

Price Points: Three takes on traditional clam chowder

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By Alexandra Hall

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Bob's Clam Hut is dedicated to making sure the ratio of potatoes to clams is the same in every cup of chowder. *Photo courtesy of Bob's Clam Hut*

Clam chowder and its fans run the gamut in terms of preferred thickness and ingredients, but in Maine, there is a standard.

Most chefs and chowder aficionados here concur that the ideal texture is silkier, dairy-based and devoid of any added thickeners, so that the deep flavors of fresh seafood, buttery onion and salty bacon shine through.

Bucking this tradition was once so sacrilege that, after New York's booming Italian population popularized the red or Manhattan style, a Maine legislator in 1939 tried to pass a law that would have made adding tomatoes to chowder illegal.

Even though it's not technically a crime to cook, Manhattan clam chowder is still hard to come by in Maine. There are variations, in terms of types of seafood and use of herbs, but these three are sure to please any true chowder lover, on any budget.

Cheap: Bob's Clam Hut

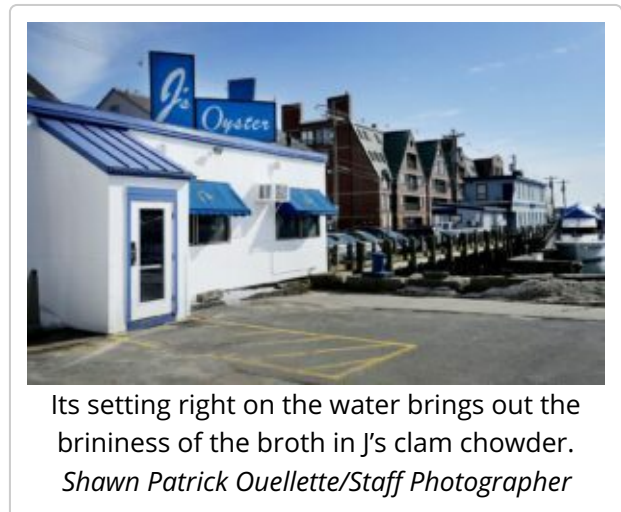
The motto at Bob's Clam Hut is "every chowder perfect," meaning it's not only important that the recipe is standardized but that the scooping is as well, making sure the ratio of clams to potatoes is the same every time. Now, that extends beyond the original Kittery location, opened in 1986, to the sleek Portland shack that started serving up fried seafood and the signature soup last year. The inexpensive (\$5.95 for a cup, \$7.95 for a bowl) classic is a milk-based chowder that's gluten- and thickener-free, and teeming with fresh, local minced clams. Rumor has it that Worcestershire sauce is the secret ingredient.

WHERE: 315 Route 1, Kittery; 111 Cumberland Ave., Portland

HOURS: Kittery – 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday; Portland – 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday, Monday and Thursday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Moderate: J's Oyster

J's puts a spotlight on the freshest seafood it can find, served without fanfare. And the chowder (\$7.50, \$9.50) embodies that mission. It comes steaming hot, with a briny yet sweetly creamy broth and an abundance of fresh, meaty clam chunks. Part of the fun, of course, is eating something so redolent of the sea, right on the sea; J's perch right on the pier simply makes the whole experience complete.



WHERE: 5 Portland Pier, Portland

HOURS: 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 a.m. Monday through Saturday, noon to midnight Sunday

INFO: (207) 772-4828; jsoysterportland.com; @JsOysterPortlandMaineWaterfront on Facebook

Expensive: Eventide Oyster Co.

Eventide considers itself a revival of the great American oyster bar – luxurious but laid-back, respectful of tradition but with a splash of modernity. The chowder (\$12) embodies all of that. It's classic in that it's unthickened and relies on dairy and clam juice. Yet it's a departure in its inclusion of sea vegetables like kombu (kelp) and nori. Every clam is fresh from the sea – a combination of quahogs from Maine and Massachusetts, and Maine steamers. Then there's the pork belly that stands in as the salty, meaty component. It's all finished

with ground black pepper, chives and dots of chive oil that add a pop of bright green.

WHERE: 86 Middle St., Portland

HOURS: 11 a.m. to midnight daily

INFO: (207) 774-8538; eventideoysterco.com; @eventideoysterco on Facebook; @eventideoysterco on Instagram; @eventideoyster on Twitter

Alexandra Hall is a longtime New England lifestyle writer who recently moved to Maine.

Comments are not available on this story.



Eventide breaks tradition by adding kelp and nori to its clam chowder. *Photo courtesy of Big Tree Hospitality*