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Two-by-two Maine oysters at Eventide, starting at top left with cocktail sauce and horseradish ice: Basket Island (Casco Bay), John's River (South Bristol), Pine Point (Scarborough), Weskeag (Thomaston), Bagaduce (Penobscot), and North Haven.

The Shell Game

Maine oysters are highly prized here and nationwide for their clean, briny flavor and plump, tender texture.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

Rule Number One about oysters in a city that's full of them: They're not all alike.

At Boone's, they make it easy to discover just how varied they are. "We have a pretty cool system here—it's so smart," says bartender Steve Lovenguth. "You take this ticket [printed with a list of the day's available oysters, their place of origin, a description of the taste, and individual price, presently \$3.45 to \$4.50 for Maine oysters] and mark how many you want of each. When we bring them, you'll get the ticket back." He leads the way upstairs to the oyster bar. "You really can't just go order 'a dozen oysters' anymore."

Up here, with gulls and the working waterfront in view, the mollusks are dis-

played on ice. As I look on, Brandon Tenney shucks my selections at magician speed and they arrive on a plate with cocktail sauce, horseradish, and a tart shallot mignonette. "The lemon wedge is always at 12 o'clock. Then you go down your checklist and the oysters are arranged clockwise in that order."

First up, a Glidden Point, from Damariscotta. The shell appears just shy of three inches long, the meat is plump, salty, juicy, just perfect. On to a Weskeag, from South Thomaston. It's similar, mildly meaty, still excellent. A Dodge Cove, another from Damariscotta, is bigger, less briny, and maybe a tiny bit more tender, with a 'sweet finish,' as it says on the checklist.

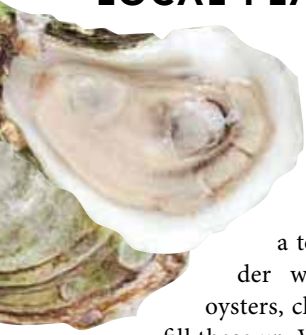
"If you eat a lot of Damariscottas, you

can just about tell how far up the river they come from," says Tenney. "The ones near the ocean are salty, while the ones way up the river are really mild."

Tenney shucks a Flying Point from Freeport—it's comparatively huge, maybe four inches. Quite a mouthful, but silkily tender, mildly salty—an irresistible feast. These must be popular.

"Actually, people gravitate toward the small ones. Sometimes we get really tiny sweet ones, and people go crazy." Tenney, a Culinary Institute graduate, knows his oysters and often starts the day with visits to Harbor Fish and Browne Trading markets to snap up his selections for the restaurant. He eats them every day. "I used to be the steak guy," he says. "Now I'm an oyster guy."

LOCAL FLAVOR



And Boone's is oyster paradise. He pulls out metal racks and trays and stacks them into a tower. "People can order whatever they want—oysters, clams, shrimp—and we fill these up. We sell a lot of oysters here." How many? "In the summer, we can shuck 600 or more in a day. Everyone on the line up here"—he gestures toward the semi-open kitchen—"knows how to shuck. So do the bartenders."

He picks up a small, cup-shaped oyster. "You can't leave without comparing Maine to the Pacific." He opens a Chelsea Gem from Puget Sound. It's plump and creamy white; the flavor is sweet and dreamy, brine from an entirely different beach and nothing like the Maine oysters. You taste the fog blowing over Port Townsend.

THE LAY OF THE LAND

"We source a lot of our oysters from the Damariscotta River," says Chris Miller, shellfish manager at Portland's Browne Trading Market. "There are certainly oyster farms elsewhere in Maine, but Damariscotta is the gold coast, with that cold, cold, brackish water. They're my favorite oysters." Miller explains that there are farmed and wild oysters in Maine. Farmers lease specific aquatic acreage from the state, while wild harvesters forage by diving and other means. Both must be licensed, and both are regulated by the state.

"The most common wild oyster here is



Above: One wild (left) and three farmed oysters from Damariscotta, "the gold coast" for Maine oysters. At upper left, a Flying Point; below right, a Maine Belon.

the Belon," says Miller. It's more precisely known as the European Flat oyster, since true Belons, like Champagne and Maine lobsters, are geographically specific. Belons' *terroir* is off the Brittany coast in France. Maine Belons established a moderate wild population after scientists in Boothbay transplanted stock from France in the 1950s. "The flavor's very different," says Miller. It's often favorably described as metallic.

