

Clams Steamed with Virginia Ham

- 3 doz. Littleneck Clams
- ¼ C. Cornmeal
- 1 Tbs. Kosher salt
- ½ # Piece of uncooked Virginia ham (I prefer the 12 month aged ham. The six month will work as well. Bacon, Prosciutto, and pancetta all will work well.)
- 1 C. White wine
- 3 cloves Garlic, sliced thinly
- 2 Sprigs Fresh thyme
- 1 ea. Fresh bay leaf
- ½ tsp. Red pepper flakes (optional)
- 3 Tbs. Butter

I love clams. The best clams for this preparation are the smaller littlenecks from the East Coast. I buy clams for the restaurants from a little producer on the Eastern Shore called Bagwell Clams. Yvonne Bagwell, the owner, has a beautiful coastal drawl. It's a joy to call her on the telephone and just listen to her talk. Her clams are always super fresh and well-purged.

When selecting clams, buy only clams that are tightly closed. Don't be afraid to ask your fishmonger for specific individual clams from the case. Ask to smell them. They should smell slightly like the ocean but have no over-riding aroma. **DO NOT BUY BIGGER CLAMS FOR THIS RECIPE!** Larger clams are tough and often muddy tasting. Even though they are labeled chowder clams, I use the smaller, sweeter littlenecks for everything.

1. Place clams in a large bowl with the cornmeal and salt. Cover with water. Allow to stand for 15 minutes. This allows the clams to circulate the water and in the process purge their grit replacing it with the grains of cornmeal.
2. Drain and rinse the clams. Scrub shells with a small brush or a nylon scrub pad. Make sure that when scrubbing you place a little lateral pressure on the shells. Often a clam dies and the shell fills with mud and sand and this will ruin your dish. The lateral pressure on the shell will cause it to slide apart. Rinse clams again and set aside.
3. Dice ham into 1/8" dice. It is best to do this when the ham is very cold. Be careful and use a sharp knife as the ham has a very heavy texture in this state.
4. Place ham, garlic, white wine, herbs, and red pepper flake if using in a sturdy pot. Place clams on top and cover with a tight-fitting lid.
5. Place pot over medium-high heat. When they begin to steam, shake once or twice. Clams are done when all are opened. If all open but one or two, discard the unopened clams.
6. Swirl in butter and serve. We eat these right out of the shells (with our fingers!) and dip rustic Eleven bread in the clam liquid.