

Turning a Dream into a Career: the Clambake Man of New York City

By Margot Susca

At the age of 8, Jim Sanford attended his first clambake at Lake Sunnapee in New Hampshire. Piles of seaweed, used to give the fresh shellfish their taste, stood high next to holes dug in the ground where the clams cooked, permeating the inland site with the smell of the sea.

"I loved it," said Sanford, owner of the Catered Clambake, at 205 W. 95th St., near Amsterdam Avenue. "I always knew I would make a career in food service."

Since 1980, Sanford has been using his own cooking technology to bring the briny feast to urban denizens. He is the only caterer in Manhattan who specializes in inland clambakes, although he learned the craft on the beach.

In 1969, after three wild days spent at Woodstock, Sanford found himself hosting clambakes on Martha's Vineyard, where he was living in a tent for \$1 a day. His idea was to bring people together with good food. The money--\$7 per person that first summer--was never really that important.

"If I made \$100 back in 1970 I was so happy," said Sanford, recalling that he worked at a local bakery on summer mornings to support his clambake habit.

In the winters, Sanford, a native New Yorker from suburban Mt. Vernon, worked for caterers in Manhattan doing odd jobs. As he grew older, he trained in French cuisine at some of the city's most familiar and prestigious kitchens, working at various times as a saucier at the Four Seasons, a cook at the Plaza Hotel, and a chef at the Trattoria de Alfredo in Greenwich Village.

But all the while, Sanford, a hippy at heart who graduated from Dartmouth College in 1959, dreamed of making a business of the clambake craft he fell in love with as a child. The challenge, working in and around New York City, was finding the space to work in.

A traditional clambake is labor intensive. First, dig a hole in the ground, fill it with flat rocks that have been heated over a fire for five hours. Next, throw wet seaweed and rockweed, which has small pockets of salt water that burst providing flavor, on the fire. Then, layer food and more seaweed.



PHOTO: Jim Sanford
Lobster served at one of Jim Sanford's clambakes

In 1980, Sanford developed an urban, portable clambake, and his childhood dream came true. Sanford also uses seaweed, which he has specially shipped from Maine, but he has designed a system of small stoves and stainless steel boxes that enable him to cook clambakes for 100 people in the space needed to park a car.

"In 1980, I made \$15,000 doing 20 parties. I haven't worked in the winter since," Sanford said. "I'm probably not making as much money as other Ivy League graduates because I only work five months a year but I'm doing what I love."

Sanford has brought clambakes to thousands of people, from roof decks in Manhattan to beach front bungalows in the Rockaways. He will travel 100 miles outside of New York City to cater parties.

For \$ a person, the feast includes lobsters, dozens of Maine steamers, locally grown corn on the cob, potatoes, barbecued chicken, and linguica, a zesty Portuguese sausage. Sanford said he includes linguica on the menu to pay homage to the history of his craft, noting that men of Portuguese descent sailed most fishing vessels off the coast of New England and ate the sausage alongside harvested clams.

The history of the clambake is important to Sanford. Native American tribes on Martha's Vineyard and coastal regions of New England were baking clams on the beach long before the Pilgrims landed, he said.

History aside, this is no longer a hobby for him.

"Although it's informal it's done in a professional way, we take a lot of pride in what we do," he said.

Clients say Sanford's clambakes are events to look forward to, ones that bring people together to celebrate and, of course, to eat. Gail Goglia, manager of special events for the New York City Police Foundation, has hired Sanford for seven years to cater the foundation's annual party for 400 supporters and cannot imagine hiring any one else.

"He does everything so authentically," Goglia said. "He's the spirit behind it."

Sanford, who at 65 looks like he could run a marathon in under five hours, said he does between 50 and 60 parties a summer, half repeat customers and a third generated by word of mouth. He has catered weddings, tailgate parties at Giants Stadium, patio gatherings overlooking Central Park, and basketball parties in Westchester backyards.

All this is done using his own equipment and bringing the taste of the beach to somewhere that might otherwise have to go without it.

"I have a friend who is a therapist and he jokes that I help people more than he does," Sanford said. "I just fill their bellies with good food."