

# THE ROW 34 COOKBOOK

Stories and  
Recipes from  
a Neighborhood  
Oyster Bar



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## The Oyster Primer

When we first opened Row 34 in 2013, a conversation around oysters usually started with us describing where the oysters were from, maybe a bit about who grew them, and an introduction to the term *merroir*, which refers to the way the environment—location, water temperature, algae, and even wind direction—contributes to the flavor of an oyster.

Today, our conversations go far deeper than just how an oyster tastes. We're talking more and more about what oyster farming means on many other levels. Most oysters you find on restaurant menus these days are farmed, not wild. We've depleted most of our wild stocks to the point that many are now in protected areas and can't be harvested for commercial use. So, farmers in coastal communities around the country are using practical, noninvasive equipment to grow oysters from seed. When people hear the phrase "farmed seafood," they sometimes react negatively, as they may have learned negative things about some types of seafood farming. But rest assured that oyster farming is a type of aquaculture you can feel good about.

Oyster farmers are, deep down, environmentalists and coastal stewards. By growing oysters in a specific bay or harbor, they're adding to that waterway's ecosystem. Oysters are filter feeders, so they essentially clean the water around them, which can quickly have a positive impact on the ecosystem. They help create algae and phytoplankton, which draws fish and bolsters the life of a waterway. Plus, oystermen and women are often strongly rooted in their local communities—and in many cases those communities have been hit hard by the diminishing fishing and lobstering industries. By bringing oyster farming into small coastal towns, these stewards are not only feeding their own families—they're also putting money and opportunity back into those communities.





As you set out on your own oyster journey, consider that each oyster is doing far more than resting on a beautiful platter and providing a taste of the ocean. Oysters are part of a much larger system that is helping our environment and reviving our coastal communities.

## Oyster Basics

There are five species of oysters that grow in the United States. Within those species there are thousands of varieties, but in general knowing the species of the oyster you're eating will help you understand what you're about to taste.

### EASTERN (*CRASSOSTREA VIRGINICA*)

These oysters are native to the United States. They grow up and down the eastern seaboard from Nova Scotia to Texas. They exude merroir, meaning they take on the flavors of their environment more than any other species. And they're tough, both in surviving the elements and in texture—they've usually got a good chew to them. These can be large or small and range from mild to super briny.

### PACIFIC (*CRASSOSTREA GIGAS*)

These oysters were brought over from the Miyagi Prefecture of northern Japan in the 1950s and were planted on the West Coast. They are a fast-growing oyster and they're the most commonly grown oyster in the world. These can be large or small and are a bit sweet with notes of cucumber.

### KUMAMOTO (*CRASSOSTREA SIKAMEA*)

Originally, these oysters came from the Nagasaki area of Japan and are now grown in the Pacific Northwest. These are considered a good starter oyster since they're firm and sometimes sweet with lots of melon and honeydew flavors.

### EUROPEAN FLAT OR BELON (*OSTREA EDULIS*)

These European oysters were brought over to the coast of Maine by researchers in the 1950s. They now grow wild along parts of the northeastern coast of the United States and even down into Massachusetts. The shells are very flat and round. The flavor is challenging; they're quite metallic, almost coppery tasting, with a sharp finish.

### OLYMPIA (*OSTREA CONCHAPHILA*)

These are the only native species of North America besides *Virginia* (Eastern) oysters. Tiny in size, they are big in flavor. They're very slow-growing oysters that can be fragile and temperamental. Unfortu-



nately, wild stocks have been depleted, but some farmers are having success growing them in the Pacific Northwest. The primary flavor is copper, but these can be rich and briny as well.

I recommend *A Geography of Oysters: The Connoisseur's Guide to Oyster Eating in North America* by Rowan Jacobsen (Bloomsbury, 2007) if you are looking for a more comprehensive reference guide.

## Oyster Geography

**Northeast:** From Nova Scotia to the mid-Atlantic, you'll find oysters with big brine that provide lots of opportunity to taste a range of merroir that varies from state to state and even from cove to cove. Several established oyster companies thrive, but more and more small growers are coming online each year.

