

**Shell game** Just-shucked oysters await beachcombers on Olympic View Beach.



dish



## picnic in the raw

Considering the oyster on the South Sound and in the lab. | by Laura Cassidy

**A**t the end of a dark, snaky private road near the south curve of Puget Sound is a picnic site unlike any other. Olympic View Beach swells with ripe Olympia, Pacific, Virginica, and Kumamoto oysters at low tide, and the full moon gives off a perfect candlelike glow. On a December night before Christmas, Jon Rowley, the oft-honored advocate of Northwest ingredients who revitalized the seafood industry with Copper River salmon and the Olympia oyster, brought four carloads of bivalve lovers to the spot to experience his favorite form of al fresco dining. As the wind blew crisp, salty seawater seasonings off the Totten Inlet, the oyster eaters forgot all about fancy seafood bars and fussy preparations named for Gilded Age tycoons. They even forgot about plates and silverware. Oysters are best eaten like apples: just picked from their source, naked and raw.

Along with the host, Bill Taylor—whose family business, Taylor Shellfish Farms, has cultivated this beach since the 1960s and others nearby since 1890—the picnickers that night included three generations of the culi-

nary Batali clan: Armandino, the patriarch and local artisan-meat king who runs Pioneer Square's Salumi with his wife Marilyn; their son Mario, the New York-based chef and Food Network star; and his apple-cider-eschewing, wine-sipping 10-year-old son Benno. While Mario Batali and his family were in town, they also got a tasting tour of Starbucks, led by CEO Howard Schultz, and a behind-the-scenes look at the Oberto Sausage factory. While there's no word about how beef jerky might figure into the menus at any of Mario's seven New York City restaurants, he and his partners will soon open two restaurants in Las Vegas—one of which will be a steakhouse with a raw bar sourced almost entirely from Washington State. Luckily, the beach is a great place to mix business with pleasure.

While the adults uncorked bottles of crisp, dry white wine—all of them winners of this year's Pacific Coast Oyster Wine Competition—the kids scrambled across barna-



**Midnight snacks** Mario Batali and son Benno prepare to shuck.

## oyster stew



Recipe courtesy Xinh Dwelley of Xinh's Clam and Oyster House

No trip to Shelton is complete without a stopover at Xinh's Clam and Oyster House (221 W Railroad Ave, Shelton, 360-427-8709) for a fresh shellfish dinner prepared with both Asian and Northwest traditions. Rub elbows with geoducks and government officials alike; among those who regularly make the half-hour drive from Olympia is Governor Christine Gregoire. As much as we love oysters fresh from their shell, there's just no arguing with Xinh's inventive, homey preparations. —LC

## INGREDIENTS

- |     |                        |     |  |
|-----|------------------------|-----|--|
| 2   | pints shucked oysters  | 1   | teaspoon pepper  |
| 1/2 | cup butter             | 5   | fresh basil leaves, chopped<br>(or 1/2 teaspoon dried) |
| 2   | cloves garlic, chopped | 1/2 | cup fresh bacon bits,<br>chopped (optional)            |
| 1   | medium onion, diced    |     | Fresh chopped parsley for garnish                      |
| 2   | cups half-and-half*    |     | Diced green onion for garnish                          |
| 3   | cups milk*             |     |  |
| 2   | teaspoons salt         |     |  |

MAKES  
**4-8**  
SERVINGS

PREP TIME  
**20**  
MINUTES

## DIRECTIONS

Blanch oysters for 2 to 3 minutes. Drain and cut into bite-size pieces. Melt butter in a large sauce pot and brown garlic. Add onion and sauté until soft. Add oysters, milk, salt, pepper, basil, and bacon bits. Stir until warm but do not boil. Garnish sparingly with chopped parsley and green onions.

\*Proportion of milk and half-and-half can be adjusted up or down depending on richness desired.

pled rocks to collect oysters with a zeal usually reserved for gathering Halloween candy. Armandino and Rowley shucked, and Mario wondered in what order we should attack the growing rows of half shells. At Taylor's suggestion, we started small, first slurping back tiny native Olys with their silvery bite, then moved on to the crinkly-shelled Kumamotos, which came to these waters from Japan in 1947. Next, without so much as a squeeze of lemon, we savored the elegant, teardrop-shaped Virginicas, originally introduced to Washington in 1890, and finally the deep-cupped Pacifics, another Japanese introduction. Working from the French term *terroir*, which refers to the earthy notes in wine imparted by the soil used to grow its grapes, Rowley

## LIKE FARMERS, BEACH MANAGERS SPREAD THE SEEDS ALONG TAYLOR'S SHORES DURING THE INCOMING TIDE.

and food writer Greg Atkinson came up with *meroir*, which subs in the French word for "sea" and describes each beach's briny, mineral-laden characteristics. We have Totten Inlet's *meroir* to thank for its sweet and pearly fruit.

The following day, to help us fully understand the geography and soil of Taylor oysters, Rowley led a tour along the west side of the Sound to demonstrate how they got to the beach—and how they got so good.

Although Northwest consumers have grown accustomed to seeking out wild-caught fish, farmed oysters are the more ecologically responsible choice. Beaches not actively farmed and reseeded flounder; oyster populations die out because of predators and a lack of viable housing options (read: shells—when the meat of an oyster is consumed, the home should be returned to the beach for the next generation). Taylor spends almost as much time and manpower reseeding the beach as harvesting it. Like the human body's kidney, filter-feeding oysters are organic water purifiers, so Taylor's efforts have positive repercussions on the overall ecosystem.

At Taylor's Quilcene production hatchery, the delicate process of shellfish propagation is led by Benoit Eudeline, a French biologist who came to Puget Sound to head Taylor's research and development team. Eudeline is

perfecting triploid oysters—sexless beings that don't spawn and therefore don't have an off-season when their meat is milky, tough, and not so great—but most of the scientist's time is spent creating just the right mood for reproduction.

