Maine Sea Urchin

*(Strongylocentrus droebachienisis)*

**Catch Region**
Gulf of Maine

**Seasonality**
September – April, 
*Subject To Fishery*

**Catch Method**
Diver Hand Harvested 
Draggers

**Yield (Roe)**
Up to 20 % of 
Whole Urchin Weight

**Flavor Profile:**
Slightly Sweet

**Texture Profile:**
Delicate, Smooth, 
Buttery

**Substitute:**
• Pacific Urchin

THE ONSET OF AUTUMN here in Maine ushers in the beginning of urchin diving season. Spiny Sea Urchins (Atlantic Green Urchins) are found along the coast of Maine through the Canadian Maritimes and yield creamy “Uni” - the corral, or roe, of the urchin. Ours come in ocean fresh and are processed right here in Portland, Maine.

Sea urchins are spiny-shelled echinoderms that look like pincushions, and some have dubbed them the “porcupines of the sea.” In fact, the name “urchin” is actually taken from the Olde English meaning of the word: hedgehog. Other names like the Spanish *Erizo de mar*, simply mean “egg of the sea.”

Urchins are closely related to sand dollars and starfish, and if you flip an urchin over you will see the familiar five-pointed, star-shaped pattern on its belly. Its symmetrical pattern of “teeth” on its underside is called Aristotle’s Lantern. Urchins have no legs, using the spines for locomotion and trapping food. The sea urchin feeds on sea grasses, algae and organic matter.

Urchins, and more specifically urchin roe, called *Uni*, are highly coveted delicacies in Japan. In the 1980s, this market was exploited by Maine fishermen, triggering a “gold rush” of sorts. Because of this intense yet unmanaged harvesting (41 million pounds were landed in 1993), Maine now has strict restrictions on this fishery, including no night or weekend harvesting, and only urchins between 2 and 3 inches in diameter can be taken out of the water (Pacific urchins by contrast are often 6 inches across). Removed from their shell, the bright yellow-to orange lobes are perfect for traditional sushi or sashimi dishes, or just with a little lemon. Uni is also used sauced over pasta or noodles, pureed with butter to finish seafood sauces, as a decorative garnish, and in hors d’oeuvres, stews and soups, omelettes and soufflés.

Whole, live Maine sea urchins are available by the pound (approximately 4-6 pieces per pound) with a day’s advance notice. Maine Urchin roe comes in 4-ounce bamboo trays (typically 20-30 pieces of uni per tray).