

# Life on the Flats

WRITTEN BY KERRY NEWBERRY PHOTOGRAPHY BY RON WURZER

Even though it's long past sunset, Totten Inlet is aglow. Lanterns flicker like fireflies across the bay, and Orion's Belt glimmers in the night sky. Ice and oysters clink and chime, like wine glasses in a celebratory toast, as shells are tipped, shucked and tossed.

Urbanites clad in wellington boots and wool caps slurp oysters, sip wine and listen to the singsong tale of the Lewis Carroll's Walrus & Carpenter, as the tide slowly rolls in. "I like to say it's half madness," says host and oyster poet Jon Rowley, "and half magic."

Rowley is a true oyster devotee; he can recount oyster-eating parties with the likes of Julia Child and recites the infamous oyster quote by writer Ernst Hemingway with ease. Ever since he ate his first oyster by moonlight at Taylor Shellfish Farm, he's been caravanning lucky groups on windy roads to Totten Inlet for the rarest oyster fete.

Eating oysters by moonlight enchants, even more so when standing on a bed of bivalves growing beneath your feet. And timing is everything. "We need a low minus tide that happens between 8pm to 10pm in the evening," says Rowley, of his poetically deemed Walrus & Carpenter Picnics. Since this occurs only a few nights each winter, the magic truly is found in the tides of Totten Inlet. All year long, though, the inlet holds an allure. Totten is one of five long, narrow inlets in the Puget Sound, framed by tall evergreens and often painted in a shroud of fog.

The area is home to some of the most famous oyster appellations in the nation—and nurtures five oyster species: the Olympia, Kumamoto, Pacific, Virginica and European Flats. "At this time of year, a Totten Virginica right off the beach, it's hard to beat," says Bill Taylor, of Taylor Shellfish Farms. It smacks of a sea-salt kiss: crisp, brisk, briny.



Bill Taylor with his late father Justin Taylor, the patriarch of Taylor Shellfish Farms, who could be found walking the tide flats most daylight tides up until the age of 90. LEFT The clam and oyster seed nursery at Taylor Shellfish, also known as FLUPSY (Floating Upwell System) in Shelton, Washington, the largest facility of its kind in the world.

The final stage of oyster harvest in the South Puget Sound, from bay to boat. RIGHT Sunlight on The Zora, an oyster work boat packed with tubs of oysters harvested by hand or pitchfork. As one part of their sustainability plan, Taylor Shellfish builds and maintains their own boats, farming equipment, and a fleet of vehicles. "Because when you are thinking in 50 year cycles, that makes sense," says Marco Pinchot, Community Relations and Sustainability Manager. Taylor Shellfish Farms was one of the first shellfish farms to be certified by Food Alliance, a non-profit organization that certifies farms, ranches, food processors and distributors for sustainable agriculture and business practices.

A hallowed ground for oysters, the south Puget Sound is fed by seasonal freshwater from the Olympic and Cascade Mountain watersheds. The ample fresh water that runs into the Puget Sound basin, boosts the production of algae. Oysters grow quickly, thriving in this algae-rich water; the result is a crisp, firm, full oyster.

In his book, "A Geography of Oysters," author Rowan Jacobsen calls Washington state "oyster nirvana." It's the perfect confluence of geography, geology and climate, creating ideal growing conditions for high quality oysters. "Nowhere else possesses such an amazing jumble of landscapes, of oyster species, and of nuanced oysters," writes Jacobsen.

Similar to wine grapes, oysters reflect the taste of where they are grown. This taste of place in wine is called terroir, a French word that loosely encapsulates land, soil, aspect and weather. For oysters, the essence of place is merroir, a term coined by shellfish guru Jon Rowley.

Bill Taylor, of Taylor Shellfish Farms, is deeply rooted to place, here in the south Puget Sound. "Our family has been in the oyster business for about 120 years," he says. The Taylor legacy reads like a Wild West tale. The story begins with his great grandfather, who tried his hand at everything from ranching with Wyatt Earp in Arizona to searching for gold in Alaska.

