

Coquilles St Jacques

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One of the pleasures of living in Brittany is the easy access to good, fresh seafood. From the langoustines, fished mostly around Concarneau in the south-west, to the oysters of Cancale in the north-east, the coast of Brittany is rich with a range of fish and shellfish, the everyday coley the *lieu noir* that you see in the supermarkets to the special scallop, the coquille Saint-Jacques.

This particular mollusc has been valued for centuries, being associated with pilgrims to Santiago de Compostella since the Middle Ages, due to the adoption of the shell by their saint, James or *Jacques* in French, hence the name coquille St Jacques. Nowadays, it is used by the multinational company, Shell, as a modern logo.

The largest deposits of scallops in Europe are found in the bay of Saint-Brieuc where, last year, nearly six and a half thousand tons of scallops were brought ashore. The three main scallop ports of the bay are: Erquy in the east, Saint Quay-Pontrieux in the west and Loguivy-de-la-Mer in the north. The fishermen of the bay, as a whole, generated a turnover of 58 million euros last year, an essential addition to the local economy.

I went recently to St Quay to see if I could find out more about this lucrative and vital industry. It's a pretty town, St Quay Pontrieux, with an attractive promenade around the public harbour. There's also the modern fishing dockyard with over 80 boats that fish for scallops. There's a large cold store and a larger processing plant, where the majority of the catch is cleaned and prepared for the supermarkets and restaurants of France and beyond.

It's a bright morning, around 10,30 in the morning, and the boats are coming in on the quayside, to unload their 30 kilo sacks of fresh scallops. They have fished for the allotted time, and have spent the last hour at sea, selecting the shells large enough to bring in, and returning the rest to the seabed. I'm on the dockside with one of the fishermen, Christian Aillet, who's just unloaded his catch, and who tells me about himself and his morning's work. Since he speaks in French, I'll explain what he says as we go along.

Christian is a self-employed fisherman, who owns the scalloper "Le Grand Bleu". He went out this morning, despite the poor weather forecast which put off many of his colleagues, and came back to port with his average catch of 300 kilos of scallops.

Christian has only one dragnet on his boat, whereas boats such as "Le

Goëlo" have two, so they normally catch twice as many as he does.

There are two of them on board, him and his assistant, Pierre Chevanche, and they go out twice a week, Mondays and Wednesdays, from November to April, to fish for a total time of 45 minutes each time.

The whole industry is highly regulated and, while he was out at sea, a plane and a dinghy belonging to the maritime authorities kept watch on the boat as they fished. They are particularly keen to preserve stocks, by limiting the time allowed to drag the seabed, and insisting on a minimum size of 10.2 cms across the shell. It's worth preserving the stocks, as this is the largest deposit of scallops in Europe.

Christian's been self-employed for 10 years, and he fishes a little less every year. But IFREMER, the agency we've just heard from, have said that there are fewer scallops on the whole, but that their numbers are cyclical, so things change from year to year, sometimes better, sometimes worse.

Not only does he fish for scallops; he's one of only three divers who are allowed to dive for abalone in the bay. That's also closely monitored, for the size of the shell, and for the total quotas.

The green algae, according to Christian, are only a problem in the summer months, when the water warms up. There's no problem at the moment, because the sea water's only 6-8 degrees. But the green algae grow just like any other, classic vegetation, in the springtime.

The green algae don't affect the scallops, but can bother the trawlers whose nets fill up quickly with green algae. The problem of the green algae, is mostly concentrated around Morlaix, Saint-Michel-en-Grève, Plestin-les-Grèves. In the bay of Saint-Brieuc, the green algae appear around Yffiniac, at the south of the bay, and not around the scallop beds. Those that are most bothered by the green algae are the fishermen that harvest the cuttle fish, during April and May.

Thank you.

