



Heaven on the half shell

The novelty of eating raw oysters soon gives way to its more subtle pleasures

Date: Jan 2010 **Author:** Joe Fitzgerald

The blade is wedged into the hinge, which pops like a spring-loaded latch. Quickly the meat is scraped off the top shell, then the muscle to the bottom shell is cut. This takes mere seconds and is called “shucking.” The shucker places the oyster, now on its half shell, delicately on crushed ice, careful not to spill the juice inside. Bathing in its own brine, the living oyster marinades in the essence of the sea. I pick it up and slurp it off the shell.

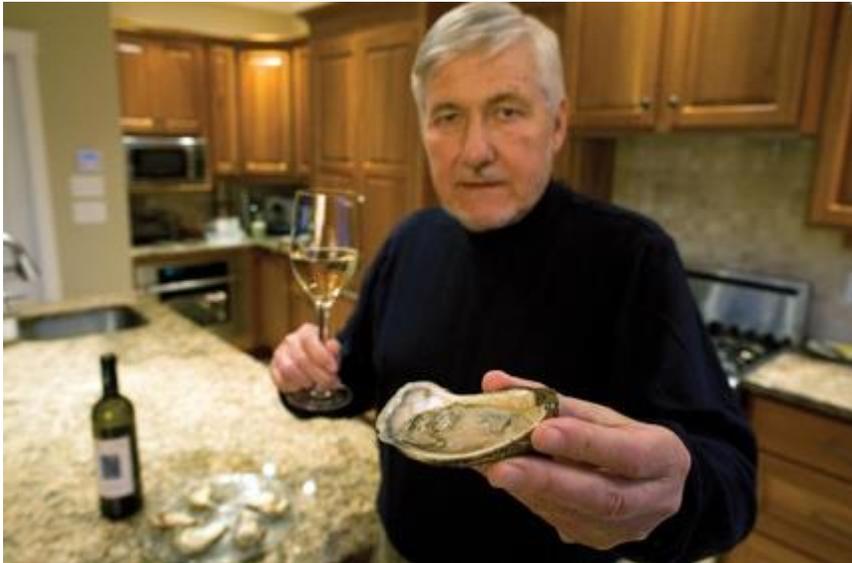
There are many different species of oysters. The one native to the east coast of North America, and harvested from Labrador to the Gulf of Mexico, is the Eastern or American oyster. Eastern oysters don’t produce pearls like tropical oysters, which actually belong to a different family. What they do produce is a gastronomic experience as lustrous as any necklace.

“It’s a uniqueness of flavour,” says Sean Wood, one of Canada’s leading wine writers and a fervent oyster aficionado. “For many it’s an acquired taste. Some people can’t get past the thought of eating them raw. The zeal of the enthusiast is to have people enjoy it as much as you do. I’ve seen an expression come over people, who are initially squeamish, where they suddenly get it.”

“Getting it” for Wood means appreciating the flavours manifest in the oysters of a particular region. “My favourite way by far to eat oysters is raw on the half shell, especially our Nova Scotia oysters, because they have a very subtle, very clean fresh flavour. By doing too much to prepare them, you are actually disguising the flavour. Some people put seafood sauce or hot sauce on them, but I say forget it. Nine times out of 10 I’ll eat oysters decently chilled with a tiny squeeze of lemon and a twist of ground pepper. That’s how I think they show best.”

Wood invokes the French term *terroir*, which in wine lexicon refers to the impact of a region on the quality of a wine. Particular regions in Europe, especially France, became synonymous with specific wines. “As people get to understand oysters more, they’re starting to use similar language,” says Wood. “The oysters up and down the east coast are genetically the same oyster, but they taste very different depending on where they come from. If they’re in a more open ocean environment, you’ll get a more saline, clean taste. If they’re in a more estuarine environment, like those from the Northumberland Strait, there is more nutrient runoff from the land and less tidal flush. With those you’ll get less of a saline clean character and more sweet, rounded, richer flavours.”

In areas that produce both wine and oysters, it’s easy to recognize crossover flavours. “We make very crisp, dry, clean, subtle-flavoured wines,” says Wood. “That’s what we do best. And there’s an absolutely natural affinity between those wines and oysters on the half shell. The crisp, fresh, clean wine and the crisp, fresh, mineral oyster on the half shell is a marriage made in heaven.”



