

OYSTERING ON WILLAPA BAY

WASHINGTON OYSTER FARMERS ARE INHERITORS OF A TRADITION AND WAY OF LIFE THAT GOES BACK TO 1851

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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Tim Ritchey uses a shovel to scatter young oysters on an oyster bed in Willapa Bay. The oysters had been removed from a nursery bed where they had grown to their present size in plastic cages; now they will mature on a new bed.



These juvenile oysters, known as "singles," grew to their present size inside a plastic cage, which protects them from crab predators. After two to three months, farmers remove the oysters from the cages and move them to a different oyster ground to fatten to maturity.



Steve Shotwell bags culch, old oyster shells that will serve as a place for spat, aka oyster larvae, to attach. Once attached, the culch will be spread over nursery beds.



Submitted photo
Pacific oysters were introduced to Washington in the early 1900s and are now the main oyster farmed in Willapa Bay.

The windshield wipers clacked back and forth. Steve Shotwell was at the wheel, peering through a light rain as his oyster boat made its way to a spot marked by poles on Willapa Bay. Deckhand Tim Ritchey attached a hook on the orange hoist and hauled a submerged longline, covered with oysters, onto the deck. He cut the bivalves off the line, deftly opened one of them with his knife, and offered it to me.

It was the best oyster I've ever eaten. Sweet and salty in perfect combination, with that hint of honeydew melon that connoisseurs speak of but which soon fades.

Oysters are a food that divides mankind. You either love them or you hate them. Those who love them really love them, and if you have a literary turn of mind even the most direct and unadorned of prose writers will wax poetic.

Steve Shotwell and his wife, Andi, have owned their Elkhorn Oyster Company in Nemah, Washington, since 1995. One of the smallest of almost 30 such oyster companies on Willapa Bay, they are the inheritors of a tradition and a way of life that goes back 165 years, to 1851.

Oyster middens left by Native Americans around Willapa Bay have been dated back at least 4,000 years, but it was not until the early 1800s that oysters became all the rage in the United States. The California gold rush created a market for oysters in San Francisco, and

Charles Russell, a seaman living and trading on Shoalwater (now Willapa) Bay, had the bright idea of hiring the natives to collect oysters, load them on a ship, and send them south. That was in 1851, and Russell had competition within months.

The native oysters in Willapa Bay were the small Washington (or Olympia) oysters. Slow growing and harvested mercilessly, they began to diminish, a process accelerated by the burgeoning logging industry. Today,

the Olympia oyster can still be found in Willapa Bay, but it is commercially extinct, with a twofold result. Eastern oysters brought from Chesapeake Bay on the new transcontinental railroad replaced the local oysters, and in the late 19th century the first oyster farms appeared in Willapa Bay. Oystermen began marking off their territories with stakes, and by statehood in 1899 de facto ownership of these tidal lands, as well as the importance of the industry, was well established. Washington made the unusual decision to allow private ownership of tidal lands, which began a history of private stewardship of Willapa Bay that continues to this day.

After a few years, something wiped out the eastern oysters, and they were replaced by *Crassostrea gigas*, the Pacific oyster, first brought to Washington by Japanese entrepreneurs around 1900. Willapa oystermen did not begin raising Pacific oysters until 1928, after a state law forbade foreign ownership of land, forcing the Japanese to relinquish their tidelands. Pacific oysters tolerated the tidal range in Willapa, and as Chesapeake oyster production diminished, the Willapa industry saw a revival. Today, one oyster in six in the United States is grown on the 15,000 acres of Willapa tideland oyster farms.

Live mature Pacific oysters did not do well on the two-week journey from Japan, so Willapa oystermen began importing oyster larvae ("spat") from Japan. They dumped the culch (oyster shells with spat attached, or "set") into the bay and waited for them to grow to harvestable size. Eventually, the Pacifics adapted to Willapa and began to set naturally, but the natural set was unreliable.

