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Author(s): lynne m. olver

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The Truth about Clams Casino

EVERYONE KNOWS THAT Julius Keller invented Clams Casino at New York City's Narragansett Pier in 1917 to please the wealthy, hungry, demanding matron Mrs. Paran Stevens, right? After all, that's what Julius Keller recounts in his 1939 autobiography, *Inns and Outs*, and his story has been repeated in standard reference books and popular Web sites ever since. End of story? Not quite.

Throughout history, claims for how new dishes were introduced range from the reasonably plausible to the absolutely impossible. Generally, most new dishes are not invented; they evolve. Timing and opportunity are key. Food history is replete with honored legends, creative stories, slightly twisted truths, unsupported claims, leaps of faith, and outright lies. There is even a term for the phenomenon of accepted fiction over documented fact: fakelore. To counteract such false facts, it is useful to re-examine primary documents and revise popularly accepted facts, and this is what I propose to do here with the story surrounding the invention of Clams Casino.

Let us begin with Mr. Keller's own words:

When [Louis] Sherry opened the Casino at Narragansett Pier and established it as a deluxe rendezvous for fashion, I learned that he was seeking a man for a ranking position on his waiting staff. I presented myself as an applicant...and he took me on. At the Casino I found there were practically no social gradations. At least ninety-odd percent of the guests were from the same caste—the top one; which meant, of course, that all were familiar faces to me. The summer residents of Newport, only a short distance away by water, came to the Casino to bathe in the surf and to eat the delicious food served in the dining room...At luncheon and dinner the restaurant was thronged with groups of people known to each other. The atmosphere was so much like that of a private club that the intrusion of even fabulously wealthy social climbers was resented...It was at Narragansett that Mrs. Paran Stevens christened me the Mighty Atom. She was the ruler of her set, a woman of strong will and biting speech...On an order she had left for luncheon one day she had included soft clams, but had neglected to mention how she wanted them served. Seizing the opportunity, I pre-

pared a dish which I had tried on my own cultivated palate and found eminently satisfactory. For each person in her party I had a service of eight clams prepared. I used soft clams of the larger size, which I had removed from their shells with the strings cut off so that only the bellies remained. These were placed on half-shells, and on each went a small quantity of butter mixed with paprika, salt, pepper, and chopped shallots, which have a mild garlic-like taste. Small strips of bacon atop the clam bellies completed the concoction, and after baking for ten minutes in the oven it was ready for consumption. When Mrs. Stevens and her guests had assembled I had a waiter take it to her table and explained to her that as she had neglected to indicate the kind of soft clams she desired I had been bold enough to prepare a dish of my own conception. She tasted it and expressed her delight, as did her guests, all genuine gourmets. "What do you call it, Jules?" she inquired. "It has no name, Mrs. Stevens; but we shall call it clams casino in honor of this restaurant." Not only were clams casino destined to win an extensive following, but my introduction of them to the socially ultra Mrs. Stevens put me in her good graces for the remainder of the time I spent at Narragansett. Every restaurant I was to conduct in later years has made a specialty of clams casino.¹

Keller's story seems completely plausible—except for a few conflicting facts. First of all, the Narragansett Pier Casino was located not in New York City but in Kingston, Rhode Island, near Newport. And it was never actually owned by Louis Sherry. Contemporary newspaper accounts confirm that Sherry assumed charge of the casino's restaurant in the 1880s;² and in 1886 he was served papers for violating local prohibition laws.³ Around 1892 he established his own restaurant, which was hailed as a rival to the venerable Casino:

The unsurpassed location of Narragansett Pier as a watering-place of unexceptional advantages has attracted visitors here from all parts of the world, and made it a famous summer resort and a worthy rival of Newport. Situated at the head of the Narragansett Bay, it faces the broad Atlantic, and of its magnificent stretch of sandy beach the breakers roll in with all the grandeur and sublimity that the most vivid imagination could conjure, and in their soothing roar the hum



of business activity and the city's bustle is forgotten, and tired brains are lulled into the repose that brings them much needed rest with the same benefits as a trip across the ocean. Within a comparatively few years this noted resort has sprung into prosperity...and to-day boasts about twenty magnificent hotels accommodating each from fifty to two hundred guests...The Casino is on the plan of that of Newport, and a magnificent orchestra is always in attendance. Balls, amateur theatricals, concerts, etc., are held here which are of the highest order of merit, and which are largely attended at all times by the summer population which comprises the most select families and visitors from both continents. Besides this every amusement is provided that both sexes can indulge in, such as tennis tournaments, bowling, billiards, etc.; and with the addition of Sherry's this season, who [*sic*] is to form a rival to the Casino, the future of Narragansett Pier will not be out shone by any of its rivals on the coast...⁴

We can find no print evidence confirming that Julius Keller was ever employed at the Casino by Louis Sherry or anyone else. Perhaps Keller was referring to Sherry's new establishment, without specifically naming it, in his memoirs? In any case, who was this mythologizing Julius Keller? His life represents a classic American immigrant success story, as his obituary confirms:

Julius Keller, Proprietor of Canoe Place Inn, Hampton Bays, L.I. who was well known as a New York restaurateur for many years, died in Southampton Hospital today. His age was 81. Born in Switzerland, Mr. Keller came to this country at the age of 16, started as a waiter and rose to be the owner of Maxim's and other places that are now legendary. In 1939 he wrote a book, "Inns and Outs," which was published by Putnam's. ...[One] of Mr. Keller's stories concerned the days when he

had no money. He went on the bread line which Julius Fleischman operated near Grace Church and received a square meal. Later, when he had "made his pile," and was about to go to Europe, he met Mr. Fleischman, and was his host at dinner, but never mentioned the bread line incident...In 1920, when he was president and treasurer of Maxim's, then at 108 West Thirty-eighth Street, Mr. Keller was found guilty of violating the prohibition law and sentenced to jail. Before he began serving the term, however, the sentence was reversed. He was known to many as "the father of cafe society," and also was reputed to have been one of the first to introduce the gigolo, or male dancing partner, to this country. One of his original male dancing partners, he said in his book, was the late Rudolph Valentino...⁵

We admire Mr. Keller's accomplishments and do not seek to dispute his claims entirely. To be fair, his autobiography does not date the exchange he had with Mrs. Stevens. If dishes do, indeed, evolve, could Clams Casino have been a brilliant, impromptu twist on an existing popular recipe?

In fact, this dish might have been known (to some) prior to Keller's supposed 1917 "invention,"⁶ as suggested by a 1916 reference to "Clams Casino" in the *Washington Post*:

Harvey's Seafood Platter Today, 12 to 3, 6 to 8:30, .50 cents. Clams Casino, Crab Flakes Newburgh, Fried Oysters, Potato Salad and Slaw. Other seasonable delicacies. 11th and Pa. Ave.⁷

Without a recipe we cannot be absolutely sure whether the Clams Casino served at Harvey's was the same dish as that created by Keller. Does it matter? Probably not. Keller was obviously a savvy promoter who knew how to capitalize on a popular trend. And for that alone he should be given credit.

Clams Casino Recipes, More or Less

My research suggests that Clams Casino may have been inspired by popular oyster recipes of the era, which were served to the same clientele. What follows is a sampling of recipes that are remarkably similar to the recipe Julius Keller claims to have invented.

Scalloped Oysters in Shells [1883]

They may be served cooked in their shells, or in silver scallop shells, when they present a better appearance than when cooked and served all in one dish.

If cooked in an oyster or clam shell, one large, or two or three little oysters are placed in it, with a few drips of the oyster liquor. It is sprinkled with pepper and salt, and cracker or bread crumbs. Little pieces of butter are placed over the top. When all are ready, they are put into the oven. When they are plump and hot, they are done. Brown the tops with a salamander or with a red-hot kitchen shovel.

