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THE WESTIN
PORTLAND
MAINE

New Oyster Cult

It's a
rising tide for
Ostreophiles.

BY SARAH MOORE

+ Diving into Maine oysters with *In A Half Shell* blogger Julie Qiu

AS THE SUN DIPS toward the horizon at the end of one of Maine's burnished summer days, like clockwork the bars, restaurants, and seafood shacks scattered along Maine's coastline begin to crowd with hungry visitors, their skin flushed and mouths parched from the heat and sharp sea breeze. Beer glasses are filled and refilled, sweating condensation onto the bar top. When it's too hot to eat but too late

not to, these sun-soaked *gourmands* only have eyes for one thing: fresh oysters served in the half shell with just a squeeze of lemon or a drizzle of *mignonette*. The tang of brine delivers you back to the ocean in one mouthful. Savoring the primal enjoyment of eating raw oysters, it's surprising to remember that only a matter of decades ago, a plate of the fresh shellfish would have been all but of unheard of in Maine.

"What's
happening
with Maine
oysters is

fresh & exciting."

Taste Maine Oysters!



Nonesuch

(SCARBOROUGH RIVER) *

These free-range oysters are harvested from a tidal estuary. Nonesuch oysters are meaty and retain a light, grassy flavor from the surrounding marsh.



Basket Island

(CASCO BAY) *

Basket Island oysters have a crisp taste of brine and barley thanks to what the grower calls a "perfect trifecta" of Casco Bay's cold, salty, phytoplankton-rich water.



Flying Point

(FREEPORT)

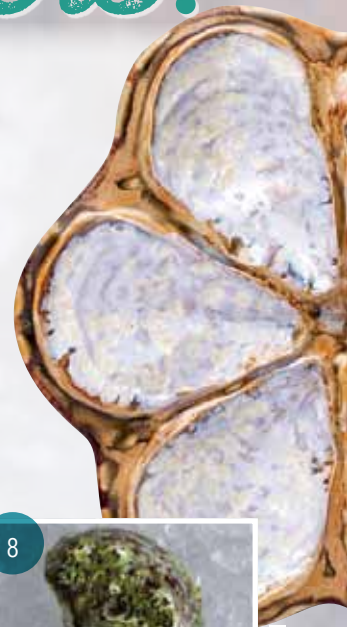
These plump oysters are planted on the hard-packed floor of the bay, where they grow robust shells. Bright and clean-tasting, Flying Point oysters pair perfectly with vinegar dressing.



Winterpoint

(WEST BATH) *

Cultivated in Mill Cove Bay, Winterpoint oysters taste mildly sweet and possess a medium salinity. Firm and up to four inches long, they are available year-round.



Pemaquid

(DAMARISCOTTA RIVER) *

One of the briniest oysters in Maine, Pemaquids have an appetizing lemony flavor that complements their light texture.



Glidden Point

(DAMARISCOTTA RIVER) *

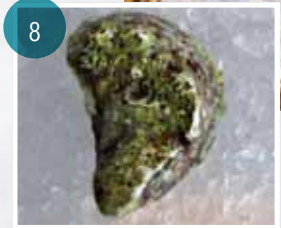
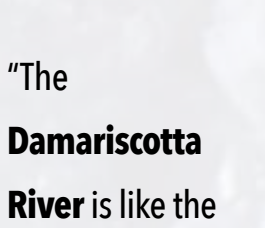
Planted in the Damariscotta River, Glidden Point oysters are allowed to mature over four years, creating a firm, meaty oyster with a strong shell.



Otter Cove

(DAMARISCOTTA RIVER) *

Otter Cove oysters spend half their lives in the brackish river and half submerged in salt water, creating a small, sweet oyster with a delicate mouthfeel.



John's River

(JOHN'S RIVER) *

Have you ever seen an oyster shell as big as your hand? Look no further than a Johns River oyster. These oysters have an appealing brininess and a sweet, fruity essence.

