

REGIONAL RECIPES, PERSONAL PORTRAITS

Astoria native's maiden cookbook, 'Dig, Shuck, Shake,' picking up steam

By LAURA CHERAU
FOR COAST WEEKEND

John Nelson, an Astoria native, has just put out his first cookbook “Dig (a clam), Shuck (an oyster), Shake (a crab): Fish and Seafood Recipes from the Pacific Northwest.”

The book is a charming, user-friendly, illustrated guide to eating from the ocean. It's packed with lively anecdotes from Nelson's childhood in Ilwaco, and his disarming style, coupled with handy illustrations, makes even complicated recipes — such as “poached Petrale sole with shrimp filling” or “sturgeon and dumplings” — a cinch.

With stories he began writing down in 2006, the book was finally published in March 2017. In August, Nelson gave a reading at Powell's Books in Portland.

“I had no idea it would take off like it did. It was the little book that could,” Nelson said. “It just chugged and chugged along.”

The book starts with straightforward instructions, a how-to of sorts — how to loin a tuna or fillet a salmon, for example, or how to dig and clean a razor clam. Which makes it, in my opinion, geographically necessary for the local kitchen and somewhat indispensable.

Of course you can find anything online now, but how nice to have these words of reason at your fin-

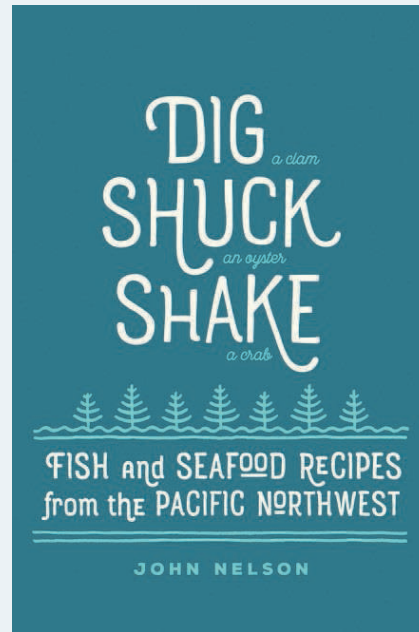


John Nelson, author of “Dig, Shuck, Shake”

gertips when the need arises. What emerges is a picture of the fishing culture and families unique to this part of the world.

Recently, Nelson was living in central Oregon, outside of Bend, where he helped start up the Brasada Ranch golf resort and began contributing his food knowledge to local and national cable and radio cooking shows. He's owned several restaurants and worked as an executive chef and instructor at the Cascade Culinary Institute.

Nelson recently relocated with his family to Pacific City. He is thrilled to return to the coast and has been spending time raking, happily, for clams.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

The Northwest 'melting pot'

Asked about his family's reaction to the book, given that so much of their history is presented there, Nelson said they were pleasantly surprised. “It'll be in our family and something for our kids to enjoy and draw upon in the future, which is important to me.”

Several stories revolve around Nelson's mother and stepfather.

His mother, Joanne Friberg Leech, was the owner of Sanctuary in Chinook for many years. There, mother and son began cooking together.

“He really took to it,” she

remembered. “John and I cooked together for seven years, and it was wonderful.”

By virtue of Nelson growing up locally, he was exposed to “farms and fishermen, both the land and the sea, and his recipes reflect that,” she said.


Nelson's step-father, Geno Leech — a fisher-poet who contributed a poem to the book's frontispiece — said his stepson was “lucky he grew up when he did. A lot of this information is going by the wayside.”

Leech admitted that, while it's true you can learn how to shake a crab on Google, “it's nice to have something real. It's nice to tell a little story to get there.”

The gastronomic cultures represented in the recipes of “Dig, Shuck, Shake” are varied. Scandinavia, Asia, Germany, South America and other locales suggest their flavors in the book. Nelson said these cultures presented themselves naturally during his upbringing.

“The Pacific Northwest really is a melting pot, and I'm not sure how much people really realize that,” Nelson said. “You can't grow up here and have blinders on and have one flavor profile. It's just not accurate.”

Perhaps that approach, he said, is why the book “seems to be doing well in England, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Japan.”

If you are interested in purchasing “Dig, Shuck, Shake,” it can be found at Lucy's Books in Astoria and Cloud & Leaf Bookstore in Manzanita. 

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