Some Belons are also farmed in Maine. "Belons are grown mixed in and among the Glidden Points on my leases," says Barbara Scully at Glidden Point Oyster Company in Edgcomb. "Belons are different in every way; most notably they have a shorter shelf life of less than a week, and a bold metallic finish on the palate." The Eastern oyster, *crassostrea virginica*, and the *ostrea edulis* (Belon) are two dif-

ferent species and they do not cross breed.

MORE SHOPPING AROUND

Nick Branchina, Browne Trading's director of marketing, expands on the topic of farmed vs. wild Maine oysters. "Since they're all growing naturally, there's not much difference. There's no feed, the way there is at a fish farm. The farmed ones have been seeded in specific places and the non-farmed are randomly located. I think farmed actually have the advantage, because then you know exactly where they're from." Meaning you know they're coming from clean water. Branchina is exacting about this. "We seek oysters we know are good, and ones wanted by our clients. We have oysters grown for us in Damariscotta—Browne Points—that are really good. There's seasonality involved. But we can generally always have Maine and a few Massachusetts oysters available. And something from the West Coast."

At Harbor Fish Market on Custom House Wharf, there's even more variety: farmed Damariscottas from Glidden Point, Dodge Cove, and Pemaquid; Massachusetts oysters farmed in Katama Bay and Westport; two Prince Edward Island (PEI) farms, Irish Point and Daisy Bay; and some fascinatingly dainty wild Damariscottas brought in by divers.

"We carry Damariscottas as often as we can get them," says Cullen Bourke, seafood manager at Free Range Fish & Lobster

