



Oysters: The Magnificent Obsession

“As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away, leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans.”

—Ernest Hemingway, A Moveable Feast

By Jane Zatylny

 LEFT: TODD BYRNES

Family-owned Mac's Oysters has been operating in Baynes Sound since 1947 (below), which has led to an impressive pile of oyster shells.

When it comes to oysters, Hemingway got it right. Consume a dozen on the half-shell, and you'll experience an immediate sense of well-being and vitality. Oysters are a nutritional powerhouse, an excellent source of iron, zinc, copper, manganese and selenium, as well as magnesium, phosphorus and vitamin C. And the taste—don't get me started. Eating an oyster is like taking a bite out of the ocean.

I've been a big fan of bivalves since I was in my early 20s, and have eaten them raw, baked and barbecued all over North America, from the humblest beachside shack to the finest urban eatery. Everywhere I've savoured them, they've tasted different. That's because oysters, like wine, assume unique flavour notes from their environment. Vineyards have *terroir*; oysters have *merroir*. They taste like the sea, undoubtedly, but every oyster producing bay, fjord, estuary or beach is unique. And in my mind, no oyster tastes better than those harvested from our pristine B.C. waters.

Most of the province's oysters are farmed and harvested off the west and east coasts of Vancouver Island. To learn more about the bivalve business, I venture into east coast oyster country by car, following signs for the scenic Oceanside route from Parksville on the Inland Island Highway. As I wind my way along the Old Island Highway through the tiny seaside hamlets of Qualicum Bay, Bowser and Deep Bay, the broad expanse of Baynes Sound comes into view. I descend into Fanny Bay, passing the red government dock with its mob of barking sea lions, then pull off the road at Mac's Oysters. Near the water's edge, the sun's reflection on a heap of discarded oyster shells nearly blinds me. I watch as a worker in a blue rubber apron up-ends a wheelbarrow of shells onto the pile, then heads back into the processing plant.

Oyster cultivation and harvesting have been a part of this area for thousands of years. Piles of discarded oyster shells, or middens, much like the one before me, reveal that oysters were an important food source for the area's first people, the Pentlatch band of the Coast Salish. They

consumed Olympia oysters or "Olys," the province's only native oyster.

Olys were also enjoyed in great quantities in Victoria's oyster saloons during the Gold Rushes of the 1850s and '60s, when bags of oysters were brought down from the Comox-area by canoe. The first account of an oyster bar in Victoria appeared in the *British Colonist* in 1859. But by 1913, over-fishing had caused a serious decline of the fishery. The Oly has yet to recover in B.C., though they can still be found in certain coastal areas, including Victoria's Gorge Inlet. The oysters are no longer harvested commercially in B.C., and have been designated as a species at risk.

Today, the province's most widely cultivated oyster is the Pacific *Crassostrea gigas*, a faster growing, meatier oyster variety. Some "gigas" were imported as seed from Japan in the early 20th century, but modern shellfish farming, or aquaculture, in this area was pioneered by Joseph McLellan, the founder of Mac's Oysters. In the 1940s, Joe seeded the beach area in Baynes Sound with 300 pounds of the imported Japanese oyster seed.

Six Simple Steps to Shucking an Oyster

It's easier than you think. Warren Barr, executive chef at The Wickaninnish Inn in Tofino, explains how to safely shuck an oyster.



1 For safety and ease, start by setting up a small shucking station, with a shallow dish and heavy tea towel. Fold the towel and place the oyster under one of the folded ends, flat side up.



2 Press the palm of your hand down on top of the towel, and carefully insert the tip of an oyster knife into the small slot at the tip or hinge of the oyster shell. Gently twist the knife to pop the shell open.



3 Push the angled side of the knife against the top of the shell, slide the blade down, cutting the top abductor muscle, and remove the top of the shell.



4 Gently loosen the oyster meat and cut the bottom abductor muscle at the side of the shell. Carefully flip the oyster over in its shell. This offers a better presentation and ensures that the oyster has been properly shucked.

5 Tap your knife gently against the shell to release the liquor.

6 Enjoy with your choice of mignonette, lemon juice, hot sauce or just *au naturel*.





Oyster farmer, Jack Greig, pulls up trays of his Clayoquot Climax oysters in Lemmens Inlet.

Realizing the potential for a farming business with the Pacific oyster in Baynes Sound, he established Mac's in 1947. Almost 70 years later, his grandchildren and great grandchildren continue to operate the family business. The narrow channel in the Salish Sea between Denman Island and Vancouver Island offers ideal growing conditions: the wind is blocked by Denman Island, which also creates good tidal flow, and the beaches are wide and flat.

