OYSTER LAND

Maine oysters are prized by chefs and gourmets around the country. Now Mainers are discovering them, too.

BY VIRGINIA M. WRIGHT PHOTOGRAPHED BY DOUGLAS MERRIAM

Maine-grown oysters get the star treatment at Eventide Oyster Company in Portland. These roasted oysters in Korean barbecue sauce are Winter Points from Bath.

ARLIN SMITH REMEMBERS the first time he ate a raw oyster. He was fourteen, a Buffalo boy with little experience with shellfish. "It was a Pemaquid," he says reverently. "It was joy, salt, and sweet. It was so pleasant, I didn't want to stop."

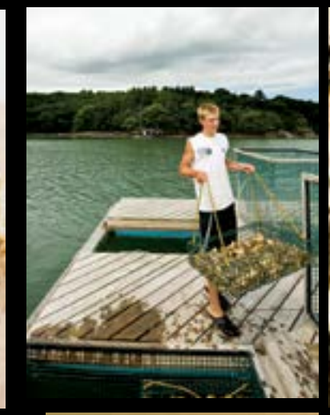
That sensuous encounter with a Damariscotta River mollusk was, in fact, life-changing, one of a handful of food experiences that set Smith on the path to where he is today – overseeing Eventide Oyster Co., the little sister of Portland's venerable Hugo's, which he acquired, with chefs Mike Wiley and Andrew Taylor, from Rob Evans last spring.

A hit with Portland's food enthusiasts from the day it opened its doors in late June, Eventide combines the casualness of a seafood shack with a menu that is at once familiar and inventive. There are lobster rolls and fried fish sandwiches, lobster stew and clam chowder, each with a novel twist. And there are oysters, upwards of twenty varieties from both coasts displayed in an ice-filled 1,500-pound granite basin that is the focal point of the small dining room. That half of those varieties are from Maine – and that they represent only a fraction of what is being grown and harvested here – often comes as a surprise to all but the most rabid oysterphiles. Despite Portland's reputation as a food destination, only one other Forest City restaurant, Old Port Sea Grill, has a raw bar specializing in Maine oysters. "The state's oyster industry is incredible, but it has been extremely underutilized and underappreciated by the people of Maine," Smith says.

"They don't realize that the best oysters in the world are coming out of these waters – Casco Bay, the Damariscotta River, Winter Point – all of these places are shipping oysters to Boston, New York, Toronto, and other places where people appreciate them."

One locale that has been appreciative is the twin villages of Damariscotta and Newcastle, perched on the Damariscotta River estuary where the state's first oyster farms were started about twenty-five years ago. In the late nineties, King Eider's Pub opened Maine's first locally sourced raw bar; now four restaurants within a one-third-mile stretch regularly serve raw (not to mention stewed, fried, and roasted) oysters. On the last Sunday in September, hundreds of people scarf down 15,000 oysters at the Pemaquid Oyster Festival, an event that may soon be too big to be contained by the wraparound riverfront deck of Schooner Landing restaurant, co-presenter with Pemaquid Oyster Company. With this summer's openings of Eventide and of Mine Oyster, a raw bar and restaurant sitting on stilts in Boothbay Harbor, the notion that oysters, like lobster, can be a signature Maine attraction has spilled beyond Damariscotta's borders.

It's happening now in large part because the aquaculture has grown and matured. Ten years ago, there were just a handful of commercial oyster farms, all on the Damariscotta River. Today there are thirty-two farms from Biddeford Pool to Taunton Bay.



TOP ROW: Arlin Smith, Andrew Taylor, and Mike Wiley, left, have opened Eventide Oyster Company next to Portland's venerable Hugo's, which they acquired last spring. A worker at Glidden Point Oyster Sea Farm, right, unloads a basketful of oysters freshly plucked from the Damariscotta River. **MIDDLE ROW:** Barbara Scully of Glidden Point Oyster Sea Farm, left, harvests her crop by hand. Eventide, right, was a hit with Portland food enthusiasts the day it opened its doors. **BOTTOM ROW:** Eventide combines the accessibility of a seafood shack with a menu that is at once familiar and inventive.

