

TASTE

WRITTEN BY GREG ATKINSON  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER

## Treasures of the Tide Flats

On a beach or at a bash, oysters are worthy of celebration

FOR A MOMENT, I had the sense that the world was an oyster — not my oyster, perhaps, but an oyster nonetheless. Standing beside the shell-shaped bowl of Totten Inlet at low tide on a winter evening, I couldn't help noticing that the clouds whirled above my head in the pattern of an oyster's markings. The receding tide lapped at the shore the same way an oyster's liquor splashes inside its shell, and the very air was filled with the fresh salt-water smell of mollusks.

The particular piece of beach on which I stood is home to a shellfish-growing operation managed by Taylor Shellfish Farms. Company president Bill Taylor and oyster promoter Jon Rowley were our hosts when a baker's dozen of us oyster aficionados set out for a beachside picnic in January. Taylor runs more than a half-dozen farms from Willapa Bay to Samish Bay, and the Taylor family has been farming oysters in Washington for more than a century.



Nothing says the Northwest like a freshly shucked oyster from a local beach.

But oysters have been growing here with and without human intervention for considerably longer than that, and their range is even greater than the estimable scope of Taylor holdings. Even before the first people wandered these shores thousands of years ago, oysters thrived from Baja California to Sitka, Alaska. Those first oysters were of one variety: the Olympia or *Ostrea conchaphila*. It was nearly harvested out of existence before oyster farmers brought in other varieties from the East Coast, Europe and Asia to build the modern Northwest shellfish industry. These days, the tiny Olympia is enjoying the respect of oyster lovers everywhere and, thanks to a concerted effort by growers, environmentalists and legislators, it's making a comeback.

### Find out more

For information on the Oyster Olympics, contact Anthony's Homeport on Shilshole Bay at 206-783-0780 or the Puget Soundkeeper Alliance at 206-297-7002. Tickets are \$75 each.

In addition to Olympias, our little band of oyster eaters slurped Atlantic oysters, Pacific oysters, European flats and Kumamotos. We washed them down with a sauvignon blanc as cold and clean as the bivalves themselves. Mary Hill Winery's 2000 Columbia Valley Sauvignon Blanc was one of 10 wines selected by a panel of tasters as perfect Northwest oyster wines at an event officially known as "The Pacific Coast Oyster Wine Competition." Each year, 10 wines are chosen based on what event organizer Rowley calls their "bliss factor." When it comes to oyster wine, bliss is best achieved with something devoid of superfluous sweetness. It must be crisp — acidic, even — and free of distracting oak or butter. The best oyster wines are "quaffers," easily swallowed without a lot of fuss.

Pacific oysters reflect the taste of the waters in which they are grown. Pondering this phenomenon, Rowley and I coined the term "merroir," after the French "terroir," which describes the way certain

foods and wine grapes bear the detectable flavors of their home soil. To christen the new word, we shucked another oyster and poured another glass of wine. We were so pleased with ourselves that, had we been a little bolder or a little less sober, I think we would have burst into song.

So wildly divergent are the different types of oysters grown in the Pacific Northwest that entire books have been devoted to the topic. "Heaven on the Halfshell: The Story of the Northwest's Love Affair with the Oyster" (Westwinds Press, 2001) by David Gordon, Nancy Blanton and Terry Nosho, outlines both the gradual decline of the native Olympia and the rise of cultivated oysters imported from far away. Colorful, readable and thoroughly appetizing, my copy of "Heaven" is battered and stained in a way that only a few of my favorite reference books ever are.

Another good oyster reference is "The Joy of Oysters," by Lori McKean and Bill Whitbeck (Speed Graphics, 2000). "Joy" covers not only the story of oysters in the Northwest but also the broader picture of oyster cultivation all over the country.

Still, no book can capture a region's passion for its local foods the way a bona fide festival can, and fortunately the Northwest has its own colorful celebration of the king of bivalves. Hosted annually on the last Tuesday of March by Anthony's Homeport at Shilshole, Seattle's Oyster Olympics serves as a fundraiser for the Puget Soundkeeper Alliance.

The alliance, one of 80 "Waterkeeper Alliance" chapters founded by Robert Kennedy Jr., is the only organization dedicated solely to protecting the waters of Puget Sound from pollution. With a board of directors that includes Seattle's mayor, the alliance has lots of reasons to celebrate and lots of reasons to support continued efforts to keep the region's waters clean. Clean water is vital to both the shellfish industry and to our regional identity.

Environmental watchdogs benefit from the proceeds of this great event, but the attendees are the ones who really make out. Thanks to a dozen oyster farms, 20 participating restaurants and a score or more wineries and breweries, oyster lovers can revel in an unlimited number of samples of the best oysters in the world with the appropriate beverages to accompany them. There are contests to identify oyster varieties by their "merroir," and to find the best shuckers. To round out the festivities, a Celebrity Oyster Slurp challenges combatants to slurp a dozen oysters as quickly as they can.

For the true oyster lover, it's the next best thing to standing on the beach in the middle of the night and popping them down the hatch one luscious slurp at a time.

*Greg Atkinson is chef at IslandWood on Bainbridge Island. Benjamin Benschneider is a Pacific Northwest magazine staff photographer.*

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