

A TASTE OF ADVENTURE

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA FARMS PRODUCE SOME OF THE HIGHEST QUALITY AND MOST SOUGHT-AFTER OYSTERS

By Tanya Seibold

Nowhere else does the bounty of a region's agriculture abound with nearly year-round access to the best fruit & vegetables, dairy, artisan cheeses, meats, breads, and of course wine, than here in Sonoma County. And within a short 30-minute drive from the heart of wine country out to the coast, thrives a local industry which is making big waves on the national food scene and garnering world-wide accolades—the oyster farms.

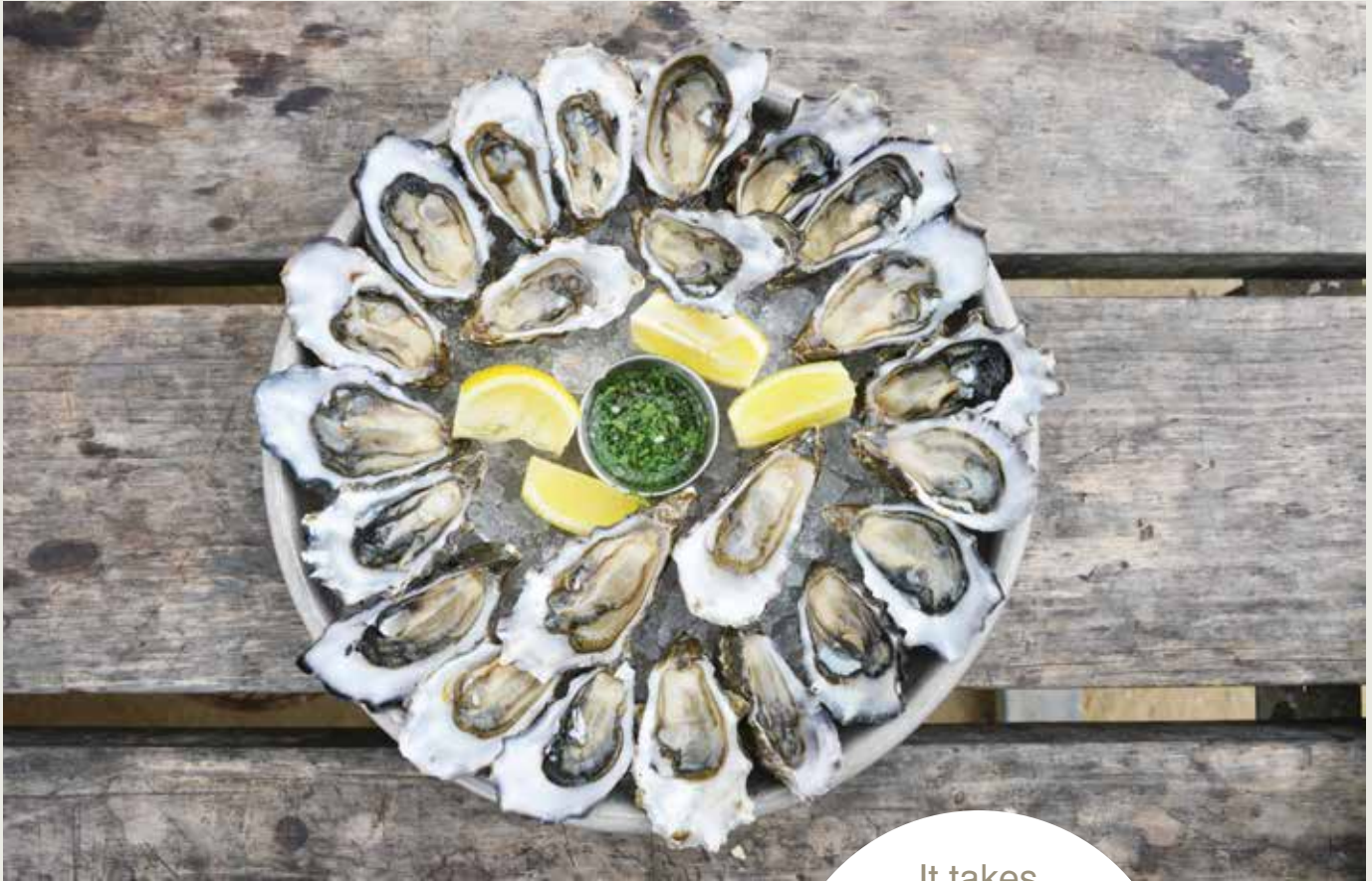
In wine production, the terroir or combination of soil, topography, and climate affects the grapes, which in turn, determines the final taste of the wine. The same principal applies to



growing world-class oysters. It's the merroir (mer meaning sea) or natural influence of tidal flows, sea beds, and aquatic culture that gives each oyster variety – and each oyster farm – a unique flavor profile. A Kumamoto variety (West Coast) from Puget Sound will taste entirely different to one grown in waters off the Northern

California coast.