"THE BEST OYSTERS IN THE WORLD ARE COMING OUT OF THESE WATERS."

Barbara Scully eshews drag dredges and mechanical graders at Glidden Point Oyster Sea Farm. She spends much of her summer underwater handpicking oysters off the Damariscotta River bed. It takes three to four years for her oysters to reach market size.

American appetites have become more adventurous, too. "Oysters are trendy now," says Jeff "Smokey" McKeen, a co-owner and founder of Pemaquid Oyster Company, which has been growing oysters in the Damariscotta estuary since 1986. "They are way more popular than they were twenty-five years ago, so the market is there for us now. All the Maine oysters have a good reputation in the marketplace. They come out of cold water so they are sweeter, plumper, and crisper than warm water oysters. They stack up against anything out there."

TWICE A DAY THE tide rushes into the mouth of the Damariscotta River between East Linekin Neck and Pemaquid Point and passes through a series of narrow passages and broad reaches, churning together the salt and fresh waters in the tight channels, then bathing the fertile mudflats with that nutrient-rich, oxygenated mix, again and again and again on its nineteen-mile course to the Great Salt Bay. The repeated upwellings and the shallow bay, which Andy Stevenson of Mook Sea Farm in the Damariscotta River town of Walpole, describes as "one giant bioreactor producing algae, the oyster's main food," combine to create an environment that is about as perfect for growing oysters as it gets.

It has been so, off and on, for more than two thousand years. A curious archaeological artifact, an enormous heap of oyster shells, defines the upper river's west bank just south of Great Salt

A Field Guide to Maine Oysters

Oysters are all about the flavor and texture they acquire from the waters and beds in which they grow. Here are a dozen of Maine's better-known oysters on which to test your discerning palate.

DODGE COVE (Damariscotta River): A classic Damariscotta River oyster, sweet and juicy with lots of briny liquor.

FLYING POINT (Freeport): Beautiful greenish shells with deep, fluted cups; fresh, salty flavor.

GAY ISLAND (Cushing): Small but meaty, with a clean, ocean taste.

GLIDDEN POINT (Damariscotta River): Hand-harvested; sweet, plump meat with deep cups brimming with briny liquor.

JOHNS RIVER (South Bristol): Mossy green shells, cupped on both sides; full, fatty meat.

NORTH HAVEN (North Haven): A big oyster, diver-harvested from a small saltwater pond; salinity varies with the seasons.

NORUMBEGA (Damariscotta River): Nice wide shell; consistent flavor and well-developed meat.

PEMAQUID (Damariscotta River): Big, juicy meat in lots of flavorful liquor; very similar to Glidden Points.

TAUNTON BAY (Mount Desert Island): Grown off-bottom in floating bags, so the shells are nicely rounded and clean; fatty meat with high salinity.

WAWENAUKS (Damariscotta River): Very large — four- to five-inch — shells; similar in flavor to the Pemaquids and Glidden Points.

WILEY POINT (Damariscotta River): Super plump, hearty meats in deep, alabaster shells; grown in baskets near the water's surface.

WINTER POINT (West Bath): A very briny ocean oyster with easy-to-open thick shells.

FOR THE LOVE OF OYSTERS

Pain is the mother of invention. In this case, the pain and blood of an oyster knife jamming into the palm of one's hand one too many times. Two Damariscotta area oyster lovers have developed very different tools that open oysters without risk to skin, tendons, and nerves.