First, microscopic eggs are harvested from broodstock, the mature oysters used for breeding. Then they're fertilized and given a safe home in tanked, purified Puget Sound waters. The little guys feed on five species of algae grown on-site in a batch culture process, in a series of work sheds that look like sci-fi film sets. Spawning takes about two

weeks, then larval oysters "settle"—they begin looking for their shell. For that, Taylor crews provide ground-up oyster shells since the microorganisms only need a microhome to attach to. Next, the micro oysters, now called spat, are transferred to a slightly sunnier Taylor site: the Kona, Hawaii, hatchery. There the spat bask in the sunlight until they grow to the size of pebbles and can fend for themselves. The spat is then called seed and is ready to come back home.

The oyster seed then spends time in a kind of underwater nursery known as Flupsy: Taylor's floating upwelling system uses large paddle wheels to keep water, food, and waste moving through oyster storage bins. Taylor's Flupsy is one of the largest systems of its kind in the world; every six months, about 200 million oysters are cultivated on this system of rafts, bins, and paddles. The bins are pressure-washed daily so the critters have optimum access to algae—even during cold fall and winter months when seeds don't actually grow. After about 60 days, the seed is big enough to live in a more or less natural environment.

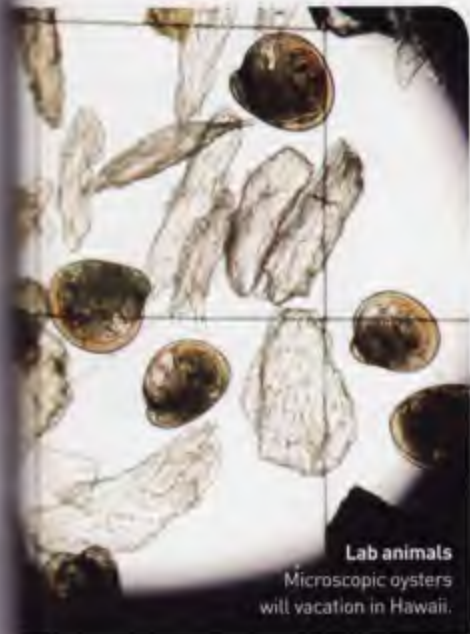
The Taylor family owns approximately 15 beaches, most on Puget Sound, one in Mex-

ico, another in Canada. Like farmers who watch over their soil and instinctively know when to plant their crops, beach managers spread the seeds along Taylor's shores during the incoming tide. After the oysters have sufficiently matured, crews return during low tide and bag them in rows of steel mesh sacks that are tethered to the beach, where they are bathed by the ebb and flow of the tide.

The oysters mature inside the bags, safe from predators and accessible to beach farmers, who can pull up the rows and harvest their bounty even during high tide. Some oysters, like the small Olympias, will live on the beach for two to three years before they're ready for market. Mindful of the larger community, Taylor also leaves some unbagged bivalves for beach birds—and, of course, the occasional Batali. ✨



Seeding Crews tend the Flupsy bins.



Lab animals  
Microscopic oysters  
will vacation in Hawaii.

## AW, SHUCKS

Want to have your own picnic in the raw? Visit the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife at [www.wdfw.wa.gov/fishcorn.htm](http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/fishcorn.htm) to find open, active oystering beaches. Just remember to shuck at the beach and leave the shells behind. If you'd rather gather bivalves in an urban setting, check out these Seattle-area suppliers of Taylor family products.

### RESTAURANTS

#### Anthony's Homeport

Various locations including:  
6135 Seaview Ave W, Seattle.  
206-783-0780. 135 Lake St S,  
Kirkland. 425-822-0225;  
[www.anthonys.com](http://www.anthonys.com).

#### Brasa

2107 Third Ave, Seattle.  
206-728-4220; [www.brasa.com](http://www.brasa.com).

#### Campagne

86 Pine St, Seattle. 206-728-2800;  
[www.campagnerestaurant.com](http://www.campagnerestaurant.com).

#### Canlis

2576 Aurora Ave N, Seattle.  
206-283-3313; [www.canlis.com](http://www.canlis.com).

#### Chiso

3520 Fremont Ave N, Seattle.  
206-632-3430;  
[www.chisoseattle.com](http://www.chisoseattle.com).

#### Elliott's Oyster House

1201 Alaskan Way, Seattle.  
206-623-4340; [www.elliottsoysterhouse.com](http://www.elliottsoysterhouse.com).

#### Union

1400 First Ave, Seattle.  
206-838-8000;  
[www.unionseattle.com](http://www.unionseattle.com).

### FISH MARKETS

#### MJ Meats and Seafood

6325 212th St SW, Lynnwood.  
425-778-2712.

#### Pure Food Fish Market

1515 Pike Pl, Seattle.  
206-622-5765;  
[www.freshseafood.com](http://www.freshseafood.com).

#### Wild Salmon Seafood Market

Fishermen's Terminal, 1900 W  
Nickerson St, Seattle.  
206-283-3366;  
[www.wildsalmonseafood.com](http://www.wildsalmonseafood.com).

### SEATTLE FARMERS MARKETS

#### Ballard Sunday market

Market St and Ballard Ave near  
22nd Ave NW, 206-781-6776.

#### U District Saturday market

University Way at NE 50th St,  
206-547-2278.

Vendors are required by law to retain for 90 days the packing slip that accompanies all Taylor shellfish and denotes their harvest date and harvest beach. If you're unsure about origin or freshness, ask for the official record. If the vendor doesn't know what you're talking about, you're in the wrong place.