**South:** From the mid-Atlantic down through Texas, oysters can vary drastically. The brine might not be as prevalent in Southern oysters, but there's plenty of variety. The South is also the fastest-growing oyster farming region in America—in just a few years thirteen new oyster





farms opened in Alabama alone, and there are now farms operating in every Southern coastal state.

**West:** Here you'll find several species, including Pacifics, Kumamotos, and Olympias. Flavor profiles vary up and down the West Coast, but often, you'll get bright flavors like melon and cucumber, as well as minimal brine.

### Six Oyster Growers to Know

It's hard for me to pick a favorite oyster farm, or even narrow it down to six. But I've chosen to highlight these because they mean something to me personally or they are strong growing operations in their regions.

#### **Hama Hama Oysters | Lilliwaup, Washington | Grower: Adam James**

The Pacific Northwest is stunningly beautiful—a raw, rugged area that has a unique feel to it. It's easy to get lost there, and yet it definitely has a sense of place. The James family has been growing oysters and logging in this area for decades. I've eaten Hama Hama oysters many times and they are a perfect example of what a great oyster from the area should be: a plump deep oyster with firm texture and a great vegetal flavor.

#### **Hog Island Oyster Co. | Tomales Bay, California | Grower: John Finger**

My love for oysters started in Tomales Bay at Hog Island. I was a chef in Northern California, and the staff took a trip to the farm. Back then, it was a humble version of what it has grown into—but my education started right there. I had enjoyed oysters plenty of times before, but eating them straight from the water turned something on for me. Hog Island has its own incredible oyster bars in California; that's where most of the farm's oysters go. But occasionally I get to serve them in New England. The flavor always brings me back to Tomales Bay: sweet minerality makes these a West Coast standout.

#### **Island Creek Oysters | Duxbury, Massachusetts | Grower: Skip Bennett**

One of my greatest and most accidental accomplishments is that I was the first chef ever to visit the Island Creek Oysters farm in Duxbury. A few staff members and I drove down to meet Skip and see what he was growing. It was a small operation then run by Skip and a few of his buddies—now it's grown into something outstanding. Skip put Duxbury on the oyster map in his own rogue way, typical of an oyster farmer. During that visit, I found my East Coast version of Hog Island oysters and for years they were the only oysters I served. The original Island Creek is still one of the best oysters ever, and now Skip's farm is growing several different varieties. He has taught me more about



oysters than anyone—and I still love eating his. The briny pop makes them a delicious example of an East Coast oyster.

**Moon Shoal Oysters | Barnstable, Massachusetts | Grower: Jon Martin**

The conditions in Barnstable are just right for growing amazing oysters, and Moon Shoal Oysters is in one of the best spots on Cape Cod, in my opinion. Although it's hard to pick one farm to highlight from this area, Moon Shoal oysters have always stood out to me. Jon was once a firefighter and switched gears to grow oysters—and he always seems to be having a great time doing it. His oysters grow in open trays on the sandy bay floor. Their salty and buttery flavor is hard not to love.

**Merritt Island Oysters | West Bath, Maine | Grower: Jordi St. John**

With its many islands, Maine has more coastline than any other state. In recent years Maine has also added more oyster farmers than any other state—making it hard to nail down just one favorite. But if I had to, it would be Merritt Island. With massive tides and cold, algae-rich water, the New Meadows River helps provide a flavor that balances between vegetal and briny. Small to medium in size with a deep cup, Merritt Island oysters are a great example of what a Maine oyster can be.

**Cherrystone Aqua-Farms | Cape Charles, Virginia | Grower: Tim Rapine**

A lot of oysters are grown on Virginia's eastern shore, and many of them are really good. I love the Misty Point oysters from Cherrystone Aqua-Farms because they have a little more flavor complexity than the other oysters available in the area. They are grown in floating cages and get knocked around on both tides, which gives them a nice cup. The flavor is salt up-front, which gives way to seaweed and mossy tones on the finish.

## How to Order Oysters

### EATING OUT

If you're new to ordering oysters in a restaurant, don't be intimidated. It's okay if you don't know what to do. I like to eat oysters in a place that sells different varieties, so I recommend finding a place with a good oyster list. The best way to start is by asking what's most popular and begin with those. Anyone selling oysters should be willing and able to help coach you through the process. Ask a lot of questions, like where the oysters are from and how they're grown. At a good oyster spot, they'll know. I also recommend starting small: Pick two or three varieties to taste together. Try them with a squeeze of lemon or a little

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## How to Shuck Oysters

Like any task in the kitchen, shucking oysters takes practice. It's an empowering feeling, though, to shuck an oyster properly—and a great party trick.