"The Damariscotta River is like the Napa Valley of shellfish."

—Julie Qiu



Weskeag

(WESKEAG RIVER)

These three-inch oysters are firm and highly briny. The versatile Weskeag oysters are suitable in both hot and cold dishes.



North Haven

(PULPIT HARBOR) *

Sourced from a family fishery, North Haven oysters spend the 3-4 years of their lives hand-planted on the bed of a pond. These oysters are diver-harvested only.



Bagaduce

(BAGADUCE RIVER)

Buttery and sweet, these oysters come from the mildly salty waters of the reversing falls of the Bagaduce River. Bagaduce oysters are consistent in their flavor, texture, and size.



Little Island

(BAGADUCE RIVER)

With cups the size and shape of golf balls, Little Island oysters are best enjoyed on the half shell. A bright, fresh, and mildly salty oyster.



Taunton Bay

(TAUNTON) *

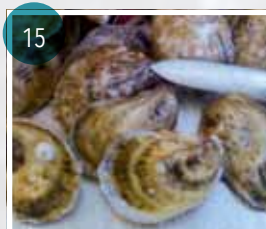
Tumbled with fresh saltwater twice a day thanks to their native waterfall habitat, Taunton Bay oysters have a salty flavor that culminates in a mild copper finish.



Ebencook

(WEST BOOTHBAY HARBOR)

The waters of West Boothbay Harbor have very little freshwater influence, so both the water and the oysters have a high salinity and a briny quality.



Gay Island

(MEDUNCOOK RIVER)

Submerged in saltwater until harvest, Gay Island oysters are intensely briny but sweet.



Spinney Creek

(PISCATAQUA RIVER)

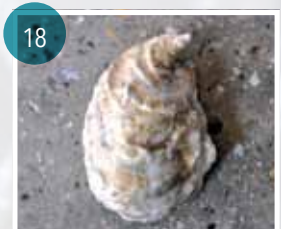
Deeply cupped shells encase the plump meat of Spinney Creek oysters. The oysters spend time in a quality assurance laboratory before going to market.



Wawenauk

(MUSCONGUS BAY)

Densely textured, these oysters spend a year or two in a sandy river bottom before reaching their full maturity. The meat inside is plump and salty but retains a lemony finish.



Dodge Cove Pemaquid

(DAMARISCOTTA RIVER)

Full and firm, these oysters boast a light citrus flavor with a touch of brine.

*Julie Qiu Recommends

1 - NONESUCH OYSTERS; 2 - ZAGAT; 3 - FLYING POINT; 4 - WINTERPOINT; 5 - PEMAQUID; 6 - MEGAN DUNLAP; 7 - ZOE LAWRENCE; 8 - MEGAN DUNLAP; 9, 10, 11 - NONESUCH OYSTERS; 12 - ZAGAT; 13 - FLYING POINT; 14 - WINTERPOINT; 15 - PEMAQUID; 16 - MEGAN DUNLAP; 17 - ZOE LAWRENCE; 18 - MEGAN DUNLAP

Premium Plates



Traditional Oyster Platter, \$135 by Allison Evans.



Walnut oyster board, hand-carved by Paul Sampson of Oyster River Joinery, \$150.



Antique Minton Majolica Oyster Plate, \$475 on eBay.



Robert's Maine Grill in Kittery serves up an array of local oysters.

11-JP SHELLFISH CO.; 12-PANGAEA SHELLFISH CO.; 13-KEN'S PLACE; 14-JULIE OIU; 15-TRACKSIDE STATION; 16-SNOWVILLAGE INN; 17-WAWENNAUK; 18-MEGAN DUNLAP; RIGHT HAND PAGE: JULIE OIU

The history of the Atlantic oyster, or *Crassostrea virginica*, is a tale of boom and bust. As recently as the early 20th century, a large number of bays, rivers, and estuaries along the Atlantic Coast were thickly carpeted with wild oysters. "For centuries, there was a unique and delicate balance of natural oyster populations and native human populations," says Peter Smith of Otter Cove Farms. "Then we began to industrialize rapidly, and cities began to expand. Oysters became a real commodity in these urban areas. They were so plentiful and accessible. You didn't need to hunt

them or raise and farm them—they were just there."