<< **Larry Schneider** developed the Aw Shucks! opener after he and wife Sherry opened a raw bar in King Eider's Pub in Damariscotta in 1996. The only restaurant on the midcoast serving raw oysters at the time, King Eider was soon flooded with oyster aficionados, and its small staff couldn't open the bivalves fast enough. The all-steel device consists of an arm outfitted with a blade affixed to a plate. An experienced user — and it doesn't take long to become one — can pop the hinge of an oyster shell in a fraction of a second without spilling a drop of the oyster's briny liquor. "People would ask where I got it. I said I made it," Schneider says. "Then one day a customer asked, 'Why are you running this restaurant when you should be selling those?' " The Schneiders sold the restaurant and have been manufacturing and selling the Aw Shucks! for the last seven years. To their surprise, their biggest customers are individuals, though they have sold the device to oyster bars worldwide. At $175 for the sink-mounted model and $215 for the cutting board-mounted model, this is a shucker for serious oyster eaters. (awshucksoysteropener.com)

>> **Dale Dapkins** fell in love with oysters in Florida, where he and a friend would go paddling into bays and fill their canoe with Apalachicola oysters. "We once ate 125 oysters in one sitting," he recalls. He was introduced to Damariscotta River oysters when he bought a camp on Lake Pemaquid ten years ago. He eats a few every evening. "They are so much better than warm water oysters," he says, "but I never did get very good with an oyster knife and I've cut myself badly many times." He experimented with several devices, even going so far as to modify a French fry maker that "looked like a byzantine contraption for torture," before inventing the Oy Boy. It's a threaded carbon steel drill bit with cone tip that Dapkins designed with Norman Schmotzer, president of B&A Manufacturing, a Palm Beach manufacturer of industrial drill bits, and an oyster lover himself. "The threads are important because they pull the bit into the shell, which puts pressure on the two halves to divide," Dapkins says. It can take the Oy Boy anywhere from a few seconds to a minute to pop the hinge, but at forty dollars for six bits, it inexpensively erases the hazards of oyster shucking. (oyster-opener.com)

Praised for their sweetness, Maine oysters typically spend a season in floating nurseries, like this one on the tidal Damariscotta River, before being spread on the riverbed to mature.

Bay. This is the Glidden Midden, 150 feet long and, in some places, thirty feet deep, believed to have been created by the ancestors of the Abenaki people long before European settlers set foot here. Spread along the eastern shore are the remnants of what was once an even larger shell heap; it was largely destroyed in 1886 when two hundred tons of shells were mined to create a chicken feed additive. That the oysters, the Indians, or both, came and went over a span of roughly one thousand years is evidenced by the layers of shells and humus, indicating long periods when no one was subsisting on oysters by the Great Salt Bay. Oysters could have waxed and waned for any number of reasons – an influx of predators like the oyster drill snail, perhaps, a hurricane that altered the mud flats, or the northward migration of the Gulf Stream, which rendered the river too cold for the mollusks to reproduce. If any wild oysters were growing in the estuary by the time colonists began settling the area in the early 1600s, they would have been decimated by the settlers' activities – lumber operations dumped sawdust into the river, which would have smothered any oyster beds.

The estuary's contemporary identity as an oyster producer dates to the late seventies, when a few growers tried raising Belon, or European flat oysters. "It was probably not the best choice," Smokey McKeen says. "The European oyster is okay when cooked, but it has a strong, metallic flavor when raw. Reach in your pocket for a coin and put it in your mouth – that's the taste of a raw European oyster."

But taste isn't what did in the Belon oyster farms. Their mollusks never made it to market. They succumbed to shellfish diseases, ill-suited gear, and other hazards that came with pioneering a technology.

The Belon farmers' experiences, however, did inform the growers who followed a few years later with the American oyster, the same species whose shells were heaped upon the upper Damariscotta's banks two millennia ago.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 82

Oyster Accompaniments

Here's another sign that Maine oysters have come into their own: They are inspiring new products, some made with oysters, some made to accompany them:

BLOODY OYSTER COCKTAIL, WALDOSTONE FARM. Zesty, thick, and full of flavor, this tomato juice cocktail's signature ingredient is Damariscotta River oyster broth. Kayli McKeen combines it with hand-juiced fresh tomatoes, beets, parsley, lettuce, lemons, and limes, and artisanal horseradish to create a refreshing drink that is good on its own or with vodka. It's sort of a healthy, and much better-tasting, Clamato. McKeen, the wife of Pemaquid Oyster Company owner Jeff McKeen, also makes a line of oyster mignonettes. waldostonefarm.com