Wine writer and oyster aficionado Sean Wood

Nova Scotia is blessed with immense diversity, boasting 10 or more name-brand types of oysters. “Buying oysters is now based on different seasonalities and different flavour qualities,” says Brian Muise, the executive director of the Aquaculture Association of Nova Scotia. “A more sophisticated market is demanding variety, and that demand is driving more and more interest in oysters.”

Oyster farming has taken place in Nova Scotia since the first European settlers arrived on the Northumberland Strait and the Bras d’Or Lakes hundreds of years ago. Today about half of Nova Scotia oysters are farmed, while the remainder are harvested wild oysters. There are nearly 30 active oyster leases that total \$650,000 in sales each year. “Most of our growers ship to the main markets in Quebec City, Montreal, Toronto, and further west,” says Muise. “Right now Halifax is a huge market. You’d be surprised how many oysters are consumed in this town.”

Oyster production in Nova Scotia took a big drop a few years ago when a serious disease infiltrated the Bras d’Or Lakes. Muise says there is increased investment in the industry, and in

the four years it takes to grow market-size oysters, production numbers will shoot up. “The growers here are really making an effort to bring new technologies to bear, grow oysters quicker and free of disease, and get a very tasty product to market.”

Some of those newer technologies are being used by Nolan D’Eon in Eel Lake, Yarmouth County. “Oysters come in all shapes and sizes, but the way we’re growing them, fastened on floating bags with the wave action, makes most of our oysters look the same,” says D’Eon. “There are three grades of oyster—choice, standard, and commercial. Choice is what everybody wants, because it has a nice shape and a nice cup that holds the water when you lay it down.”

Founded in 1996, Eel Lake Oyster Farm has grown from an experimental project to a thriving business; it markets its product as Ruisseau oysters. D’Eon lived on the lake and saw wild oysters growing there. “The lake we grow them in is a tidal lake, almost as salty as the ocean, but depending on rainfall it can be quite brackish,” he says. “That mixture of salt and fresh water makes algae, which the oysters eat. Most of the feed is on the surface or first 12 inches of water, so we grow them right on the surface, whereas in P.E.I. and other places most are bottom leases; they feed them right in the mud deeper in the water column. My oysters are full of meat because they’re grown at the surface.”

From sea to restaurant, chefs recognize the outstanding variety Nova Scotia provides. “Shandaff and Ruisseau oysters are very well known, not only in Nova Scotia but also throughout the Atlantic region and Quebec,” says Matt Costain, the chef at The Press Gang in Halifax. “They take a little longer to mature but are well worth it on flavour. They have a very clean shell. Black Point oysters from Pictou, one of our suppliers, offer diver-caught oysters. With sustainable catches being a popular theme in the culinary world right now, it makes them very attractive.”

Costain says that most people eat oysters raw on the half shell, but chefs are getting more innovative in finding new ways to prepare them. “Baked oysters in the shell are popular, and fried oysters and tempura are common as you go down to the southern states,” he says. “Once at a competition, two groups of us were preparing oyster ravioli. If someone was starting out, I’d recommend trying a fried oyster to get some texture, but from there just enjoy them naturally. Maybe put on a little of your favorite topping and appreciate what they bring on their own.”

Nova Scotia, gourmands agree, is the perfect place to begin or continue your epicurean journey. Rowan Jacobsen, the 2008 James Beard Award-winning author of *A Geography of Oysters: The Connoisseur’s Guide to Oyster Eating in North America*, sums it up this way: “What I love about Nova Scotia oysters is the same thing I love about Nova Scotia—the wildly varied geography. From the bracing Atlantic brine of a Cape Breton or a Bras d’Or to the earthy intensity of a Tatamagouche, the oysters make great ambassadors for Nova Scotia’s natural wonders.”

For those who are a little squeamish about eating the bivalves raw, this is a great recipe to enjoy their natural flavour. Serves 4.

- *¼ cup (60 mL) parsley, finely chopped*

- *½ stalk celery, finely chopped*
- *1 tbsp (15 mL) oregano, thyme, or marjoram, finely chopped*
- *½ cup (125 mL) or 2 oz fine dry breadcrumbs*
- *Juice of 2 lemons*
- *Olive oil*
- *2 dozen oysters, shucked on the half shell*

Mix parsley, celery, herbs, and breadcrumbs. Sprinkle some of the mixture onto each oyster, then add a drop or two of olive oil. Put the oysters under a grill or broiler until breadcrumbs are golden and oysters are firm, 3 to 5 min. Remove from oven, squeeze fresh lemon juice over oysters, and serve.