Abundant and decadent, oysters were an affordable luxury that transcended class divides. Oyster shells littered the sawdust-strewn floors of New York's taverns. "From the time of the Revolution till the last beds were closed in 1927, the price [of oysters in NYC] barely moved," says *The Big Oyster* author Mark Kurlansky in an interview on NPR. "There was something called The Canal Street Plan, which was all-you-can-eat [oysters] for six cents, at a time

when Delmonico's was charging 50 cents a berry for out-of-season strawberries."

But the insatiable hunger of growing populations and effluent waste produced by large cities like Manhattan started to sour the oyster dream. Free-flowing sewage infected oyster beds in areas like the once-abundant Long Island Sound in New York, causing outbreaks of diseases like cholera among those who consumed the raw bivalve. To top it off, the infamous 1938 New England hurricane and a shellfish parasite that decimated swathes of the Atlantic oyster beds during the 1950s were the last nails in the coffin for oysters, according to *Scien-*



DISCOVERY

tific American.

“Growing up, the old saying went that you shouldn’t eat oysters during months that *don’t* contain the letter ‘r,’” says Lisa Carol Rose, a fifth generation waterman—the term used in Chesapeake Bay to describe an oyster fisherman. “The summer months are when algae blooms or ‘red tides’ occur, spreading toxins that are then absorbed by shellfish.” By this measure, wild oysters were firmly off the menu during Vacationland’s busiest months.

In Maine, two generations of oyster eaters slowly forgot such a delicacy even existed. They all but dropped from the menus of cel-



In A Half Shell has partnered with Maine Sea Grant to develop the Oyster Trail of Maine, a program that aims to educate locals and visitors alike on local oyster varieties and the growers, purveyors, and restaurants that get them to you.

brated restaurants. Oysters seemed down-and-out, with all hope lost.

A MIRACLE COMEBACK

Following fallow decades, science ushered in a new dawn for the maligned shellfish. “Cleaner waters and advances in aquaculture techniques made oyster growing a viable business. Today, most commercial oysters in New England come from hatchery-reared larvae,” says *Scientific American*. Farms have also introduced the native species’ suave European cousin, *Ostrea edulis*, to Maine waters.

The market is greedy for this renaissance. Step into any seafood bar in Portland, and you’ll see a menu of oyster varieties on sale for up to \$3 each on the half shell. Kurlansky calls it the “second Golden Age of the oyster.”

The Oyster Chronicles

International oyster expert **Julie Qiu** knows a great oyster when she tastes one. The New York-based osteophile and founder of *In A Half Shell* blog recently made a five-day trip to Maine to indulge her passion for our oysters.

BY JULIE QIU

AS AN INTERNATIONAL OYSTER FANATIC, I find it wise to be diplomatic when I’m asked, “Where do the best oysters come from?” encouraging the asker to remember that every oyster-producing region *can* grow exceptional oysters. I can rave over an oyster from anywhere, as long as it’s served in peak condition.

But I’ve got a **confession: I secretly favor Maine oysters over all other regions in North America.** Maybe I’m biased from happy childhood memories of Acadia National Park and romantic summer trips with my then boyfriend, now husband. Maine has always served us well as a place of relaxation and renewal. We even got married in Stockton Springs and toasted our new life together with champagne and local oysters. Objectively speaking, I think the pristine environment and bracingly cold waters of the Gulf of Maine make the oysters here taste a cut above the rest. You just can’t deny the crisp brininess and bone-broth savoriness of the oysters that come out of these waters.

Oysters aren’t that different from fine wines insofar as they are site-expressive, meaning their taste is shaped by the characteristics of their growing environment. **Where wines have terroirs, oysters are defined by “meroirs.”** Water salinity, temperature, the type of algae present in the water, and seabed characteristics all factor into an oyster’s flavor.

