

taste}

# Аннннн, АВАЛОНЕ!

Davenport's underwater farm



Tom Ebert on the beach at Davenport Landing, the home of American Abalone Farms.

By Ann Parker

**The buttery taste and delicate texture of abalone make it a rare and captivating culinary treasure.**

Tom Ebert is a veritable Cupid in the gastropod world. Since 1988, he has helped literally millions of abalone eggs find their match. Considering that one mature female red abalone can produce from 10,000 to 10 million eggs at a time, the numbers mount up quickly.

Ebert's business, American Abalone Farms, was based at Long Marine Lab in Santa Cruz before he moved it a mile north of Davenport in 1994. At that shoreline location, where the previous tenant cultivated salmon and trout, former fishponds were transformed into seawater abalone tanks — nearly 2,500 of them. Shielded in large, open-sided sheds, each tank contains up to 500

abalone, ranging in size from almost microscopic to market-sized, 4-inch mollusks. Machinery thrums nearby, running day and night to power seawater pumps pulling in ocean water. They circulate some 2,500 gallons per minute, constantly diverting saltwater through the abalone tanks and out again.

"This is our location's big attraction," Ebert says.

To anyone who hasn't discovered the considerable edible joys of abalone, the appeal may seem a bit puzzling. After all, they're basically just giant marine snails. Yet their beautifully iridescent shells and buttery, delicate taste and texture have captivated coastal peoples for centuries. There are about 80 species worldwide, but the red-shelled abalone Ebert raises prefer chilly waters; in North America they're found only on the West Coast from Oregon to Baja. The local red algae they feed upon turns their shells red.

Millions of pounds of abalone have been harvested in California over the decades, including a record 5.4 million pounds in 1957 — but the supply wasn't as endless as it

seemed. Excessive harvesting, coupled with natural forces such as the warming effects of El Niño, drastically reduced the abalone population. In 1997, California Fish and Game stopped all commercial abalone fishing and severely restricted sport harvesting. Only a handful of carefully monitored facilities have been allowed to raise and sell abalone since then. Those companies, including American Abalone Farms with its nine full-time staff members, represent the future of the U.S. commercial abalone industry.

China and Japan once accounted for nearly 90 percent of his business, notes Ebert. "But about three years ago our marketing shifted and now 100 percent of our abalone is sold and shipped within the U.S. and Canada."

Almost all of Ebert's abalone is sold to wholesalers and restaurants, but a small percentage is made available to the rest of us every Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., when the abalone farm opens its doors to the public. Ebert's parents display abalone shell and pearl jewelry to the dozens of people who visit weekly. His father, Earl, is a retired marine biologist and abalone specialist who worked with the California Department of Fish and Game for more than three decades. His mother, Peggy, has graded thousands of abalone pearls through the years.

Inside the packing room, live abalone is displayed by size and price. Styrofoam coolers are stacked nearby, waiting to be packed. The live abalone, given a blast of pure oxygen before being sealed with ice packs in a padded cooler, will survive up to 48 hours. Prices for





American Abalone Farms is a maze of sea water pipes and tanks housing the growing abalone.

the live abalone — popular among Chinese visitors — start at \$5, but most locals prefer the delicacy cleaned, tenderized, and ready to cook.

"By far what local people buy most is our four-pack of abalone steaks," Ebert says. The vacuum-sealed packs go for \$20.

Once tasted, abalone can never be forgotten. And thanks to aquacultural companies like American Abalone Farms, this seductive shellfish can be enjoyed while wild varieties are allowed to renew in the ocean.

"We still can't grow abalone as well as Mother Nature," says Tom Ebert. "But we're closing in on the process." ♦

#### IF YOU GO

##### American Abalone Farms

**What:** Live and frozen abalone available directly to the public

**Where:** 245 Davenport Landing Rd., Davenport

**When:** Saturdays only, 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

**Cost:** Live abalone priced by size; frozen prepared steaks \$20 per pack of four

**Details:** [www.americanabalone.net](http://www.americanabalone.net)

#### Awesomely Edible Abalone

Don't salt or over-tenderize the meat. Above all, don't overcook — whether pan-frying, baking or steaming your precious abalone. Here is a simple pan-fry recipe:

1. Heat butter or oil (or a blend) in a heavy skillet; add minced garlic.
2. Bring to high heat without burning garlic.
3. Dip prepared abalone into egg beaten with salt and pepper.
4. Dredge abalone in fine bread-crumbs.
5. Cook approximately 30 seconds on each side.

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