PEMAQUID OYSTER STOUT, MARSHALL WHARF BREWING COMPANY. Master brewer Dan McGovern tosses ten dozen Maine oysters into the wort, the sticky, sweet liquid that is boiled as part of the beer-making process. Originally made once a year to be served at the Pemaquid Oyster Festival, the rich, chocolately stout is now available by customer demand most of the year at the company's Belfast store and tasting room and adjoining restaurant, Three Tides. marshallwharf.com

OYSTER LAND

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 69

Most of the growers came to the aquaculture with backgrounds in marine science. McKeen's partners, Chris Davis, a shellfish geneticist, and Carter Newell, an oceanographer, were encouraged to try their hands at oyster growing by a professor at the Darling Marine Center, a research institute in Walpole. Likewise, Barbara Scully was working for the Maine Department of Marine Resources when she began growing oysters as a hobby.

"It was a big science project that grew and grew and now has taken over my life," says Scully, the owner of Glidden Point Oyster Sea Farm in Edgecomb.

In many ways, Scully says, it remains a science project, a continuing experiment in which procedures are tweaked and tested under ever-changing conditions. "It's one challenge after another," she says. "No year is ever the same. In Maine, where the water is cold, it takes at least two years, and optimally three to four years, to grow a good quality market-size oyster. In that period of time, so many things can happen that it's difficult to know what you did right and what you did wrong. You pretty much guess at what's happened along the way to make a certain thing happen, such as faster growth, deeper cup, better flavor, longer shelf life. And when you've got animals for that amount of time, one bad mistake can result in very high mortality, and suddenly you've got a significant setback on your hands."

THE OYSTER is a curious creature, starting life as a microscopic swimming fishlike larva. Within twenty-four hours, it forms two shells. Fourteen to twenty days later, it develops a foot, with which it pulls itself along until it finds a place to settle and grow. "It will never move on its own again," says Andy Stevenson. "Mussels can sever their byssus threads and move with the currents, clams have feet, and scallops swim. Oysters stay put."

Out in the wild, the oyster that makes it this far has beaten incredible odds: of the 20 million spat produced by the northern American oyster, only 1 percent survive. In a hatchery like Mook Sea Farm, there are no predators gobbling up infant bivalves in the tanks of filtered, aerated, and warmed Damariscotta River water, but there are technicians, who sieve, count, and size the oysters every forty-eight hours from the time their shell forms to the time they're ready to set. Those that don't make the grade – as much as 80 percent from a large spawn of 120 million animals – are culled. The footed survivors are placed on a bed of shell fragments to set. Each shell chip can accommodate only one of the still-microscopic animals, thus avoiding the "Milford effect," when oysters set on each other and grow in clumps.

Together with Muscongus Bay Aquaculture in nearby Bremen, Mook Sea Farm provides most of Maine's oyster farms, as well as many others along the East Coast as far south as Virginia, with seed oysters, which typically measure one to just under four mm in length. How long it takes them to reach market size depends on the grower's location and methods.

That perhaps is the most remarkable characteristic of oysters: They are profoundly sensitive to their environment. Water temperatures, currents, salinity, whether the bottom they grow on is mud, sand, or no bottom at all – all of these factors affect the size, shape, and strength of the shells, the plumpness of the animal, and ultimately its taste.

"Oyster farming is site specific," says Smokey McKeen. "If you look at oysters around the world there are about a dozen different techniques for growing them." Even on the Damariscotta River, farms within sight of each other use different technologies, resulting in different looking and different tasting oysters.