Day One: I land at Portland International Jetport and get right down to business. First stop: Eventide Oyster Co. for a midday snack. My first meal of the trip features new discoveries from Brown Point, Otter Cove, and Schoodic Point farms. A plate of fluke crudo with wild blueberry and hoisin sauce is a delicious addition to my oyster-centric diet.

Temporarily satiated, I head south to meet up with Abigail Carroll, the “accidental oyster farmer” who grows Nonesuch Oysters near Scarborough, and I’m immediately fascinated by her approach to the craft. Scrappy and innovative, she has repurposed old lobster traps as make-shift oyster nurseries. They seem to perform just as well as traditional gear.

I sample some of her bottom-planted oysters, bag-cultured oysters, and a couple of her Nonesuch Flat—a variety that is native to Europe (*Ostrea edulis*) but can also be found in Maine. They have a robust, savory flavor and metallic finish that is completely different from our native Atlantic species (*Crassostrea virginica*).

Day Two: As soon as I set foot inside Robert’s Maine Grill in Kittery, I automatically float over to the stainless-steel raw bar beneath the cathedral ceiling. Now that’s what I call an oyster theater! Executive Chef Brandon Blethen and Tom Robinson from Taylor Lobster Company and I begin discussing oysters over a round of beers. We sample a platter of two dozen oysters from several appellations in Maine, New Hampshire, and Nova Scotia. I whip out my *33 Oysters on the Half Shell* tasting journal, and we proceed to compare tasting notes like college kids cramming for finals week.

The complex, layered seaweed and mineral notes of the Cape Blue oysters from the Damariscotta River are wonderful, but the real showstopper of the day is Chef Blethen’s cold, hickory-smoked Glidden Points. The smoky brine takes this raw oyster to a whole other level.

Day Three: A long drive from Southern Maine to Mount Desert Island is richly rewarded with some of the tastiest wood-fired pizza I’ve ever had and a round of freshly harvested oysters from Western Bay, Mount Desert Island.

I meet with oyster rancher Matt Gerard, the owner of Bar Harbor’s Sweet Pea Farm, who is a generous and entertaining host. His personal approach to oyster farming can be described as *laissez-faire*: they are bottom-cultured and exposed to the elements and predators.

Later that afternoon, I have a chance to tour a nearby oyster lease with Brian Harvey, grower of Mount Desert Island Selects. These are some of the sweetest and meatiest oysters I’ve ever found in Maine. Their umami taste actually reminds me of cured ham. Prosciutto of the sea, anyone?



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In Maine, it may be more prudent to call it the third. If you peel away from Route One just after crossing the Damariscotta River and continue on foot, directly on the riverbanks you'll discover evidence of

this region's ancient appetite for bivalves. "Deposits of oyster shells are continuous on both sides for over three hundred yards," writes Harold W. Castner in *The Prehistoric Oyster Shell Heaps of the Damariscotta*



The Walrus and the Carpenter speaking to the Oysters by illustrator John Tenniel depicts the famous poem from Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through The Looking Glass*. The Walrus and Carpenter's rapacious appetites for oysters mirrors the modern day demand for the bivalve.

Day Four: The Damariscotta River is like the Napa Valley of shellfish. After a scenic drive down the eastern bank of the river, I arrive at Mook Sea Farms. No other farm exemplifies both the art and science of oyster farming as well as this one. A scientist, inventor, and climate-change activist, founder Bill Mook is an amalgamation of Bill Nye, Jacques Cousteau, and Willy Wonka. Mook Sea Farms primarily uses a floating cage system to cultivate their oysters. The wave action and plentiful food allows their oysters to grow quickly and produce clean, manicured shells.

Day Five: I can't leave Maine without a proper "shuck your own" experience at Glidden Point Oyster Farm. I try my hand at shucking an XL Glidden Point, and it certainly puts up a fight. But nothing is more satisfying than shucking your own briny lunch right at the source.