Luckily, the elder Taylor landed in Washington in the 1890's and began farming the tiny Olympia oyster, the only oyster native to the west coast. Today, Bill and his brother Paul, along with their brother-in-law Jeff Pearson, are the fourth generation of his family to run Taylor Shellfish Farms, the largest producer of shellfish in the United States.

The modest headquarters sits in the tiny town of Shelton, Washington, near Totten Inlet, where Bill and his brother began working the mudflats at the ages of five and seven. "We always enjoyed the activity and being outside," says Taylor. At that time, most of the families living on the bay were shellfish farmers.

When Taylor speaks of the other shellfish growers in the area, he smiles when he recounts that most of them share great grandfathers who were also farmers of the tidelands. The business is an art built on legacy.

"A lot has been passed down from generation to generation," says Bill, "and is learned from going out and working with your dad or grandfather," he says. Like any work of passion, oyster farming falls into the lifestyle category, and demands commitment. The life of a shellfish farmer is dictated by the tides. In the heart of winter, "the low tides are all at night, so you are out working at midnight," he says, "your life is very different from most other people."

An alliance grows when you work a piece of land from dawn to dusk, from youth to adulthood. "You develop special connections to places you work," says Bill. In college, a friend convinced Bill to travel around South America for a few months. The classmates worked six months prior digging clams in "Chapman's Cove" to afford the trip.

The year was 1975, and the bay was degraded from pulp mill pollution. "Now I go back and look at the beach and I've been able to see that area really heal itself over the past 30 to 40 years," he says. "You gain an enhanced appreciation for those areas."





Bill and his brother Paul returned to the family business after college, in the early 1980's, when shellfish hatcheries were starting to become commercially viable, before that, the business was built on harvesting what nature provided. In 1990, Taylor Shellfish built their first hatchery, which transformed opportunities, moving from gatherer to farmer.

Most Taylor Shellfish oysters begin in hatcheries, one in Quilcene, Washington and the other in Kona, Hawaii. Between the two spots, Taylor Shellfish raises seven billion oyster larvae annually. The role of the hatchery is to provide the perfect conditions for male and female oyster to spawn.

The baby oysters are shipped to farms in bundles about the size of a large baseball. Each bundle, resembling a black ball of sand, is equal to about ten million baby oysters. Once released into temperature controlled tanks; they will tap around, seeking a suitable substrate to attach to—in this case, a recycled oyster shell. Depending on the time of year, the farmer will move the oysters into the bay, where they will feed on a variety of rich micronutrients and grow. The average growing cycle spans three to five years, and varies by oyster species. The business of oyster farming is sustainable business and good for the environment.

Oysters are filter feeders, as they consume tiny plankton, they filter their food from water, improving water quality. The bivalves not only help clean the water, they are dependent upon the water being clean. For these reasons, it's very ingrained in the oyster industry to act as environmental advocates. Each generation in the Taylor family has encountered environment-related challenges along the way. "Water quality is a major issue for us," says Bill. In the 1980's water quality in the bay was tainted by local pulp mill pollution; current issues are tied to ocean acidification, a much broader, far-reaching, global challenge. The industry has been collaborative both within itself and with the academic community, says Bill, when speaking of their cohesive voice on environmental issues. "A rising tide raises all boats," he says. In addition to facing challenges together, the industry works jointly on advancing technologies.

Forking oysters into tubs for harvest, low tide, Oyster Bay. Most oysters are harvested after two to three years of feeding and growing in the bay. RIGHT Oyster seed. BOTTOM RIGHT Totten Inlet oyster harvest, where Taylor Shellfish grows their coveted Totten Virginia oysters known for their clean, briny splash and slight mineral finish. Totten Inlet is also where the annual Walrus & Carpenter Picnics are held, a late night winter fete that benefits the Puget Sound Restoration Fund.