Pemaquid Oyster Co. starts its

seed oysters upriver in a floating upweller system, a trough outfitted with a pump so the bivalves bathe in an always fresh supply of nutrient-rich water. When the oysters reach thumbnail size – a matter of four to eight weeks – McKeen and his crew take them downriver where they are separated by size in a mechanical grader and placed in the floating cages that comprise the farm's nursery. "We grow them in cages for about a season, then we scatter them on the bottom of the river, " McKeen says. "It's a great leap of faith at that point because we've been raising these things up and handling them many times and now we're going to give them to the river." There they are vulnerable to predators like crabs, snails, and starfish, as well as diseases like MSX (multinucleated sphere unknown), a parasite that wiped out one-third of Pemaquid's crop in 2010. After growing through two seasons, they are harvested with a drag dredge. They spend another week in floating cages farther downriver where the water is colder, saltier, and less muddy, improving the flavor before they are shipped to market.

Over at Mook Sea Farm, meanwhile, the oysters spend their entire lives in cages, suspended near the water's surface, the most productive part of the water column as far as algae and phytoplankton are concerned. Every seven to ten days, workers flip the cages, so the sun bakes away any seaweed, barnacles, and other critters that threaten to clog the mesh. It is more labor intensive farming than that practiced by Pemaquid Oyster, Andy Stevenson concedes, but it protects the crop from predators, the oysters grow bigger and faster in the warmer water, and harvesting is simply a matter of emptying the cages.

At the other end of the technology spectrum is Glidden Point Oyster Sea Farm, where Barbara Scully raises her oysters without mechanical graders and dredges. She spends much of her summer in a wet suit with an oxygen tank on her back, plucking mature oysters from the riverbed. "What intrigued me was whether I could grow the same high-quality oyster that I was growing as a hobby on a commercial scale," she explains. "Often when people jump in on a commercial scale, something is lost in what you try to do efficiently or cost effectively. Just the economy of scale takes away a little piece of quality. I didn't want that to happen. So I've stuck with doing things by hand for the most part. It creates good jobs for young people and it provides a better insight into what's going well and what's not because you're handling and looking at everything you're growing in a very intimate and up-close way." Scully's oysters spend three or four years in the river before they are ready for harvest, and she believes they taste all that much better for it.

Indeed, time and temperature are what set Maine oysters apart from their better known Southern counterparts. "Southern oysters never go into hibernation. They never stop pumping or feeding," Andy Stevenson explains. "But Maine oysters, especially those on the river, stop growing when the water temperature starts to drop in October or November. They put their energy into glycogen production and preparing for colder temperatures. So they're building up glycogen, which is a sugar. That's what people taste when they taste a Maine oyster. They taste the sweetness. They are tasting the plumpest, sweetest oyster there is. It's an oyster that's hard to beat."

OVER THE LAST decade or so, oyster farming has spread beyond the Damariscotta, into other rivers and ocean sites. The profile of the growers is changing, too. Out on North Haven, lobsterman Adam Campbell began farming oysters in the salt pond across from his home after a state study uncovered a decline in baby lobster populations around the island.

"I bought some seed and put it down and it grew like hell," he says. "But there were a lot of bumps in the road that the scientist who prepared the business plan left out – like how much work it is to keep all these oysters alive and how fast they grow and how quickly you have to respond to their growth. And they need the most care just as the lobsters are in full-swing. It was a steep learning curve."

After twelve years, though, he's become adept at juggling lobsters and mollusks, and his North Haven oysters have a good reputation for their distinct flavor and texture. He has learned not to harvest immediately after heavy rains, which dilute the small pond's salinity and make for a less briny oyster. "Every oyster takes on the characteristics of where it's grown," he says. "If you're in a high-energy environment you will end up with a thicker shell than one that is lower energy. Mine is a low-energy environment – there are not a lot of strong currents, swells, or rough waters, so my shells are more delicate than some, but the oysters are over-the-top good."

There are other changes under way, too, at least in the Damariscotta, where water temperatures have risen to levels that allow oysters to spawn, something that wasn't happening when McKeen and Scully began farming twenty-five years ago. The farms' pelagic larvae have swum into the tidal currents and found places to set away from the managed beds. Divers occasionally harvest them to take to market. The wild Damariscotta River oyster is back.

Virginia M. Wright is the senior writer at Down East and author of *The Maine Lobster Book*.