Situated 30 miles north of San Francisco Bay, Tomales Bay is a narrow stretch of state-protected estuary which is shielded from the direct currents of the Pacific. It also happens to sit directly over a submerged canyon of the San Andreas Fault. This Fault



Zone is a dividing line between the North American and Pacific plates. Why is the oceanography around Tomales so important to growing oysters? Well, it's precisely because of the Fault Zone's diverse oceanic plate sediment and underwater ecology being in perfect balance for shellfish cultivation, that farms such as Hog Island Oyster Co. and Tomales Bay Oyster Company are not only flourishing—but producing some of the country's finest quality and most highly sought-after oysters.

“Few foods carry the flavor of ‘place’

The oyster size and age will make a difference in taste. Smaller and younger oysters will generally be more tender.

quite like an oyster,” says a member of the Hog Island Oyster Co. team. “Tomales Bay has the cool, clean water rich in plankton that oysters feed on to grow plump and sweet, and the flavor of the bay is evident in every delicious mouthful.”

Located a few miles south of Hog Island is Tomales Bay Oyster Company (TBOC). Established in 1909, it's California's oldest continuously run shellfish farm with the first officially recognized farm beds sown during the Gold Rush. Originally chosen for its untainted tidal waters

It takes approximately 1½ years for an oyster to reach maturity before it can be harvested.

and prime access to the emerging railroad lines, TBOC began breeding a proprietary oyster—the owner's reserve selection—called Golden Nugget.

Naturally tumbled by the wind & waves, this oyster is purposely cultivated for a deep, round shell and thick, sweet meat.

“Tomales Bay offers pristine waters carried down by the California current from the North Pacific, providing us with cold, nutrient-dense water,” says Sean O'Brien, Assistant Manager of Tomales Bay Oyster Company. “Since Tomales Bay is relatively under developed, we are tucked away from pollutants, and our farm area yields

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good water quality. Our waters are fueled by Northwest winds in the spring, which triggers an up-welling and increased amounts of phytoplankton available for the oysters to feed on, giving the oysters a unique flavor.” For those of us who adore oysters any which way—raw, smoked, barbequed or fried—the vast taste difference between the five varieties grown in the U.S. is key to why we tuck into this salty delicacy.



One of the most traditional ways to enjoy a fresh oyster is raw, straight from the shell, with a squeeze of lemon (maybe a dash of hot sauce) and a cold beverage. Whether it be a glass of bubbly, local micro-brew, or a chilled glass of Sauvignon Blanc, each oyster variety has a natural mate that drinks best with it. Here are some common varieties you'll find near you, along with suggested beverage pairings.

Kumamoto

Plump, firm, rich and sweet; terrific summer oyster with a buttery taste. Serve with Geysers Peak Dry Creek Valley Sauvignon Blanc or a light-oak style Chardonnay. Perhaps a refreshing German Pilsner or even a pear or apple hard cider.

European Flat

Rounder, flatter, meaty texture with a distinctive seaweed flavor. Drinks well with Geysers Peak Gewürztraminer. Or try a California Sparkling – citrusy and floral – a perfect foil to the saltiness from the seaweed flavor. If drinking beer, look for a wheat beer such as an imported Belgium White.

Hog Island Sweetwater

Their own variation of the Pacific variety. A rich and sweet tasting oyster with a slightly smoky finish. Drinks deliciously with Geysers Peak Pinot Grigio. If enjoying this raw, try a lighter style mignonette (vinegar & shallot based sauce) made from Champagne vinegar, finely diced shallots, lemon zest and hint of fresh thyme. If your oyster is going on the grill, then finish it with a hearty mignonette made from a tomato juice-base, shallots, horseradish and Worcester sauce. For this pairing, try a fuller-style IPA or Brown Porter; both would be a great match.



Hog Island Hogwash

A 50-50 blend of unseasoned rice vinegar and seasoned rice vinegar gives the perfect balance of acidity and sweetness.

- ¼ cup seasoned rice vinegar
- ¼ cup unseasoned rice vinegar
- 1 large shallot, peeled, minced
- 1 large jalapeño pepper, seeded, minced
- ½ bunch cilantro, finely chopped
- Juice of 1 lime

Method

Combine all ingredients in a medium bowl. When serving, stir the Hogwash beforehand to incorporate all the ingredients in the bowl. Serve in a shallow dish alongside freshly shucked raw oysters. Use the Hogwash the same day it's made.

If making ahead, mix all dry ingredients and store refrigerated in an airtight container. Just before serving, add vinegar and lime juice and blend. Pairs with Sauvignon Blanc.

Recipe courtesy Hog Island Oyster Co.