Vince O'Neal, owner of The Pony Island Restaurant on Ocracoke, uses recipes passed down in his family, which was among the first to settle in the village.

PHOTOGRAPHY (BOTH PAGES) BY LISSA GOTWALS

# COASTAL BOUNTY

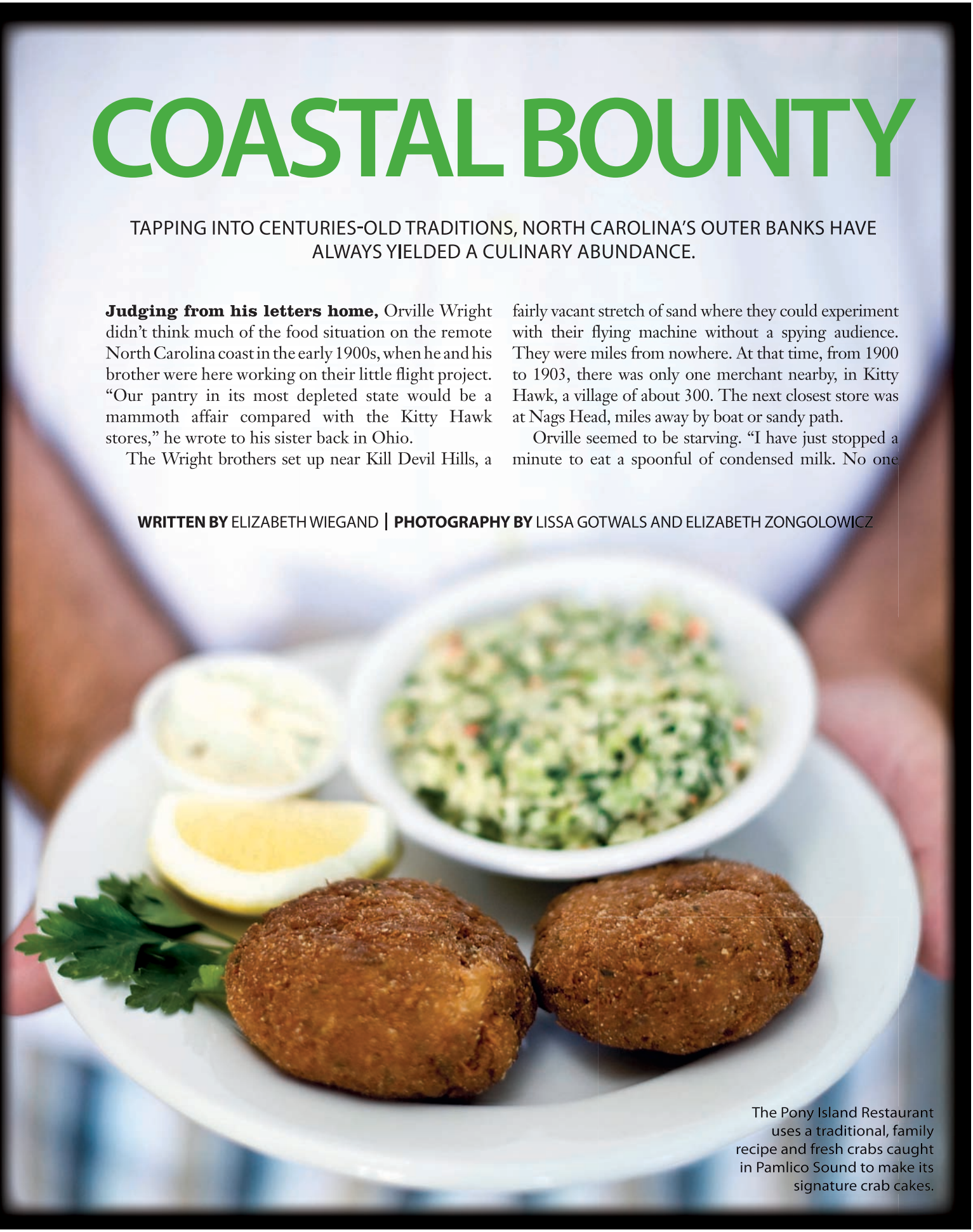
TAPPING INTO CENTURIES-OLD TRADITIONS, NORTH CAROLINA'S OUTER BANKS HAVE ALWAYS YIELDED A CULINARY ABUNDANCE.

**Judging from his letters home,** Orville Wright didn't think much of the food situation on the remote North Carolina coast in the early 1900s, when he and his brother were here working on their little flight project. "Our pantry in its most depleted state would be a mammoth affair compared with the Kitty Hawk stores," he wrote to his sister back in Ohio.

The Wright brothers set up near Kill Devil Hills, a fairly vacant stretch of sand where they could experiment with their flying machine without a spying audience. They were miles from nowhere. At that time, from 1900 to 1903, there was only one merchant nearby, in Kitty Hawk, a village of about 300. The next closest store was at Nags Head, miles away by boat or sandy path.