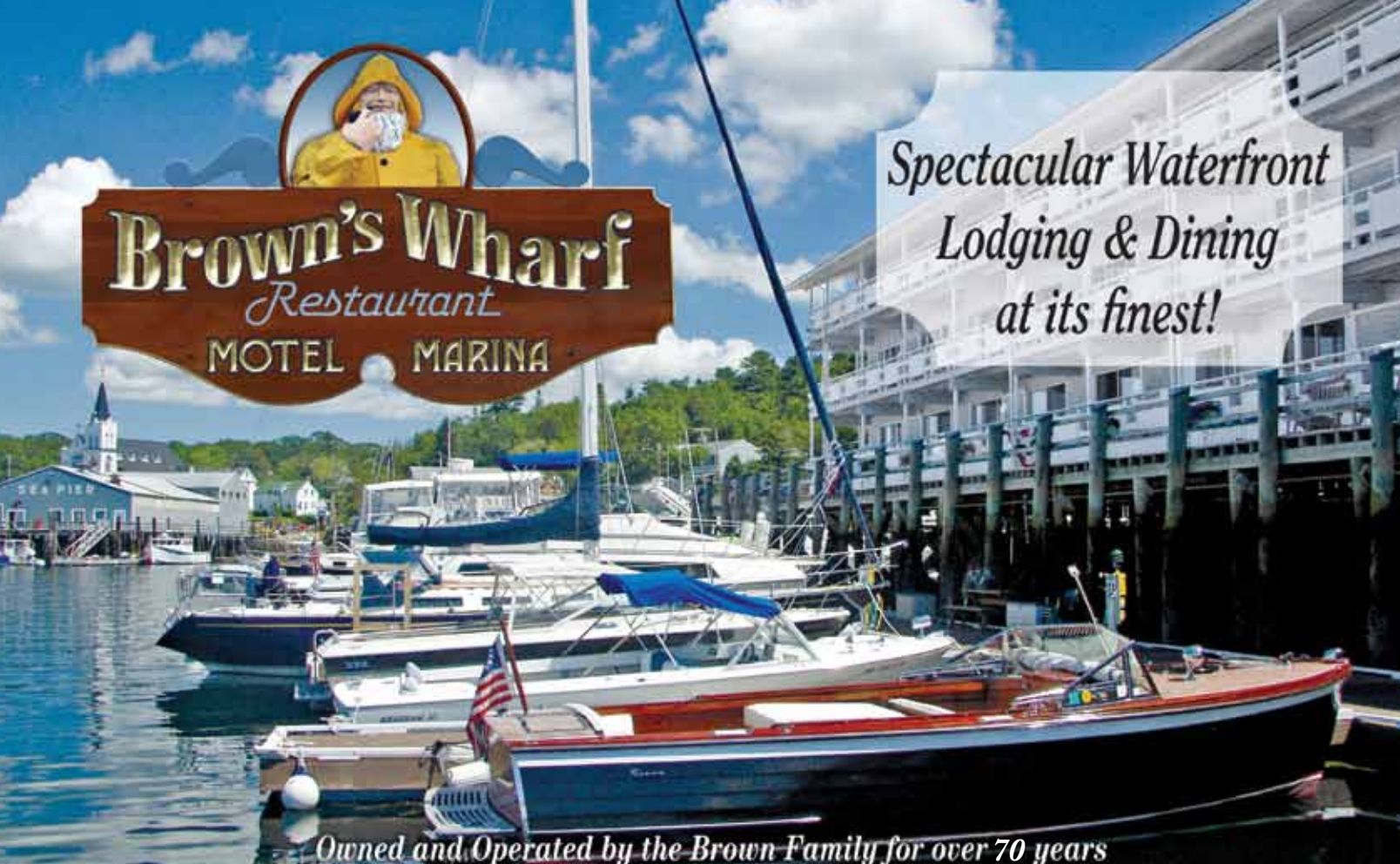


Tip: Oyster pros leave unshucked oysters flat side up on the ice to let the juices settle in the cup (serving) side.





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LOCAL FLAVOR

on Commercial Street. “People overwhelmingly want Maine oysters, and Damariscottas are a good ‘starter’ oyster. They’ve got the briny kick you’re looking for; they’re a little bit more bright. And they don’t get lost in other flavors, like sauces.”

FARM FRESH

“There are five long-standing operations growing oysters in the Damariscotta, and a handful of smaller ‘project’ growers,” says Barbara Scully, who’s owned Glidden Point Oyster Company for more than 20 years. “The growing techniques, handling methods, and quality can be highly variable at times between the different growers.” The term Damariscotta oyster is generic. Glidden Points, Pemaquids, Wiley Points, and Dodge Cove are all Damariscottas, but they’re not all alike.

“We’re one of the oldest oyster farms in Maine. I no longer harvest in the months of January, February, or March. The icy conditions are super harsh on people, boats, the equipment, and the oysters. It’s also nice to not have to worry about hav-

ing a boat in the water for winter storms. The harvest volume is somewhat variable, depending on weather, survival, and market demand. This week I shipped over two tons of oysters.”

Once you start looking around, you realize just how many Maine oysters are in transit every day, both to supply the restaurants here and to ship out of state to the gourmet world at large, where Maine oysters are in demand.

Although tiny compared to Maine’s lobster fishery—\$8 to \$9 million in oyster sales in 2012 compared to \$340 million in lobster, according to affordableacadia.com—Maine oysters are still big business.

SAMPLING EVERYWHERE

Oysters are so popular, and such featured stars on crushed ice displays around town, that it pays to seek out deals. That means happy hour.

“All our oysters are \$3 apiece,” says Laura Argitif at Old Port Sea Grill. “But they’re \$2 each at happy hour every day from 3 to 6 p.m. And on Sundays, all day, they’re six

for \$10. We have them all labeled so you can select exactly which type you want. We try to keep to Maine oysters, with maybe some from Massachusetts or PEI. We don’t like to go beyond the cold-water oysters.”

Hot Suppa, the gourmet diner in the Longfellow Square neighborhood, famously has \$1 oysters during 4 to 6 p.m. week-night happy hours. On a recent visit, almost every seat was taken at 5:30 and every party had a platter of oysters on the table. The only oysters on hand that night were from Wescott Cove in Connecticut; they were good-sized, saline, and tasty, but not quite as delicate as Mainers.

Not the raw bar type? No problem. Caiola’s on Pine Street has an enduring hit with a Caesar salad ringed with fried oysters. On Forest Avenue, Po’ Boys & Pickles is known for their Cajun fried oyster sandwiches, and Susan’s Fish-n-Chips has fried oysters by the pint, quart, or full dinner. Eventide’s raw oyster selection is terrific, but “Their oyster buns are one of my favorite things ever,” says lobsterman, novelist, and former Eventide shucker Jon Keller. ■



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