of Santiago, on September 5, 2017. In August this year, Chile set a five-year capture ban on the macha clam in much of the country to stop its overexploitation. The mollusk is one of the star dishes of the local cuisine

Long one of the country's favorite seafoods, Chile's macha clam has become a victim of its own popularity, with over-exploitation forcing authorities to ban clam fishing in all but a few areas to help stocks recover.

From humble seaside taverns to exclusive Santiago restaurants, machas have long been a mainstay of the menu in seafood-loving Chile.

Found in the surf-swept sandbanks along the coasts of Chile and southern Peru, the macha is fished in the traditional way by men and women who brave icy waves and riptides to wrest their prize from the sea.

But since August, fishing for machas has been banned in the central regions of Valparaiso, O'Higgins and El Maule after industrial-scale extraction has all but destroyed stocks.

The future for the clam lies further north, where the fishing community in La Serena is held up as an example of a sustainable way forward after strict fishery management plans were put in place to help stocks recover.

"The machas have almost disappeared in Chile, except in this preservation area, where stocks have been taken care of for years," said Franklin Zepada, president of the San Pedro Fisherman's union in La Serena.

On nearby Coquimbo Bay, Zepada says the conservation programme and a quota system for catches has secured the livelihood of 175 local macha fishers, including 50 women.

A quota system of around 1,000 tons a season has bolstered prices, and the fishing community ensures that any clam less than six centimeters in size is returned to the sea to mature.



A fisherman walks out of the water after collecting saltwater clams known as 'machas' (*Mesodesma Donacium*) from the shore at a beach in La Serena, about 400 km north of Santiago, on September 5, 2017. In August this year, Chile set a five-year capture ban on the macha clam in much of the country to stop its overexploitation. The mollusk is one of the star dishes of the local cuisine

Buried in the Sand

Part of the clam's raw appeal for consumers is the gritty fight to claim the bivalve from an icy Pacific in the austral winter.

The technique is old and rustic.

It's a heart and soul, hands-and-feet kind of fishing. No rods, no nets, just pure hand-to-hand combat with ripping current and surf.

In San Pedro, groups of men and women "macheras" defy wind and tide

to wade thigh deep into the icy seas of the austral winter, feeling for the bump of the shellfish in the sand with their bare feet, before reaching down and grappling under the water for the reclusive clam.

Being a good "machero" is all about experience.

"The macha fisherman must be in good physical shape to put up with that. He has to put on 20 pounds of lead to anchor himself to the sand and resist the waves so that the sea doesn't move him around," said Zepeda.

"I'm 53 and since the age of 10 I've been catching machas. It's dedication that makes everyone a good worker," said Luis Castillo, before throwing the catch of the day on the beach on Coquimbo Bay.

Once out of the water, the machas are sent to a production center managed by the fisherman's cooperative, to be sorted for size and shipped to restaurants and stores.



A fisherman walks out of the water after collecting saltwater clams known as

'machas' (Mesodesma Donacium) from the shore at a beach in La Serena, about 400 km north of Santiago, on September 5, 2017. In August this year, Chile set a five-year capture ban on the macha clam in much of the country to stop its overexploitation. The mollusk is one of the star dishes of the local cuisine

Clams with cheese

A popular seafood dish in Chile is machas served baked in the half-shell with a coating of melted Parmesan cheese, along with a drizzle of white wine and lemon.

Invented by who else but an Italian immigrant, "Machas a la Parmesana" has become a classic of Chilean cuisine.

Conservationists warn that stocks will have to be carefully managed if such delicacies are to survive, however.

Found only on a stretch of Pacific coastline from southern Peru down to the Chilean island of Chiloé, the macha was almost wiped out by a devastating El Niño, which increased the temperature of the Pacific, in 1997 and 1998.

It recovered sufficiently in the following years to supply both the domestic and export market, but according to marine biologist Jaime Augusto, overfishing is a much more persistent foe than El Niño.

"If there continues to be a lot of fishing activity on the coast, not only will we lose the machas, but probably other species as well," he told AFP.

Augusto, who works on the San Pedro macha management plan, said

unregulated macha fishing continues to be a problem because the ban is difficult to implement along such a lengthy stretch of coastline.

He said managers are trying to keep records of traditional macheros so that if and when stocks recover they will be the ones who benefit.

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