Orville seemed to be starving. "I have just stopped a minute to eat a spoonful of condensed milk. No one

**WRITTEN BY** ELIZABETH WIEGAND | **PHOTOGRAPHY BY** LISSA GOTWALS AND ELIZABETH ZONGOLOWICZ



The Pony Island Restaurant uses a traditional, family recipe and fresh crabs caught in Pamlico Sound to make its signature crab cakes.


down here has any regular milk. The poor cows have such a hard time scraping up a living that they don't have any time for making milk," he wrote. "You never saw such pitiable looking creatures as the horses, hogs, and cows are down here. The only things that grow fat are the bedbugs, mosquitoes, and wood ticks."

It's ironic that Orville would complain about having so little to eat, with the virtual larder of seafood in Roanoke Sound there for the plucking. Native Americans and early settlers had roasted oysters, fried fish, and stewed crabs — not just survival food, but what any seafood lover would call veritable feasts.

## Making do

Outer Bankers also had a gift for making do. Fish disappeared in the winter, so they salted the abundant catches of summer to preserve them. They didn't eat shrimp but caught lots of them. So they traded shrimp for corn. The inland farmers used the shrimp for fertilizer, and the Bankers dried the corn on old sails spread over their porch roofs, then took it to one of the dozen windmills that dotted the Banks to be ground into cornmeal.

Families shared butchered pigs, hung hams, and set aside enough salt pork for frying fish, making cornbread, and flavoring chowders. And, they grew potatoes and onions, which they put into dry storage.

There were few things Bankers couldn't produce or scavenge themselves, such as canned milk, tea, or flour. That's why the Wright brothers found the general stores in such a "depleted state."

## In search of fortune

Sir John Colleton was one of the eight British Lords Proprietors, the first to be granted land in the Americas by King Charles II in 1663. He was a planter from Barbados who made a fortune trading in sugar and slaves, and was looking to do the same in the Carolinas.

A sound-side island near Kill Devil Hills,

At Cafe Atlantic on Ocracoke, owner and chef Ruth Toth (top left) buys whatever her local fisherman, James Barrie Gaskill, finds in his nets that morning, such as oysters or blues or mackerel, often lightly breaded and fried up fresh.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISSA GOTWALS

If it's not caught locally, you won't find it at Basnight's Lone Cedar Café in Nags Head, where Vicki and Caroline Basnight head out into the sound to get clams for the chowder.

Colington Island, was named after him. Sir Colleton never set foot here but directed his agents to plant grapes for wine, because muscadines grew on the mainland's shores, along with tobacco and corn. Pigs and cattle were allowed to roam the "plantation."

With the soil so sandy, production was disappointing. Three hurricanes in the years from 1667 to 1670 devastated their efforts. So Colleton became one of the first real estate agents on the Outer Banks, exchanging land with potential settlers. Squatters, mostly fishermen, also moved in.

For two centuries, cattle roamed the northern end of the Banks. During the summer, the cattle were flushed onto the beach, then herded to the sound so the yearlings could be hauled to markets in Virginia.

Without refrigeration, beef was hard to keep fresh, so Bankers rarely bothered to slaughter them for meat. In 1933, two hurricanes killed much of the livestock. Next, grazing on the dunes was outlawed, and the cows were removed.

Pigs, however, continued to roam. "Up in the wash woods, up in Corolla, it was known for hunting wild boar, or, really, pigs that had gone free," John "Jack" Wilson, a Manteo native, recalls about the 1940s when he was in the United States Coast Guard and frequently up that way.

## Seasonal herds

The "summer people" arrived at their beach cottages at Nags Head on Memorial Day and stayed until Labor Day. Before the bridges to Manteo and the Outer Banks were built in

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELIZABETH ZONGOLOWICZ

the 1930s, they had to catch the steamer from the mainland. They frequently brought along their own meat on the hoof. Chickens were kept in coops, but hogs and milk cows were allowed to roam free, frequently seeking the shade under the beach cottages, sharing their flies, ticks, and fleas. The ubiquitous latticework on the beach cottages went up to keep the bug-infested beasts out from under the houses.

Even on the mainland, Dare County had only one dairy during the early 1900s, recalls Wilson, now 84 years old. "We were raised as babies on canned milk," he remembers. His father re-opened another dairy in 1945 in what's now downtown Manteo; the herd of six cows grazed at the present elementary school. That explains why traditional coastal Carolina clam chowder has no cream.

Dolly Gray Jones, winner of the 2008 clam chowder cook-off, comes from a long line of Bankers and good cooks, and runs the kitchen at Nags Head's famed Sam and Omie's. "It was just an 'old school' chowder, one like everybody else has always made down here," she says of her winning recipe, her mother's. "Everybody had onions and potatoes in dry storage. Everybody had salt meat, the pork. And anybody could get out and get the clams," she says.

She likes to dig hers from Oregon Inlet, where they're salty and big, four to five inches across. "And I did just like my mama always told me, to freeze them first. That sweetens them up," Jones says. "And then they'll also pop that shell open, and you don't lose any of the juice that way."

Five generations have been making the same clam chowder recipe that came from Dolly Midgett, born in 1826 on Hatteras Island. Her descendants, who own Basnight's Lone Cedar Café on the causeway from Manteo, use her recipe for the chowder on their menu.