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The oyster seed grater at FLUPSY (Floating Upwell System) in Shelton, splitting different sized shells into similar cohorts. The smaller shells fall to the bottom, the larger remain on top. RIGHT Kumamoto harvest in Chapman's Cove, where the petite oysters, known for their deeply fluted shells and honeydew finish, are hand-harvested.



## What's on the boards?

### TOTTEN INLET

The two most famous appellations in south Puget Sound are Totten Inlet and Little Skookum Inlet, and since Little Skookum is actually a tributary of Totten, the two often are thought of interchangeably. Both have seriously algae-thick waters, leading to market-sized oysters in a year or less. But differences exist. While Little Skookum is basically a creek bed that fills at high tide, Totten is ninety feet deep in places and much more a creature of the sea. It produces oysters with the rich seaweedy flavor South Sound is famous for, but a bit saltier and less earthy than Little Skookum. Little Skookum oysters get first crack at the intense brown and green mudflat algae that develop at the head of Little Skookum, while Totten oysters get a mix of those mudflat algae and ones that grow in deeper water. Many believe the resulting oyster to be the perfect combination of flavors—strong, but still combination of flavors—strong, but still sea.

Taylor Shellfish also grows an Eastern oyster in Totten Inlet. With the incomparable springy texture of an Eastern oyster and the ripeness imparted by Totten Inlet, the Totten Virginicas is a great oyster, and demand regularly outpaces supply. Worth seeking out.

by Rowan Jacobsen, *A Geography of Oysters: The Connoisseur's Guide to Oyster Eating in North America*

### NETARTS

Harvest Area: Netarts Bay, OR  
Flavor: High Brininess, Metallic Finish

### KUMAMOTO

Harvest Area: Puget Sound, WA  
Flavor: Full Sweet Flavor, Watermelon

### OLYMPIA

Harvest Area: Puget Sound, WA  
Flavor: Creamy Salty Flavor, Slight Metallic Finish

### TOTTEN VIRGINICA

Harvest Area: Totten Inlet, WA  
Flavor: Clean, Crisp, Briny, Slight Metallic Finish

### YAQUINA

Harvest Area: Yaquina Bay, OR  
Flavor: Sweet, Mild, Melon Finish

### PENN COVE

Harvest Area: Samish Bay, WA  
Flavor: Fresh and Salty, Cucumber Finish

### SHIGOKU

Harvest Area: Willapa Bay, WA  
Flavor: Light, Clean Cucumber Taste

### GOOSE POINT

Harvest Area: Willapa Bay, WA  
Flavor: Sweet, Citrus Notes

### HOOD CANAL

Harvest Area: Hood Canal, WA  
Flavor: Mildly Salty, Sweet, Cucumber Finish

### QUILCENE

Harvest Area: Hood Canal, WA  
Flavor: Mild, Clean Flavor, Sweet Finish

### BARRON POINT

Harvest Area: Hood Canal, WA  
Flavor: Sweet, Musky, Not Salty

### BROOKSIDE

Harvest Area: Hood Canal, WA  
Flavor: Medium Brininess, Full Flavor

### DABOB

Harvest Area: Hood Canal, WA  
Flavor: Light, Crisp and Salty

### CRANBERRY CREEK

Harvest Area: South Puget Sound, WA  
Flavor: Crisp, Bold Brininess, Clean Honeydew

### SHIGOKU

Harvest Area: Samish Bay, WA  
Flavor: Fresh and Salty, Cucumber Finish

### GOLD CREEK

Harvest Area: Hood Canal, WA  
Flavor: Salty Sweetness, Lettuce Notes

### DEER CREEK

Harvest Area: South Hood Canal, WA  
Flavor: Crisp Brine, Clean Flavor

### MIRADA

Harvest Area: South Hood Canal, WA  
Flavor: Medium Brininess, Sweet Finish

### SISTERS POINT

Harvest Area: Great Bend, Hood Canal, WA  
Flavor: Very Salty with a Slight Cucumber