I make my way back to Portland in search of one last indulgence before I leave. My last stop on this whirlwind oyster tour is at the corner of Commercial and, appropriately, Pearl Street. If hot dog and pretzel stands are iconic to New York, then Brendan Parson's BP Shuck Shack fills that role in Portland. Brendan's oyster cart has everything you need for a great *al fresco* raw bar experience, including a detailed map of the Damariscotta River. ■

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DISCOVERY

River in 1969. “There are five major mounds and many smaller deposits. The size of the oyster shells in these deposits excites the imagination. They could range from a foot in length to twenty inches.”

One of the largest is Whaleback Shell Midden, a heap of discarded shells believed to have been formed over the course of one thousand years by the native people. “It used to be the size of an apartment building,” says Peter Smith. The lyrically named “Glidden Midden” can be found on the opposite bank. Both mounds were partially harvested and processed for chicken feed in the 1800s or eroded by tides but remain some of the largest midden deposits in the country.

During the late 19th century, the elite ostreophiles of the East Coast preferred to discard their shells upon ornately designed oyster plates. According to *Distinction* Magazine, the trend began with Lucy Hayes, wife of President Rutherford B. Hayes, who “decided to replace the White House china, [and suddenly] oyster plat-



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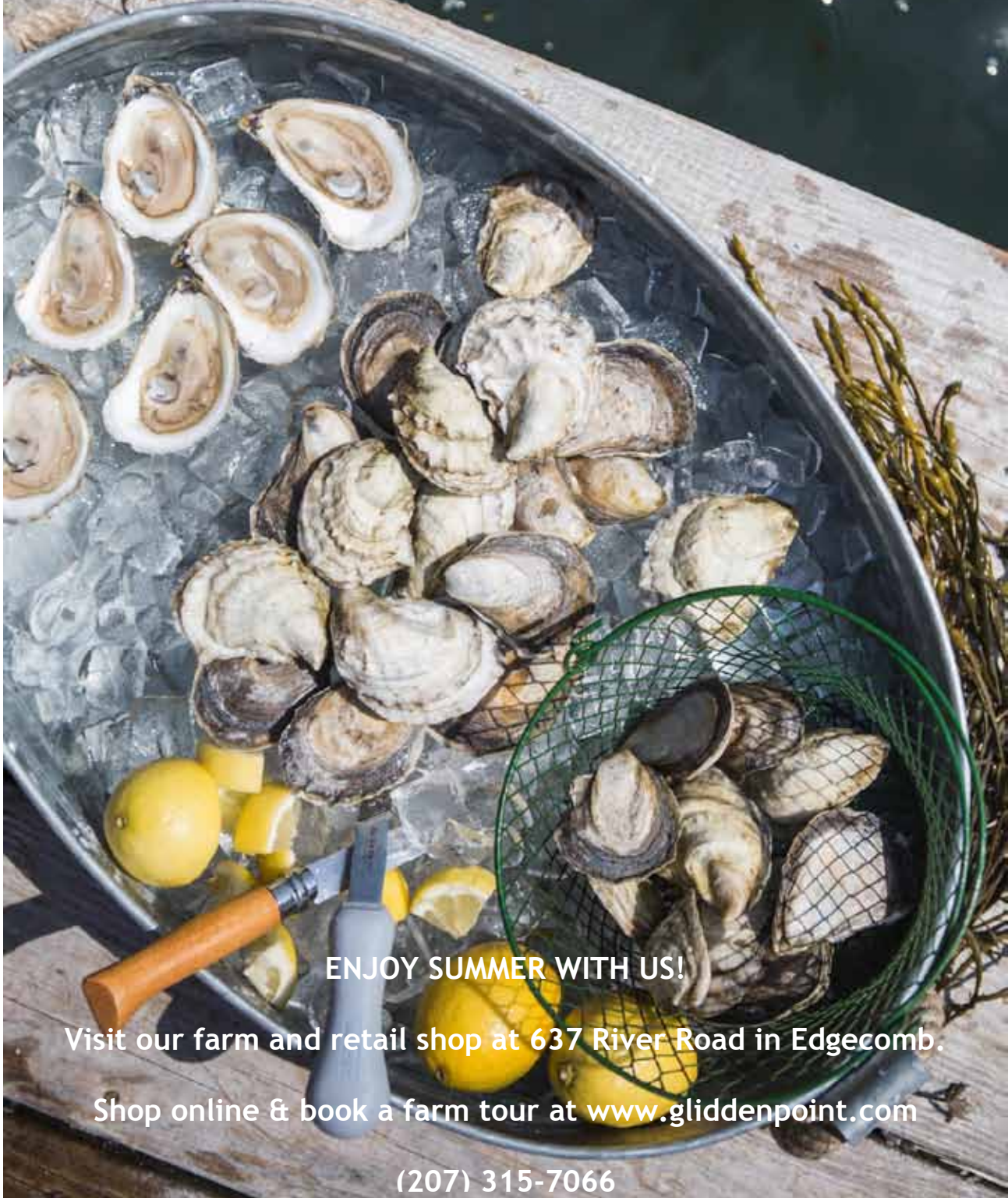
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DISCOVERY