## Coastal feasts

The first tourists on our beaches were American Indians. Like us, they came to eat. Mainland natives would head over in their canoes after their crops were planted, and then again right after their harvest. Mounds of oyster shells remain, attesting to their feasts.

"My kids like to walk over to the spit of land in the Great Gut, where there's a mound of old oyster shells, and dig up arrowheads and all sorts of Indian artifacts," says Annie Davis, owner of The Great Gut Deli in Wanchese.

Oysters were a mainstay when John Gaskill, now 93, spent his summers living at the Bodie Island Lighthouse, where his father was a keeper in the 1920s. "We leased an oyster bed in front [of the lighthouse] … and I'd take the big coal bin and load it up," he recalls.

"We had [to] salt fish, because during the winter the fish weren't really there, and we didn't get red meat unless somebody had an old cow or bull to get rid of," he says.

His favorite, to this day, is a dinner of boiled drum — "old drum, when they used to let you catch it," he specifies. Fishing regulations restrict the catch of large drum to ensure their sustainability. Just one of those big drums, sometimes 50 or 60 pounds, fed whole families, sometimes the entire village. Chunks of boiled drum are served along with boiled potatoes, chopped onions, and always fried salt pork.

### Sea harvest

As you'd expect, those who lived on the coast ate fish. Lots of fish. "We had fish for breakfast, fish for lunch, and fish for dinner," Wilson recalls. "Not all three meals every single day, but lots." Most breakfasts were just "little fish" and potatoes, both boiled. During the winter, they had salted fish, which had to be soaked overnight in water. A winter treat was when the herring were running.

As a boy, Wilson helped catch those fish with a drop net, jumping off one side of the boat with one end of a net while someone else did the same on the other side. When the ends were brought together, they'd haul their catch into the boat.

Before motorboats, fishermen stayed mainly in the sounds. "Over toward the mainland, in the Croatan and Pamilico [sounds], they used what was called 'pound nets,'" Wilson says. It's a fishing technique early settlers learned from the American Indians to catch mullet, speckled trout, and others. Visitors can still see pound nets today — they're the large numbers of stakes sticking up from the water holding a series of nets that entrap the fish, or impound them.

Shrimp were a nuisance, getting caught up in nets, and were considered "bugs." No one would eat them. "Never thought about catching them, much less eating them," Wilson says. "They started bringing them in during the 1950s from down at Stumpy Point in the Pamlico Sound."

## to know more

*The Outer Banks Cookbook: Recipes and Traditions from North Carolina's Barrier Islands* is available at local bookstores, from online retailers, and through the publisher at **www.globepequot.com** or (888) 249-7586.

Farther south, near Cape Fear, folks were trawling for shrimp a bit earlier, once motorboats and refrigeration were available.

## Fading traditions

Fishing for a living has always been tenuous, with no control over weather or when or if fish will show up. At least those who ply the waters usually got enough to eat.

Local fishermen still like to scoop sea water from the sound and boil it right on their boat, adding onions, potatoes, bluefish, or whatever catch of the day. However, it's more difficult to sell their day's work, the sacks of oysters, clams, or iced-down fish. Large-money catches were once taken to village fish houses, which in turn sold the fish and shellfish to restaurants or distributors. Wanchese is one of the few fishing villages with any fish houses left — the Wanchese Seafood Industrial Park, built in 1981 to accommodate commercial fishing vessels and boat-builders. Most crab houses have also met their demise, with just a few remaining crab-picking businesses.

Shedders, where molting crabs ready to shed their old shells are babysat all day and night, still are tended mostly by young, single men who don't mind catching naps in the cabs of their pickups during the short run of soft shells.

These dying traditions make it difficult for even restaurants on the Outer Banks to buy local fish today.

"Each day I ride over to Wanchese and check out a few fish houses to see what the day boats have brought in," says Blake LaRose, fishmonger for Basnight's Lone Cedar Restaurant Café on the Manteo causeway. "You've gotta handle the fish fast and good to keep the freshness there, so we clean it, put it in a vacuum pack, then put it on a layer of ice in the walk-in cooler."

If it's not from North Carolina waters, you won't find it on the menu. The restaurant closes for a couple of months during the winter lull in fishing and tourists.

With so many seafood traditions being lost, it seems more important than ever to support our local fishing industry, by buying local seafood or eating at restaurants that use local suppliers.

Perhaps "eating local" would have helped the Wright brothers. They could have asked someone in Kitty Hawk for a big bowl of clam chowder, maybe in exchange for a peek at their flying machine. That would have satisfied their hunger and the locals' curiosity.

*Elizabeth Wiegand is a freelance writer and author of* The Outer Banks Cookbook: Recipes and Traditions from North Carolina's Barrier Islands. *She lives in Raleigh.*

## if you're going

**Sam and Omie's**
7228 South Virginia Dare Trail, Nags Head, N.C. 27959
(252) 441-7366

**The Great Gut Deli**
219 Thicket Lump Drive, Wanchese, N.C. 27981
(252) 473-2479

**Basnight's Lone Cedar Café**
7623 South Virginia Dare Trail
Nags Head, N.C. 27959
(252) 441-5405