### GIGAMOTOS

Harvest Area: B.C.  
Flavor: Fresh and Salty, Cucumber Finish

### CORTEZ ISLAND

Harvest Area: Deep Bay, B.C.  
Flavor: Mild Brininess, Delicate Meat

See more at [PortraitMagazine.com](http://PortraitMagazine.com)

# Oyster Poorboy Sandwich

Recipe by Bistro Marquee  
[www.bistromarquee.com](http://www.bistromarquee.com)

## INGREDIENTS

6-7 Small to medium sized shucked oysters  
1/2 cup Buttermilk  
1 T Crystal brand hot sauce

## FOR THE DREDGE

2 cups Fine cornmeal  
2 cups Flour  
2 tsp Kosher salt  
2 tsp Black pepper  
1/2 tsp Cayenne pepper

## REMOULADE

2 cups Mayonnaise  
4 T Grain mustard  
1 T Dijon mustard  
1/4 cup Chopped rinsed capers  
1 bunch Green onion and whites (thinly sliced)  
6 T Chopped cornichon pickles  
1/2 cup Chopped parsley  
1 T Worcestershire sauce  
2 Anchovy filets, minced  
3 T Paprika  
1 dash Hot sauce  
Juice and zest of 1/2 lemon

## PREPARATION

Mix well and refrigerate up to 10 days. Drop oysters into dredge and cover sides gently, patting flat. Place dredged oysters on plate and set aside. In a suitable cooking vessel, pan-fry or deep-fry oysters until golden brown and crispy. Place on paper towels to drain. Season with kosher salt.

Lightly butter toasted brioche or soft French roll. Spread remoulade over both sides of bread and place oysters in the roll. Top with creamy coleslaw.



Photo by Ali Walker



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“Everyone has an open door policy,” says Bill. If someone wants to come learn something about the way we do things, we say “come on over.” He pauses, and then says: “I think we are one of the more collaborative industries. A lot of us share ideas on a regular basis.”

With each new generation, the industry continues to thrive. The Taylor’s are already welcoming a fifth generation to the family business. Bill’s niece, Marcelle, recently moved from Los Angeles to help launch a new oyster bar in Seattle. “I sit in an office with my two uncles and my dad, my sister and my cousin,” says Marcelle. “Nothing beats that.” All of the Taylor generations concur on the allure of the oyster. “There’s an intriguing part of shellfish that people want more of,” says Marcelle. “It’s such a family, communal food,” she adds, “you share this platter in the middle of the table, and it brings people together.”

Eating a raw oyster is akin to food ritual: the lift of the shell, the slight tilt, the kiss of lips, splash of sea-salt, taste of place. Poet Seamus Heaney captured their essence best when he wrote: “My tongue was a filling estuary/My palate hung with starlight/As I tasted the salty Pleiades/Orion dipped his foot into the water.” It’s a sensual reminder to slow down in a world that moves so fast.

ABOVE Seattle’s Elliott’s Oyster House chef Robert Spaulding serves its namesake bivalve all year ‘round. Every oyster on their menu comes from carefully managed, certified growing areas.

## A weekend on Hood Canal

Plan your Oyster Getaway Weekend at Alderbrook Resort & Spa on Hood Canal. Located about 20 minutes from Taylor Shellfish Farms, (and about 2 hours from Seattle) the 88-acre scenic resort offers a nice range of luxury rooms and cottages, a full-service day spa and fitness center, 18-hole golf course, nature trails, docks, fine dining and a superb wine list. All the amenities, yet nestled away if you’re looking for a quiet weekend. [alderbrookresort.com](http://alderbrookresort.com)



# Smoked Oysters in Cognac Cream

Recipe by Chef Ryan Gaul of Southpark Seafood  
[www.southparkseafood.com](http://www.southparkseafood.com)



## PREPARATION

Sauté shallots in a bit of butter until soft. Deglaze with brandy and reduce. Deglaze with white wine and reduce. Add heavy cream and oyster liquor and reduce until mixture measures 2 cups. Puree in food processor. Season with salt and balance with lemon juice, then cool.

