

Schooner Feasts

Galley Cooking on a Windjammer

BY LEIGH DONALDSON

On a warm summer morning freshened by an onshore breeze, the schooner American Eagle left Rockland harbor on an easterly heading, slipping close to the breakwater lighthouse. “On three, everyone call ‘hello’ to Gayle,”

ordered Captain John Foss when he spotted a friend waving from the rocks. All 16 of us hollered a lusty “Hello, Gayle!” and waved joyously as though she were our longtime buddy and sailing companion, too.

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Left: “Hello, Gayle!” from the American Eagle.
Below: The American Eagle sails off for a week-long journey.

galley confirmed that the cook was scrambling to keep her freshly baked chocolate chip cookies from sliding on to the sole. But at 11°, three cookie sheets skidded across the galley tables and landed, perfectly upright, on the settee. Eileen Worthley, the American Eagle’s assistant cook, flashed a victory smile and announced that our dessert had survived.

Being out to sea is magical. Eating meals on a schooner is divine. I’ve taken several windjammer cruises along the Maine coast, among the islands of

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Left: Eileen Worthley dishes up lunch for the guests.
Bottom Left: Rick Loalbo removes freshly baked bread from the oven.
Below: Cooks Eileen Worthley and Rick Loalbo of the American Eagle.

She learned to face each challenge with humor and patience. Dressed every day in a Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and neon-colored Crocs, Eileen loved the casual lifestyle. Still, she’s found time to develop a marketing plan for her granola, a slowly roasted blend of rolled oats, wheat germ, coconut, and brown sugar to which she adds dried cranberries, blueberries, and walnuts. She watched it constantly, stirring and turning the pan repeatedly to avoid those dreaded hot spots. One of these days, she promised, she’ll sell it as “Grouchy Grandma’s Granola.”

Her galley mentor was Rick Loalbo, now in his 10th season cooking aboard the *American Eagle*. Rick learned to cook from his

There are some 15 historic schooners that ply the Midcoast of Maine providing overnight cruises of various lengths—an extraordinary way to experience Maine food, Maine maritime history, and Maine hospitality.

The American Eagle, now a National Historic Landmark, was built in 1930 and sailed for 53 years with the Gloucester fishing fleet. She is outfitted with a small galley that features a wood-burning stove built in Nova Scotia in the early 1900s, an old-fashioned icebox, and lockers that hold dry goods and paper supplies. Last summer, the galley was the domain of cooks Rick Loalbo and Eileen Worthley.

Eileen, who owned a bakery for 16 years and worked as a pastry chef at high-end Boston hotels including the Ritz, Four Seasons, and Le Meridien, is an accomplished baker. But none of that prepared her for mastering the art of cooking while standing at an angle and learning how to gauge the temperature of a wood-burning oven that has no temperature dial. But the biggest challenge to cooking on a schooner, she told me, is the humidity that affects baking more than any other type of cooking.



Nana, who made wonderful Italian dishes with her special tomato sauce. Not a fan of complicated, fussy cooking, his motto is “keep it simple.” On one recent day at sea, he served a hearty 15-bean vegetable soup for lunch with loaves of fresh baked bread garnished with basil and grated cheese, an hors d’oeuvre platter of chicken pot-stickers and sliced kielbasa roasted with a soy-ginger-citrus

The biggest challenge to baking on a schooner is the humidity.

glaze, and an oven-baked salmon dinner topped with thin slices of red onion and fresh cilantro. His greatest challenges? Limited storage and getting everything ready on time.



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Top: Chef Mary Barney of the Mary Day prepares breakfast for the week’s guests.
Below: Captain Barry King greets his guests on their first morning.

One of the first ships I ever sailed on was the *Mary Day*, skippered by Captains Barry King and Jennifer Martin. Unlike most other schooners, it was originally designed for passengers, not cargo. The galley has a deluxe ice-chest and a saloon with food storage spaces both beneath the benches and overhead. The overhead in the cabin itself is unusually high, making it cooler and more comfortable for the cook and passengers.

Cooking on a wood stove aboard a schooner is certainly an art.

For many years, their cook, Mary Barney, baked for Josephine Day at the Trailing Yew Inn on Monhegan Island. Mary learned how to cook for a crowd from Day, notably, how to make pie crust for more than 12 pies without having it come out tough, and how to make steamed bread, biscuits, and yeast rolls for 120 people. Working on an old Glenwood wood-fired stove, she quickly discovered that almost everything cooked inside it benefits from retained moisture.

Cooking on a wood stove aboard a schooner is certainly an art. Managing just the right temperature for breads and the slow heat required for the perfect stew, can only be learned through trial and error. Knowing when to burn soft wood and when to begin laying on the oak is a craft every cook must eventually master, all the while being confined to a small galley that is in constant motion.