**Step 1.** Wash your oysters thoroughly under cold running water, scrubbing the outside of the shells. Do not let them sit in the water; move them to a cutting board. Prepare a platter by lining it with a few paper towels and then covering the platter with crushed ice. Prepare your sauces (page 33), lemon wedges (page 43), and crackers (page 221).

**Step 2.** Place an oyster cup-side down on a towel. Fold the towel partway over the top of the oyster, making sure the hinge is exposed. This will protect your non-shucking hand.

**Step 3.** Hold the oyster down firmly against the surface with the palm of your non-shucking hand. The towel should create a barrier between your hand and the oyster.

**Step 4.** Place the tip of a shucking knife inside the hinge between the top and bottom shells. Push the tip into the hinge; twist the knife back and forth until you feel the hinge pop.

**Step 5.** Open the top shell of the oyster just enough to slide the oyster knife along the inside of the top shell to loosen the meat from the shell.

**Step 6.** Holding the oyster level so the liquor does not run out, carefully loosen the bottom muscle from its shell, so the oyster is “floating” in the cup of the bottom shell.





## Raw Oysters with Cocktail Sauce, Classic Mignonette, and Spicy Mignonette

These are the sauces that we serve with most raw bar items. The sauces can be made a few days in advance and refrigerated. I don't personally love cocktail sauce on oysters, but a little freshly grated horseradish on an oyster might change your life. If you can't find fresh horseradish, simply use all prepared (jarred) horseradish in the cocktail sauce. And if you like some heat, use a jalapeño instead of a Fresno pepper in the spicy mignonette.

Place a few paper towels on the bottom of a large, rimmed tray (stainless steel works well) and fill with crushed ice or small ice pellets.

Pour each sauce into individual ramekins and place the ramekins in the center of the oyster platter.

Using the instructions on page 25, shuck the oysters, making sure to cut the meat completely from the shell; discard the tops and arrange the oysters on top of the crushed ice. Scatter lemon wedges around the ice and serve immediately.

### Cocktail Sauce

If using fresh horseradish, peel it and use a microplane to grate it into a medium bowl. You should have about 2 tablespoons. Add the remaining ingredients to the bowl and stir until combined.

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**MAKES 24 OYSTERS, 4 TO 6 SERVINGS**

- ¼ cup Cocktail Sauce (below)
- ¼ cup Classic Mignonette (following page)
- ¼ cup Spicy Mignonette (following page)
- 24 medium oysters
- 8 lemon wedges (see page 43)

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### FOR THE COCKTAIL SAUCE

**MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS**

- One 2-inch piece fresh horseradish
- 3 tablespoons prepared horseradish
- 1 cup ketchup
- 1 cup chili sauce
- 1 tablespoon Tabasco sauce
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper





## Grilled Oysters with Lemon-Garlic Butter

This is the perfect summertime outdoor recipe that is both easy and delicious. These are great eaten right out of the shell—with or without the toast. This recipe also works with clams. Don't overcook the oysters. Let them warm through on the outside edges of a grill. When the butter is bubbling, it's time to eat.

Heat a grill to medium heat.

Place the sourdough slices on the grill and toast lightly, 1 to 2 minutes per side. Cut each into 3 evenly sized pieces and set aside.

Shuck the oysters, leaving the meat in the shells. Divide the butter among the oysters, giving about 1 generous teaspoon to each, and carefully place them on the grill. (Melting butter will flare up if it drips, so try to place them around the edge if the flame is high.) Watch for the butter to bubble and then grill until the oysters are firm to the touch, about 1 minute after the butter starts to bubble.

Sprinkle the oysters with parsley and a pinch of salt. Serve with the grilled sourdough bread.

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**MAKES 18 OYSTERS, 4 TO 6 SERVINGS**

**6 large slices sourdough bread**

**18 medium to large oysters**

**4 ounces Lemon-Garlic Butter (page 226), at room temperature**

**2 tablespoons flat-leaf parsley leaves, cut into strips**

**Sea salt**