## TO SERVE

Put the smoked oyster back in its shell. Cover with sauce and top with a mixture of panko bread crumbs and grated parmesan. Bake in oven until golden brown and bubbling. Top with parsley and preserved lemon.

## SHUCKING

Shuck Netarts Bay oysters and remove from shell while saving all of the liquor to make the sauce. Save the shells.

## FOR THE SAUCE

- 2 Shallots julienne
- 1 cup Cognac
- 1 cup White wine
- 3 cup Heavy cream
- Salt
- Lemon juice

Photo by Ali Walker

A GLISTENING PLATTER OF OYSTERS ON THE HALF SHELL brings to mind the well-sung quote by Jonathan Swift: "It was a brave man who first ate an oyster." A smart man, too. Oyster purists know that the best way to savor this sea-salt kiss is with a splash of lemon, or slurping au naturel. And with a glass of wine, too, of course – typically a dry, crisp white. We suggest trying a winner from the 2014 Pacific Coast Oyster Wine Competition, an annual dating service for West Coast wines and oysters. Wines are judged blind, each with at least one Kumamoto oyster. Judges gather in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle seeking the "bliss factor", or how the wine exalts the oyster.



## On the Half Shell

### SEATTLE PICKS

**Elliott's Oyster House**  
[elliottsoysterhouse.com](http://elliottsoysterhouse.com)

**Blueacre Seafood**  
[blueacreseaford.com](http://blueacreseaford.com)

**Shuckers Oyster Bar**  
[fairmont.com](http://fairmont.com)

**Taylor Shellfish Farms  
at Melrose Market**  
[taylorshellfishfarms.com](http://taylorshellfishfarms.com)

**The Walrus and the Carpenter**  
[thewalrusbar.com](http://thewalrusbar.com)

**Ballard Annex Oyster House**  
[ballardannex.com](http://ballardannex.com)

**Anchovies and Olives**  
[ethanstowellrestaurants.com](http://ethanstowellrestaurants.com)

**Coastal Kitchen**  
[coastalkitchenseattle.com](http://coastalkitchenseattle.com)

**Frank's Oyster House &  
Champagne Parlor**  
[franksoysterhouse.com](http://franksoysterhouse.com)

### PORTLAND PICKS

**Southpark Seafood**  
[southparkseafood.com](http://southparkseafood.com)

**Dan & Louis Oyster Bar**  
[danandlouis.com](http://danandlouis.com)

**Higgins Restaurant and Bar**  
[higginsportland.com](http://higginsportland.com)

**Eat: An Oyster Bar**  
[eatosterbar.com](http://eatosterbar.com)

**Jake's Famous Crawfish**  
[jakesfamouscrawfish.com](http://jakesfamouscrawfish.com)

**The Parish**  
[theparishpdx.com](http://theparishpdx.com)

**The Woodsman Tavern**  
[woodsman Tavern.com](http://woodsman Tavern.com)

**The Heathman Restaurant and Bar**  
[heathmanhotel.com](http://heathmanhotel.com)

**Trifecta Tavern and Bakery**  
[trifectapdx.com](http://trifectapdx.com)

**Imperial**  
[imperialpdx.com](http://imperialpdx.com)

## CLASSIC SAUCES

### Cocktail Sauce

Recipe from the University Club of Portland

2 cups	Ketchup
3 T	Fresh horseradish (to taste)
2 T	Ground mustard powder spice
2 T	Water
2 T	Lemon juice
1/4 tsp	Salt
2 tsp	Garlic, chopped
2 tsp	Tabasco
2 T	Worcestershire sauce

