

# Birthday dinner:

## A feast of oysters on the Willapa Bay mudflats

# Coastal Life

Story and photos by DAVID CAMPICHE

When frigid winter winds bullied their way east and downriver to the mouth of the Columbia, the Chinook Indians donned their winter gear and portaged the isthmus across the Long Beach Peninsula to Willapa Bay. The natives camped on the shoreline, gathered and consumed baskets of succulent oysters — these a smaller native bivalve than those of today. The tribe steamed them in beautiful, tightly woven baskets, which they filled with salt water and red-hot stones. Long before Capt. Robert Gray upset the apple cart, the Chinooks were a self-sufficient and content people.

The oyster in favor today is the Pacific oyster, a bivalve originally imported from Japan, a species both larger and less delicate than its predecessor. Overharvesting of the native oyster led to their near demise in the late 19th century. Not to worry: In a close race, the Pacific runs nose to nose right up to the wire. But no matter how you call it, the Pacific is a wonderful treat.

Early on a Monday morning in the month of bare branches, a buddy called and suggested a rendezvous on the state-controlled oyster bed at Nahcotta. “It’s Donald’s birthday,” he stated fervently. “We need to treat him to his favorite meal,” meaning, of course, the raw, delicate and sublime oyster. “Free raw oysters. You pick ‘em; we slurp ‘em,” and Billy willfully smacked his lips.

Growing up in these parts, we boys hunted waterfowl on lovely and unpredictable Willapa Bay. Unexpectedly, we would confront clear warm days, a Finn sweat bath, even in the middle of winter. We called hunting on these days “blue bird shooting,” and of course, the bird hunting deteriorated. The ducks sat in the middle of the bay and wouldn’t budge or fly.

So, on a still February afternoon, we three amigos stumbled into a fair blue bird day. The generally tumultuous wa-



Two oyster lovers seek the natural bounty during low tide on Willapa Bay.

ter was flat as the 15th-century view of the world. The tide had retreated to its natural composition, unctuous mud. From Nahcotta, one could clearly make out Saddle Mountain, some 60 miles south in Oregon. The temperature was a sun-bathing 65 degrees.

We came prepared with oyster knives, a bucket of clean water, fresh lemons and a homemade red sauce with more Tabasco than horseradish.

Walking through Willapa Bay mud is always tricky. Locals claim the bay is stabilized by piles of hip boots that have been forfeited to the mud gods. We chose a path over the discarded piles of shells left by other oyster lovers. Each visitor is allowed to gather 18 oysters. But one rule remains very firm: You must leave the shells. In July and August, oyster larvae swim freely in the warm bay water. Simultaneously, they attach to discarded oyster shells — and only oyster shells — and then grow rapidly into the delicate flesh we call oyster meat.

Generally, the oyster is harvested after three years. Each year they are physically moved to a richer feeding ground. If you prefer a smaller bite — a more delicate morsel — persuade an oysterman to harvest one- or two-year-old oysters.

Opening the shell takes skill and patience. A pair of thick rubber gloves and a sturdy oyster knife is mandatory. I prefer to come in from the back of the shell and break the hinge. That takes some force and a sudden twist of the thin strong blade. Be warned: One must remain watchful. Wounds occur frequently to the unwary and often enough to an experienced shucker to shape the day badly.

Donald gathered all his oysters in an organized pile before eating a single one. He



Dining on the mudflats: half shell and lemon.

washed the shells in his clean water bucket, the same one he lugged begrudgingly across the soft mud flats. Opening the shell slowly, he carefully downed the soft flesh after squeezing fresh lemon juice over the meat. That isn’t my style, but method is madness, and I refuse to judge a human being on the evidence of his or her oyster prowess.

Billy followed Donald and extracted all 18, placing them in a glass Mason jar to share later with his lovely wife, Nancy. To show such restraint speaks to her exceptional nature. She must be an angel. My wife remains allergic to oysters.

I downed the flesh as quickly as I opened each of them. Holding the shell in my left hand, I loosened the hinge and the muscle that binds the mollusk to the shell, and then downed the silky flesh in a single bound. Yes, I covered the morsel with my homemade sauce before I consumed the salty delicacy.

With a relish befitting a true courier de mer, Donald sat on his inverted 5-gallon bucket and swallowed whole, each and every one. You should have seen the smile on his face: those bared white teeth and the satisfaction that lingered after each and every mouthful.

The sun was settling in the west as

we gathered up our oyster paraphernalia. Across the bay, Long Island shimmered in the dusk, a ribbon of silky lavender. A flock of pintail lifted and curled over the bay. The surface continued to reflect the setting sun, the rising full moon.

We grabbed one last look. The sky had turned to that soft Renoir pink, like flushed skin. It darkened as we walked. A lone high squawk from a regal great blue heron skirted across the mudflats. Thinking back to the Chinook, I realized that some pure moments refuse to change.

Distant travelers ask frequently about the appeal of living in the rural Columbia Pacific. It remains difficult for me to define all the assets that lead to a love affair with his stunning place we call home. Willapa Bay certainly defines this affection.

Here, now, sitting in my kitchen, I’m reminded of the infinite pallet of colors that I just witnessed. I realize that I am incapable of defining all the colors of paradise, or, as I call it, the beauty of the Great Tao. Is not such landscape simply too rich for full recall?

I swallow one of the oysters that I retrieved from the Willapa and smile inwardly. It slithers down my gullet without resistance or complaint. Suddenly the world is at peace, again.

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