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OYSTERS & TERROIR

by Megan Hill

SHIGOKU. Olympia. Kusshi. European Flat. Kumamoto. Totten Virginica. Sitting at an oyster bar almost anywhere in the coastal Northwest, you're bound to come face-to-face with a mountain of bivalves of slightly different shape and size, and with names that—to the untrained eater—may quickly become overwhelming or simply meaningless.

But these names foretell the cold, murky tidelands where these creatures spent time eating, growing and reproducing before being harvested and whisked away to sit on ice at a seafood restaurant. Each oyster is a slightly different beast, with its flavors and nuances determined by the place it spent its life. Oysters, then, have their own sort of terroir, much like that of wine grapes; in fact, bivalve lovers use a term called “merroir” (after *mer*, the French word for sea) to describe this phenomenon.

There are more than 150 varieties of oyster grown in North America, with all of these varieties stemming from just five species: Kumamoto, Pacific oyster, Atlantic (Eastern) oyster, Olympia and European Flat. In the Pacific Northwest, there are more than 65 varieties available, grown and harvested in places like Vancouver Island, Puget Sound, Hood Canal, and the Washington and Oregon coasts. The other stuff sharing the water with the oysters—the minerals and micro algae, for example—as well as water salinity, pH, and even rainfall amounts contribute to the oysters' flavor profiles.

Where to Slurp

Oyster Bars are prevalent in Northwest coastal cities and towns. These five are among the best with a sizable variety and knowledgeable staff to guide you.

- >> **Dan & Louis Oyster Bar**, Portland
danandlouis.com
- >> **Elliott's Oyster House**, Seattle
elliottsoysterhouse.com
- >> **Rodney's Oyster House**, Vancouver, B.C.
rohvan.com
- >> **Taylor Shellfish Oyster Bar**, Seattle
tayloroysterbars.com
- >> **The Walrus and the Carpenter**, Seattle
thewalrusbar.com

The same variety of oyster, then—say, the deep-cupped Pacific oyster, which originated in Japan and is farmed extensively in Washington State—will taste different depending on where it was grown. Cultivate the Pacific in the Totten Inlet, a branch of Puget Sound near Olympia, and it will taste different than a Pacific that lived in Willapa Bay, just off the Pacific Ocean in southwest Washington.

Similarly, the same variety of wine grape will contribute subtly different flavor profiles to wine if it was grown at a slightly different elevation or slope of the same vineyard. Ditto if it's been a dry year or a wet one, a cold year or a hot one.

So what can you expect when you're about to slurp any of these oysters? There's a lot of variation, but nutrient-rich waters produce plump, meaty oysters, while those brinier bivalves probably had less to feed on. Your best bet is to ask at your favorite oyster bar and try each variety side-by-side to determine what you like.

Try eating your raw oysters without any topping, whether it be a simple squeeze of lemon or a spoonful of mignonette. Chew them slowly and let the flavors bloom on your palate. Try to pick out flavors like cucumber and copper as you eat. Like wine tasting, recognizing these flavors can take practice, and it helps if the experts behind the counter can be your guide. 🍷



Harvesting Oysters on the Long Beach Peninsula, WA

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