In addition to Mac's, there are now more than 20 oyster producers in the Comox Valley. In 2013, they collectively exported in excess of \$12.6 million worth of oysters to 14 different countries. The farms range from small family businesses to large outfits like the U.S.-based Taylor Shellfish Farms, which operates Fanny Bay Oysters.

I'm here to meet Gordy McLellan, general manager of Mac's—and Joe's grandson. As Gordy shows me around his operation, I realize that oyster processing is still a very labour-intensive business. Three men shuck 2,000 to 3,000 large oysters a day each, by hand. Two women wash the shucked oysters and pack them in tubs, also by hand. It is hard work, but there is plenty of laughter and camaraderie.

"It's a great life," says Gordy. "I just came off the beach. Two hours ago, I was skiing at Mount Washington. It's just so amazing to be out here in nature all the time."

He shucks an oyster and hands it to me to try. Its liquor is assertive. It's briny, almost spicy. The meat is firm, sweet and absolutely delicious. I eat six oysters and immediately feel the characteristic rush of wellness.

But oysters are not only good for us, they're also good for the environment. Ranked "Best Choice" by SeaChoice, a Canadian seafood sustainability program, these filter-feeding bivalves derive their nutrition (and their flavour) from the nutrient-rich phytoplankton in their surrounding ocean habitats. Farmed oysters also improve coastal water conditions, removing carbon dioxide from the ocean for shell formation and helping to reduce greenhouse gases.

"We're as sustainable as you can get," says Gordy. "We've been farming the

same beaches and waters since 1947, and they're still just as rich as they were then."

Oyster production begins like other farmed crops, with seed, which in this case is a tiny version of an adult oyster. The seed is reared in hatcheries from larvae, then the "grow-out" of oysters takes place in a variety of ways. These methods include both beach and deep-water techniques. Seeds are planted on beaches or set out in bags, cages, socks, lines and trays that are hung from buoys and/or rafts.

The way an oyster is cultivated helps determine its size and shape as well as the texture of its shell and cup. Tumbling machines, for instance, can shape shells, creating designer oysters from Pacific seed. This method was first pioneered by Keith Reid, who farms Kusshi and Stellar Bay oysters in the Deep Bay-area of Baynes Sound.

While some oyster farms are visible from the shore, others are accessible only by boat, particularly those in the remote fjords off the west coast of Vancouver Island. On a misty March morning, I board the *Browning Passage* in Tofino to visit Lemmens Inlet, where farmer Jack Greig produces Clayoquot Climax oysters. Marcy Young and Lutz Zilliken, owners of Tofino's Fish Store and Oyster Bar, and Warren Barr, executive chef at the Wickaninnish Inn, are already on board the 37-foot wooden boat. We warm our hands on steaming mugs of coffee on the upper viewing deck as Mike White, captain and owner of the classic yacht, eases her out of the harbour.

As the *Browning Passage* glides into the sound, the sky turns a deep lavender-grey and the drizzle of rain becomes a downpour. We move downstairs into ▶

Five Must-Try B.C. Oysters

B.C. boasts scores of different oysters—and just as many oyster bars to serve them. Here are a few of our favourites.

❶ **Kusshi** These small, tasty oysters are grown in floating trays by Keith Reid in Deep Bay. They're repeatedly tumbled so their shells are almost as deep as they are long. A great oyster for first-timers as well as seasoned oyster lovers, Kusshis start off salty, then turn sweet. The shell holds less liquor, but produces a deep, firm oyster. Enjoy a platter of raw Kusshis straight up at Blue Water Café + Raw Bar (1095 Hamilton Street, Vancouver).

❷ **Clayoquot Climax** Cultivated by Jack Greig on suspension trays in the glacial-fed waters of Lemmens Inlet, this small-to-

medium-sized oyster delivers a clean, crisp cucumber finish, and is best enjoyed with a squirt of lemon juice. Too bad for oyster lovers everywhere that they're only available at one place, the Fish Store & Oyster Bar (368 Main Street, Tofino). Never tried a raw oyster? Your first one is free. (Warning: you'll soon want more.)

❸ **Beach Angel** This beach bum may have a rugged exterior but inside it's all sweetness with a nice briny finish. Produced by Outlandish Shellfish Guild on a Cortes Island beach. Order a plate of "firmed" Beach Angel oysters at the Wickaninnish Inn's The

Pointe Restaurant (500 Osprey Lane, Tofino). A great alternative to baked oysters, this technique involves brining the live oysters overnight, then cooking them just slightly in a *sous vide* machine for a delicious near-raw result. Served on a bed of rich cream, this dish is to die for.