Today, virtually all oyster farms in Willapa Bay use

larvae from local hatcheries, which are placed in tanks with bags of shells (cleaned to provide a good attachment surface). The spat are cultured for a short time before the culch is placed in nursery beds. From that point on, each oyster farmer has his own way of growing the oysters to their final size.

As Steve Shotwell drove his boat toward a patch of tidelands he owns, an oyster dredge crossed the bow, a hundred yards out. Dredging is a traditional means of cultivation. Culch is scattered on the ground — the bottom — and later harvested with a dredge. "They occasionally harrow it," Shotwell explained. "It flips the oysters out of the mud so they grow better and they don't suffocate."

However, dredging is made difficult by the increasing number of native ghost shrimp in Willapa Bay. The shrimp burrow in the hard-packed bottom, making it too soft to support oyster beds; the oysters sink into the mud and die.

We arrived at one of Shotwell's beds, where Tim Ritchey used a shovel to scatter oysters.

The oysters had been removed from a bed where they had grown to their present size in plastic cages, protected from crabs; now they would mature on the new bed. Shotwell explained that oyster grounds differ. A seedbed can't be too soft, and conditions on another bed may be more favorable for fattening oysters to maturity.

Shotwell increasingly grows oysters on longlines, which involves spacing set shells along rope suspended above the bottom

from PVC posts. This overcomes shrimp problems, reduces predation from crabs, and produces good yields of high quality oysters. The practice is labor intensive, though, and exposure to storms and fowling by weed and debris makes some areas unsuitable for longlines.

Like most growers, Shotwell is also growing more "singles" than in the past. These are oysters grown individually, protected in trays or cages. Of uniform size and quality, singles are ideally suited to the growing market for live in-shell oysters.

Shotwell's small Elkhorn Oyster Company has a Shell-

"As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away, leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans."

—Ernest Hemingway, "A Moveable Feast"



Skilled workers shuck oysters at Elkhorn Oyster Company, one of the smallest of almost 30 such oyster companies on Willapa Bay.

HOW TO SHUCK AN OYSTER



Use an oyster knife: If you slip, it's too dull to do any damage, but it's inflexible and sharp enough to open the shell. If you're opening a lot of oysters you'll find rubber gloves, the heavier the better, a valuable addition.

What to do: Hold the oyster with the flat side up. You'll often hear that the best place to insert the knife is at or near the hinge. No professional shucker does this. Instead, stab the opposite end of the oyster, about a half-inch or a little more in from the lip of the shell. Insert the point of the knife through the hole you've just created. The muscle that attaches the oyster to the shell is just beyond the point of your knife, on the flat side of the shell. With your knife parallel to the shell, cut the muscle, and then pry the flat half of the shell way from the other half. You now have a perfect oyster resting in its liquid. If you wish, run your knife under the oyster to make sure there is no attachment to the other side. Add Mignonette. Enjoy.



Oysters Shelburne

By chef Cedar Martin
of the Shelburne Inn

Ingredients

- 1 pound chopped fresh baby spinach
- 1 tablespoon chopped shallot
- ½ teaspoon chopped garlic
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon ground white pepper
- 2 ounces ouzo
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 6 oysters on half shell
- Bread crumbs as needed

Directions

Heat olive oil, add shallots and garlic. Cook until translucent. Add spinach, salt, and pepper. Sauté until spinach is wilted. Add ouzo and cook off alcohol. Remove spinach from pan and add heavy cream; reduce to half. Return spinach to pan and cool to room temperature. Top oysters with spinach mixture and bread crumbs as desired. Bake in preheated oven at 400° for 15-20 minutes.

Mignonette with raw oysters

Ingredients

- ¼ cup red wine vinegar
- 1 tablespoon minced shallot
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 12 fresh large oysters

Directions

Stir vinegar, shallot and pepper in a small bowl. Drizzle over oysters.

Variations: use champagne vinegar. Add any of these: pinch of sugar, parsley leaves, minced cucumber, minced ginger.