“Once I learned to control the fire which includes remembering to feed it and paying attention to it,” says Mary, “I could make almost anything come out beautifully.” She’s right, and some of my *Mary Day* favorites are her rosemary sunflower bread, lemon-coconut muffins, and vegetarian tortilla casserole.



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Pam Sheridan, who cooks aboard the *Victory Chimes*, owned by Captains Kip Files and Paul DeGaeta, worked in the restaurant business for 35 years. She had to learn to think on her feet and deal with what Mother Nature provides. “You can’t control the weather, tides, or the people, but you can control the quality of the food,” says Pam, who describes her cooking as “down home”—nothing fancy and most everything made from scratch.



Indeed, in the *Chimes’* official 100th anniversary cookbook, Mary Walker, their first chef and the book’s author, says they prepare food that is “forgiving” even if the boat rocks, the stove dies, or the galley help “messes up.” One of Pam’s horror stories is when the ship heeled abruptly once and her carrot cake ended up soaked in seawater.

Above: The *Victory Chimes* under sail.
Left: Chef Pam Sheridan prepares breakfast for a schooner full of hungry guests.
Below: The *Victory Chimes* at dock.

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Hannah, who stands 5’11” tall, had to learn not to bump her head against the galley entrance. She now believes that “food tastes so much better on a woodstove.” Captain Barnes is a stickler about serving high quality food, so their ingredients come from places like Sage Market in Rockland and Curtis Meats in Warren. Many of the vegetables come from the family’s gardens, artfully maintained by Jane Barnes. Some of the schooner’s specialties include platters of hors d’oeuvres of crab with basil on thinly sliced crostini, and puff pastries filled with caramelized portabella deglazed with brandy and mixed with roasted garlic and Jarlsberg cheese.

“Food tastes so much better on a woodstove.”

Top Left: The Stephen Taber under sail.
Below: Meal presentation on the Stephen Taber. Cara Lauzon (left) and Hannah Bixler (right).
Bottom Left: Hannah and Cara prepare a meal in the galley.



The *Stephen Taber*’s cook was Hannah Bixler, assisted by Cara Lauzon, but it was Captain Noah Barnes’s mother, Ellen (the *Taber*’s cook for 25 years and author of their cookbook, *A Taste of the Taber*), who mentored them in the sensitive art of cooking on their 1910 wood-fired oven. This season, Cara has taken the reins in the galley.



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How Anne Mahle ended up being the cook aboard the *J.&E. Riggins*, captained by her husband Jon Finger, is a story in itself. Born and raised in Michigan, she worked her way through college

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in restaurants where food was made on a large scale and presented in a way that “did nothing to enhance the dining experience.” After graduation, she took a year off and drove to Maine to become a mess cook aboard the *Stephen Taber*, a job that was exactly like its title: cleaning up after the mess that the cooks and crew made.



Anne spent three summers on ships as mess cook, deckhand, then head cook on the *Victory Chimes*, until she decided that she wanted to learn more about the art and craft of cooking. She worked under Hans Bucher’s guidance at Jessica’s Restaurant (now Primo) in Rockland. From this Swiss-trained chef, she learned traditional European-style cooking, and how to make food taste and look good too.

“I believe in food cooked with the freshest and purest ingredients, such as local vegetables and fruits picked at their peak,” Anne told me. A breakfast of blueberry pancakes, bacon,

Anne Mahle whips up bacon and pancakes for breakfast.



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fresh fruit, and hot coffee has never tasted so good as the one prepared by Chef Annie and served on the sun-dappled deck one recent morning. Other highlights from her repertoire include crêpes, eggs Benedict, banana salsa, and tomato, leek, and brie linguini.

The highlight of most of these windjammer sails is the lobster bake on one of Maine’s deserted islands. Once passengers have arrived on the island by small boat, a fire is set. When the fire is hot, kettles of seawater are placed on top to boil. Lobsters and unshucked corn are covered in seaweed to cook. Mussels are steamed in beer or wine with dashes of seawater, garlic, and butter. There are some variations on this theme, but the result is always a feast to be remembered.

What is it about eating aboard a schooner that is so appealing to me? Is it the ocean air that whets the appetite? The smell of bread baking in a wood-burning stove? Is it the romance of the sea and the grace of these maritime museums under sail? Or, is it that there’s no hurry or worry? All I need to think about is what we’re having for the next meal. Whatever the reason, meals on a Maine windjammer are some of my fondest and most delicious memories.



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Opposite Page: The crew at work on the American Eagle
This Page, Clockwise from top left:
Captain John Foss of the American Eagle (left) chats with Captain Noah Barnes of the Stephen Taber.
The J.&E. Riggin under sail.
The Stephen Taber prepares to get underway.
Guests share some of the work on the American Eagle.



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