#### PREPARATION

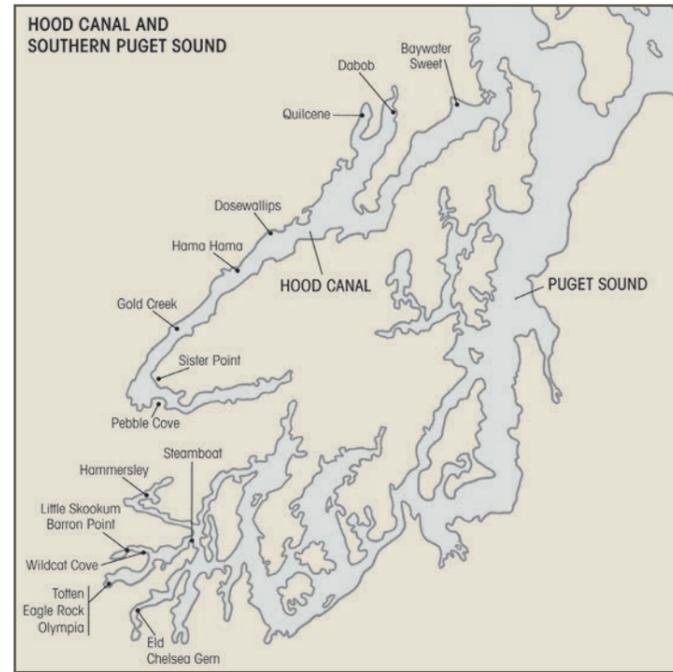
Combine mustard powder with cold water. Then mix all ingredients together. Adjust seasoning to your taste. Depending of the heat of the horseradish you may want to add more or less. Let everything marinate together overnight for the best flavor. Serve with your favorite oysters or seafood.

### Shallot Mignonette

Recipe from the University Club of Portland

1 cup	Champagne vinegar
1/2 cup	Brunoise shallots
1 T	Black Pepper
1 pinch	Salt

Mix and serve



Like wine and cheese, oysters owe much of their flavor to terroir, the specific environment in which they grow—indeed, oysters are the food that tastes most like the sea. Today, there are at least two hundred unique oyster appellations in North America, each producing oysters with a distinct and often dazzling flavor.

## HOOD CANAL OYSTERS

by Rowan Jacobsen *A Geography of Oysters: The Connoisseur's Guide to Oyster Eating in North America*

Puget Sound reaches into Washington State like an arm dipping into a barrel. Its upper arm abuts Seattle, its elbow bends at Tacoma, and at Olympia it spreads five fingers into the land. Those five long, narrow inlets—Hammersley, Little Skookum, Totten, Eld, and Budd—comprise some of the most famous oyster appellations in the Northwest. Budd reaches directly into downtown Olympia and is closed to shellfishing, but the other four are thick with amazingly fast-growing oysters and clams. Each inlet has its distinctions, but they all contribute that characteristic South Sound flavor—full, rich, intense, more sweet than salty, a hint of cooked greens or seaweed, bordering on musky. It's like a sea version of collards with pork fat.

An extraordinary two hundred miles from the open sea, the South Sound has relatively low salinity; the sea is less of a factor. After navigating all that coastline, the water that reaches the South Sound has experienced countless land influences. It's also nutrient-rich, thus algae-rich. Rivers, tidal zones, and mudflats each add their own algae-mineral cocktail to the mix. Salmon push up those inlets in fall, flooding them with nutrients when they die. If Eastern oysters smell like wet rocks at low tide, South Sound oysters smell like wet earth at low tide. It's an acquired taste. But those who acquire it consider milder oysters too boring. They toast each other's arch taste with a musky Pinot Gris and never look back.

Just a few miles of fir forest separate Hood Canal from Puget Sound, but geologically they are worlds apart. South Puget Sound is a land of gentle terrain and shallow inlets. Hood Canal, on the other hand, is steep and deep: steep mountains above, deep waters below. It's a genuine glacier-carved fjord, the only one in the continental United States. Oysters adore Hood Canal. The water is kept brackish, cold, and oxygenated by the Olympic rivers.

Even more important, the glacier left behind a gravelly till, quite unlike the muddy substrate that dominates Puget Sound. Firm river deltas line the canal, every one of them laced with brackish sloughs and thick with oysters. The classic Hood Canal flavor is very different from that of southern Puget Sound; more lettuce and lemon zest, saltier, less sweet, and very firm for a Pacific.