



FRESH THOUGHTS:

Sustainable Seafood Series

John Shields

Chef/Owner, Gertrude's at the Baltimore Museum of Art

About the Chef

Chef John Shields, Culinary Ambassador of the Chesapeake Bay, is a nationally acclaimed expert in regional American coastal cuisine. His career began informally when, at a very early age, he worked with his grandmother Gertie Cleary in a church hall kitchen. They fixed businessmen's luncheons and parish fund-raising dinners for dozens to hundreds of guests. Grandmom was the perfect teacher.

"I remember as a small boy in Baltimore my grandmother's excitement with each approaching season and the treasures it offered for the table," John says. "We would marvel at the first asparagus of the spring, breathe in the sweet, musky fragrance of ripe Eastern Shore melons, and laugh at the antics of feisty blue crabs as they escaped from overflowing bushel baskets. When my grandmother prepared the food, be it vine-ripened tomatoes or fresh-from-the-bay rockfish, I was always aware of the quiet reverence she felt for these prized gifts."

John's illustrious professional career began by accident. After studying at the Peabody Conservatory of Music, this Baltimore native moved to Cape Cod with aspirations of becoming a rock star, and played the piano in bars. Then one day an injured friend asked John to work his shift in the kitchen of a popular Cape Cod inn. Little did John know that his first day, spent making 36 pie shells, would evolve into many years as a restaurant chef/owner, author, and host of national public television series.

In the 1980s, John moved to Northern California, where he joined the New American Food revolution. He was first executive chef at A La Carte, a highly regarded French restaurant in Berkeley. But he missed the food of his youth, so he opened his own restaurant, named it for his grandmother, and began to introduce San Francisco Bay area residents to the wonderful regional American fare of the Chesapeake Bay.

Gertie's Chesapeake Bay Café was located in Berkeley's famous "gourmet ghetto," where soon-to-be stars such as Alice Waters, Jonathan Waxman, and Jeremiah Tower were reinventing American cooking. Gertie's quickly gained enormous popularity, and California magazine hailed it as "a shining star in the culinary constellation of Northern California restaurants."

Nearly two decades and many, many crab cakes, later, John made his way back to Baltimore, where he now lives. He owns and operates the award-winning restaurant, Gertrude's at the Baltimore Museum of Art—still paying homage to his grandmother, though a little more formally.

John is the author of three award-winning cookbooks on the cuisine of Chesapeake Bay: *The Chesapeake Bay Cookbook*, *The Chesapeake Bay Crab Cookbook*, and *Chesapeake Bay Cooking with John Shields*.

In 1998, public television stations across the country began airing John's series "Chesapeake Bay Cooking," based on the book. For the series, John hit the road, interviewing folks around the Chesapeake region and showing how they prepared their favorite regional dishes. The series was so popular it ran for years.