ters had to be part of the set. Working with the artist Theodore Russell Davis, Lucy settled on a design motif shockingly different from the staid patterns of her predecessors...oyster platters with porcelain half shells rimmed in gold and resting on a tangle of seaweed."

The presidential interest sparked a sensation that resulted in Limoges and Haviland porcelain firms producing a universe of fancifully painted platters to meet worldwide demand. Today these collectors' items are being whisked out of dusty cabinets and put to immediate use by 21st century enthusiasts.

Modern-made oyster platters seem to favor smooth lines and natural materials. At Scales Restaurant on Custom House Wharf, efficient wait-staff scoop crushed ice into a shallow groove that runs the length of the long polished-concrete bar. Deft-fingered, they shuck the fresh oysters and present them delicately perched on the ice in their half shell, pulsing sea water through translucent flesh. At BP's Shuck



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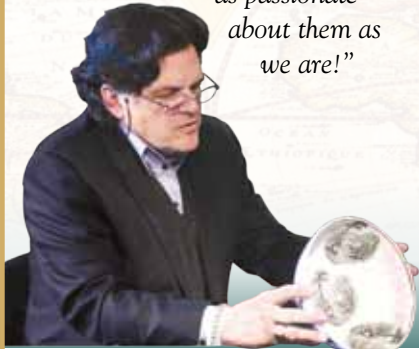
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DISCOVERY



J's Oyster has been a staple of Portland's waterfront for over 30 years. "Until recently, we only used oysters from Chesapeake Bay," a server tells us. "Then suddenly all these local oyster growers began popping up. We source Maine oysters now. I think they taste better."



Shack (above), a handcart that you'll find roaming Portland this summer, Brendan Parsons serves up his Damariscotta bivalves on thick slabs of wood engraved with six oyster-shaped dimples, handmade by local artist Paul Sampson.

As Maine's foodie community surges through the summer season, Otter Cove is shifting gears to meet the demand for high-quality shellfish. "I'm filling orders for places like Eventide, Central Provisions, Tipó, Scales, Earth—the top restaurants that are looking for an exceptional product. [Co-owner Brian Mozeleski] and I are committed to raising quality oysters responsibly." The local industry is bolstered by the news that Island Creek Oysters from Boston will install themselves in Creighton and Sons flower market on Washington Avenue. Flowing in the opposite direction, Eventide will open an oyster bar in Boston's Fenway neighborhood. Reading between the lines, it looks as though the tide for oysters will continue to rise in Maine. ■

FROM TOP: MEAGHAN AMURICE; JULIE OIU



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