

CHARLESTON CITY PAPER

C CUISINE



Jonathan Boncek

OTTER ISLAND WILDS, A NEW DISCOVERY FROM THE ACE BASIN, ARE BRINY OYSTERS THAT LIVE SINGLY INSTEAD OF IN CLUSTERS

Nothing Ordinary Here

Lata and Nemirow ply the local waters for the Ordinary oyster hall

BY STEPHANIE BARNA

Get used to hearing the word "merroir." Just as terroir rose up over the last few years to describe a food or wine's "expression of place," merroir is being used to describe an oyster's tasty relationship to the briny water it lives in.

The word has become a part of Chef Mike Lata's lexicon as he's waded deep into local waters with his newest restaurant The Ordinary oyster hall, slated to open this week on Upper King Street.

"This is a conversation we used to not be able to have," remarks Lata as we taste a platter of ice cold Otter Island and Capers Blade oysters. "The Otter Island oysters taste different from the Capers Blades, which are grown just 60 miles away in Bulls Bay."

Lata rattles off more facts about oysters, a topic he's obviously become quite knowledgeable about as he's explored the products of the sea.

He says every oyster on the East and Gulf coasts, from Nova Scotia to Galveston, Texas, is the same genus — *C. virginica* — and the only thing that differentiates them is the water and environment they grow in. "The merroir is what makes it different."

Our local Carolina oysters, rarely found outside of the area, are known for their briny, juicy burliness. The bivalves are big and wet and most often served steaming hot on a plywood table in the backyard. But that's begun to change in recent years as shellfish

purveyors like Clammer Dave Belanger and Dan Long have cultivated oyster singles like Capers Blades and Carolina Cups, which are much more likely to be served raw on the half shell.

On ice at the Ordinary, you'll also find Otter Island wilds, a new critter on the scene that is being cultivated by Taylor Sikes at St. Jude Farms, a company that just launched in October and already has a long list of restaurant clients. The demand for local singles is high, and Sikes says their concept has been two years in the making. Their most unique product is that aforementioned wild Otter Island oyster, which are not taken from clusters and replanted as singles, as the Blades and Cups are. The Otter Islands are wild loners collected from the waters of the ACE Basin, according to Sikes.

On a tray of ice next to the aptly named Capers Blades, which have sharp and elongated shells, the Otter Island wilds are rounder and very fat. Slurp it down, and the taste is as big and briny as you'd expect from a local; the lingering finish clean and marshy, wild and delicious.

"Beausoleils and Malpeques of Nova Scotia are known all over America, but our oysters are not," says Lata. He sees the Ordinary as being well positioned to spread the word, an evangelist of our tasty bounty.

You could get the impression that Mike

Lata takes himself too seriously, that this passion for ingredients and quality makes him a dull boy. But when it comes down to it, he's a big believer that going out to eat should be fun. And that's the sort of experience he's planning to deliver at the Ordinary, whether a diner cares about merroir or not.

The Ordinary's menu is set up for grazing. Order a plate or two of oysters or perhaps splurge on a seafood tower, which comes in one, two, or three tiers piled high with clams, lobster tails, shrimp, and stone crab claws.

Lata debated about putting Maine lobster on the menu, but being a Massachusetts boy, he decided what the hell. "Ultimately, it came down to I know where to get good lobster, and most people are used to eating the stuff in the tanks," he says. "I grew up eating them, and I like lobster. I want to serve it for now."

He predicts you'll see the Yankee in him show up other places on the menu. For instance, he'll probably serve uni (sea urchin) because he knows a day boat harvester in Maine.

"We don't want to be a tourist restaurant or be exclusive to foodies," he says. "There's no tuna or carpaccio or crab cake on the menu. You won't see a filet of fish where you pick the sauce. We don't want to be fussy or cheffy either."

continued on page 50



THE RAW BAR SEATS SIX, WHILE THE THREE-TIERED SEAFOOD TOWER COULD PROBABLY FEED SIX

Nothing Ordinary

continued from page 48

In addition to the oyster bar, the menu has cold fish and salad plates that you can graze on. Like the pissaladière, a classic seafood tart, or the smoked amberjack pâté. Then there's the lobster roll, a nod to his New England roots that will probably become a fast favorite. On the hot side of the menu, you'll find brown oyster stew, crab gumbo, steamed clams, and triggerfish schnitzel (what?!). You can also order up some American caviar which comes with a pile of crunchy sea salt potato chips, creme fraiche, and chives.

Brooks Reitz has been brought over from FIG to manage the restaurant and the cocktail program, and co-owner Adam Nemirow has put together an unusual wine list. Indeed, the drinks should garner as much interest as the food. Reitz has placed rum front and center. The island spirit is a perfect match for seafood, he says, so he did some research and found the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club Cocktail and thinks local drinkers will take to it. He's also working on a Pimm's Cobbler made with Pimm's, gin, grenadine, and fresh ginger.

Nemirow describes his wine offerings as shellfish driven. "It's obviously geared toward bright briny fresh seafood," he says. One of his favorite offerings is the Domäne Pépière Muscadet, which comes from the Loire Valley and is known as the perfect oyster wine. It's a bracing white that's actually quite affordable and will go well with just about any seafood on the menu. Nemirow has also put some sherry on the list, promising that "there's something magical about certain types of cooked and chilled shellfish paired with sherry."

You've probably noticed that we haven't mentioned any entrées, and that's because there aren't any on the menu. The plan is



Photos by Jonathan Boncek

to offer one entrée per day, a plat du jour, that will come with a salad and dessert. Lata says the name Ordinary refers to restaurants where you expected a prix-fixe menu. Each day, the entrée will reflect the freshest product or the most interesting idea in the kitchen. Crab cakes or fish and chips might show up. He's shooting for a price point of \$30 for three courses.

Of course, as of Saturday, the prices and quite a lot of other details had yet to be finalized, but Lata and Nemirow seemed calm and relaxed about it all. They don't quite know what to expect from the Upper King Street neighborhood, having been down on Meeting Street near the Market for so long, but they're ready to open. If they make some mistakes, so be it. They'll adjust and learn, just like they did over at FIG. It's a method that's worked pretty well for them so far. ☐

The Ordinary will be open Tues.-Sun., 3-11 p.m. 544 King St. (843) 414-7060. eattheordinary.com