❹ **Black Pearl** A sophisticated sister to the Beach Angels, Black Pearl oysters are also produced by Outlandish Shellfish Guild. These deep-water tray-cultured oysters are pampered in glacier-fed, fast-flowing tidal waters near Quadra Island. They offer firm flesh, a light brine and taste

fresh and clean, like the first greens from your garden. Try a dozen with a spoonful of classic mignonette sauce on the patio of trendy Shelter Restaurant (601 Campbell Street, Tofino).

❺ **Effingham** Named for the remote deep-water inlet in Barkley Sound where it is produced by Effingham Inlet Oysters, this diminutive oyster delivers an intriguing smoky flavour in its nice plump meat. Great on the half-shell with a bit of horseradish and lemon juice at the Coast Hotel Victoria's Blue Crab Seafood House, in the capital city's Outer Harbour (146 Kingston Street, Victoria).

**It's worth noting that there are risks associated with consuming raw oysters. If you have any doubts about your personal risk of illness from eating raw oysters, you can always enjoy them fully cooked.*



the warm cabin, where Marcy begins to shuck oysters as quickly as we finish them. Jack's oysters are firm, creamy and slightly salty, with a distinctive cucumber finish. We sample them every way possible: unadorned, with a squeeze of lemon and a spoonful of fresh horseradish and with a splash of Marcy's jalapeno, cilantro and Prosecco mignonette. Staff at the Oyster Bar shuck hundreds of these beautiful oysters every day. And no wonder: the establishment, and today, this boat, are the only places on Earth where you can enjoy them.

Soon, the oyster farm comes into sight, framed by the towering spruce forests of Meares Island. Rows upon rows of barrels, each suspending 10 strings of 100 oysters apiece, bob in the water. We watch Jack work as the rain slants into the ocean, lifting bulging oyster lines out of the water on a winch. Captain Mike carefully edges his boat closer to Jack's barge, mindful of the changing tide.

Jack smiles broadly as he ties up alongside us and steps aboard, ducking out of the unrelenting rain. As he accepts a cup of coffee, I learn that he supplies the oysters on the long lines to Gordy McLellan at Mac's Oysters. It's a small world, that of an oyster farmer.

With their memory still fresh on my palate, I ask Jack how he produces his Clayoquot Climax oysters. The seeds for these oysters, he says, are planted on suspension trays. As the shells grow, Jack removes their sharp edges, or frills, by hand every five days, then tumbles the oysters about every four to six weeks in the summer to refine the shells and shape the oyster meat.

Regardless of the cultivation method or geographical location, the life of an oyster farmer involves hard work and uncertainty. The industry is highly regulated by both provincial and federal governments. (Licenses to cultivate Pacific oysters in the province are administered by Fisheries and Oceans Canada, while provincial legislation guides the administration of aquaculture leases.) Harvest prohibitions, when they occur, can be devastating to oyster farmers, much like

Marcy Young and Lutz Zilliken, owners of Tofino's Fish Store and Oyster Bar, with a line of Pacific oysters.



crop failures for other farmers.

But this work seems to bring a great deal of contentment. "It is physical," admits Jack. "Especially when the wind is blowing out here at 30 knots. But the typical day is pretty awesome. Look at the scenery around me. In the winter, there's snow up there on those peaks! I have the best office view."

As we say goodbye to Jack and start our cruise back to Tofino, I find room for a few more oysters, and savour their salty liquor one more time. And that's when it occurs to me. Oysters may be decadent. They're certainly sexy. But the real attraction is that they are a part of the ocean—part of the vast natural world of coastal B.C. And when we consume them, we are, too. 🐚

FOR MORE INFO

B.C. Shellfish & Seafood Festival
Comox Valley, June 9 to 19;
discovercomoxvalley.com

B.C. Shellfish Growers' Association
bcsga.com

Deep Bay Marine Field Station
viudeepbay.com

Clayoquot Oyster Festival, Tofino
November 17 to 19; oystergala.com

Browning Pass Boat Charters
browningpass.com

Tourism Tofino
tourismtofino.com

Discover Comox Valley
discovercomoxvalley.com

A Geography of Oysters: The Connoisseur's Guide to Oyster Eating in North America
by Rowan Jacobsen Bloomsbury (USA, 2008)