If they are cooked in the silver scallop shells, which are larger, several oysters are served in the one shell; one or two are put in, peppered, salted, strewed with cracker-crumbs and small pieces of butter; then more layers, until the shell is full, or until enough are used for one person. Moisten them with the oyster-juice, and strew little pieces of butter over the top. They are merely kept in the oven until they are thoroughly hot, then browned with a salamander. Serve one shell for each person at table, placed on a small plate. The oysters may be bearded or not.⁸

Soft-Shell Clams, Scallops [1886]

Purchase a dozen large soft clams in the shell and three dozen opened clams. Ask the dealer to open the first dozen, care being used not to injure the shells, which are to be used in cooking the clams. Clean the shells well and put two soft clams on each half shell; add to each a dash of white pepper and a half a teaspoonful of minced celery. Cut a slice of fat bacon into the smallest dice, add four of these to each shell, strew over the top a thin layer of cracker dust; place a pat of table butter on top, and bake in the oven until brown. They are delightful when properly prepared.⁹

Saratoga Clams [1901]

One dozen large clams placed in a pan in the oven until opened; take from shell and chop fine; use about one-third as much bread crumbs as you have chopped clams; season with butter and pepper, and moisten with clam broth; fill the half shells; sprinkle top of each with bread crumbs and bits of butter; bake twenty minutes until of nice brown, and serve hot in the shells.


—Mrs. Ann Parsons.¹⁰

Soft Clams, Ancient Style [1908]

Take a dozen nice, large, soft clams, wash them well and open them, keeping only one part of the shell with the clam. Put a piece of butter on each clam and plenty of Paprika pepper and a little strip of raw bacon. Put the clams on a roasting pan, which place in a hot oven for about ten minutes and serve it on the pan in which the clams have been cooked.¹¹

Soft Shell Clams Casino [1939]

48 soft shell Clams, medium size
 3 slices bacon, diced
 ¼ cup browned bread crumbs
 1 tablespoon butter
 1 teaspoon worcestershire sauce
 Salt, pepper

Scrub the clams, pick them over carefully, steam them open, and shell. Cut away the hard part, using soft parts only. Select sufficient perfect single shells to serve a plate of 8 to each person; and then fill these shells with the soft parts of two clams, not one. On top of each shell place pieces of diced bacon, some bread crumbs and a dot of butter, also a bit of the worcestershire, salt and pepper. Bake until they are browned, and serve hot, with a relish.¹² 

NOTES

1. Julius Keller, *Inns and Outs*, edited by James R. Crowell (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1939), 64–66.
2. "At Narragansett Pier," *New York Times*, 26 June 1887, 16.
3. "Enforcing Prohibition: The Narragansett Pier Casino Cases in Court," *New York Times*, 17 August 1886, 1.
4. *Industries and Wealth of the Principal Points in Rhode Island: being city of Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, Woonsocket, Newport, Narragansett Pier, Bristol and Westerly* (New York: A.F. Parsons, 1892), 269–270.
5. "Keller, The Owner of Canoe Place Inn," *New York Times*, 27 February 1945, 19.
6. The year 1917 is cited in standard food history texts. See, for example, *The Encyclopedia of American Food & Drink*, which states "Clams Casino...The recipe originated at the Casino at Narragansett Pier in New York City around 1917" (John F. Mariani, *The Encyclopedia of American Food & Drink* [New York: Lebhar-Friedman, 1999], 86); and *The American Century Cookbook: The Most Popular Recipes of the 20th Century*: "Clams Casino...A New York restaurant recipe, specifically one dreamed up at the Casino at Narragansett Pier in 1917..." (Jean Anderson, *The American Century Cookbook: The Most Popular Recipes of the 20th Century* [New York: Clarkson Potter, 1999], 12).
7. "City Bulletins," *Washington Post*, 18 September 1916, 10.
8. Mary F. Henderson, *Practical Cooking and Dinner Giving* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883), 114.
9. Thomas J. Murrey, *The Book of Entrees* (New York: White, Stokes & Allen, 1889), 19–20.
10. *Cook Book, Compiled by the Ladies' Village Improvement Society of East Hampton Long Island* (Winsted, CT: Dowd Printing, 1901), 13.
11. Oscar Tschirky, *The Cook Book by "Oscar" of the Waldorf* (Chicago: Saalfeld Publishing, 1908), 92.
12. J. George Frederick and Jean Joyce, *Long Island Seafood Cook Book* (New York: Bourse Publishers, 1939), 107–108.