

A LITTLE LARCENY



have a problem with freezers. They are wonderful if buying in bulk and so on, but having a year-round supply of your favourite fruit, veges, meat or seafood makes them somehow less special;. The old song goes “for every thing there is a season” and it’s spot on. Over the years I’ve looked forward to the first Gala apples, to blackberries, to mushrooms when they litter the paddocks, to a host of other seasonal foods.

In particular, toheroa, those delicious giant bivalves from the west coast of Northland. Fattened on gale-driven Tasman Sea plankton, they can grow up to six inches long. Minced and mixed into a batter and fried (in fat) into fritters, they are a meal worthy of royalty. Eaten on slabs of fresh buttered bread with lashings of salt, they are more than a match for another favourite, whitebait fritters. I’m salivating just thinking about them.

You don’t just buy toheroa and cook them. You must travel a great distance, (from one coast to the other), you must wait for the tide to fall, spend hours bent double, bums up, digging with bare and bleeding fingers (no spades or other implements allowed). You should be chilled to the bone and soaked by breaking waves. Then the long trip home with the booty (20 per person, from memory). A huge cook-up, the bread and fritters washed down with bottles of beer, followed by a sated siesta. Now that’s living.

The Balls are a pretty honest bunch. We might take liberties with the speed limit if nobody’s looking, keep some little items from the taxman if we can, pirate the odd pen from work or bank. I’m told that when I was very young we visited an uncle who was a wildlife ranger. Obviously carefully primed, little Kevin announced that “Daddy shot a bunny and it went quack quack.” But as I say, we were basically law-abiding, until it came to toheroa.

During the toheroa season, usually just a couple of weeks, crowds flocked to Glink’s Gully and other beaches west of Dargaville. They were joined by dozens of inspectors, whose job it was to ensure nobody took more than their limit. And, like something out of Whisky Galore, the most amazing ingenuity was employed by the “smugglers”.

Many a woman arrived at the beach anorexic and left nine months pregnant, the “baby” being plastic bags full of shelled toheroa tied around her waist. (There was a lot of giggling too, as the still-alive toheroa wriggled and tickled tummies). The exercise kept us fit too, as a result of a dance called the “toheroa twist”. Swivelling at the hips saw our feet sink into the wet sand and quickly locate the toheroa, which could then be dug. Much more effective than looking for air holes in the sand.

It was illegal to shell toheroa on the beach, but that was standard practice. There’s the story of one ranger who disappeared behind a tree bush to answer a call of nature. While he was about his business it started raining toheroa shells. By the time he arranged his clothing and rushed around the bush the offenders had gone.

Shelled and bagged toheroa went inside spare tyres, into babies' cots, inside door linings and into sleeping bags. We had one close call when younger son had a fit of the giggles just as we had been cleared to leave the beach with an illicit cargo of toheroa.

My parents came up with what we thought was a novel solution. A mincer was attached to the tray of Dad's old Chevy, the Primus was fired up and we'd cook and gobble fritters until we could barely stand. Then, having buried the shells, we'd assemble our 20 toheroa each and, in all innocence, present ourselves to the waiting rangers at the only beach exit.

My parents came up with the innovative idea of renting a bach for the toheroa season, so we could live on toheroa for the whole two weeks. This idea backfired one year when the start of the season was delayed by a few days. We were all poised and ready to raid, but the rangers began patrolling the beach to make sure nobody jumped the gun.

The West Coast beaches are long and flat – people even dropped in by aeroplane to collect toheroa – and we quickly realised that one patrolling Landrover had a lot of territory to cover. Also, the loom of its lights could be seen for miles, so as soon as it passed we'd scuttle down the beach and dig furiously, until we saw its lights returning. Then it was back up the beach to hide in the toe toe until it passed, and off we'd go again. It wasn't until morning, when we surveyed the scene, that we saw the churned up sand that marked the path of our nocturnal forays. I think the rangers probably had as much fun as we did, and had a good laugh at the evidence of our activity.

Another near-miss happened a few years later when three mates and I took my Mini onto the beach at night (highly illegal), loaded up a big sack of toheroa, and then drove up the cliffs onto a nearby back road. There, under headlights, we shucked the whole bagful, tossing the shells over nearby bushes and concealing the meat in plastic nags about the car. We retraced our tracks to the main road and headed to town, finding to our horror that the shells we'd been tossing over the bushes had been landing on the main road. It was littered with shells, a dead giveaway to anybody who came along.

Finally came the best trick of all. The Post Office ran a rural delivery service along the beach where the baches were, and my parents found that yes, they could post parcels for just a couple of dollars each. So each day when the van came round they had a parcel ready, a bag of toheroa in the shell (for longer life). They were addressed to us in Whangarei and were duly delivered, on time and in excellent condition. Nobody, not even a fisheries inspector, messes with the Royal Mail!

Compare all the above with diving into the freezer and grabbing a bag of toheroa for dinner. No torn and bleeding nails, no heart-stopping fear and anxiety, no being swept off your feet by West Coast waves as you grab the last few minutes of the tide, no excitement and camaraderie of the hunt.

It's just not the same, is it?