THE GREAT AMERICAN ESTUARY

By Francine Maroukian

 Plenty of chefs know their way around a fish, but few, however, know how to navigate an estuary. Estuaries are those murky coastal transition zones where rivers flow into oceans, where fresh and salty water mix to create the kind of habitat that makes the right kind of chef salivate. A chef like Spike Gjerde, who sources from the Chesapeake Bay for his restaurant Woodberry Kitchen in Baltimore, and then donates all his used oyster shells to construct reefs that enable repopulation

Estuaries, not so long ago, were in bad shape. You can have all the federal and state regulations you want, but marine stewardship has to happen at the community level. These chefs think of nearby waterways as farmers think of their fields. But unlike the "brow-local" agricultural movement, which can pinpoint the origin of every lettuce leaf, estuarine sourcing has a mysterious quality because water moves. After a decade of having their cooking style reduced to the one-size-fits-all cliché "farm to table," chefs are being drawn to the challenge of balancing profitability on the razor's edge of the water's dynamism. This requires treating ecosystems not as resources to be exploited but as relationships to be nurtured. "We connected ourselves to these Atlantic fisheries," says Gjerde of his relationship to the Chesapeake. "And we will rise and fall with the changing tides."

While most chefs serve fish from distant waters, estuarine ones like Gjerde, Donald Link, Mike Lata, and Bill Taibe are enthralled by what you might call minerology—a marine twist on the wine term terroir, the impact that soil and environment have on the flavor of a wine. If that sounds like silly food talk, consider this: East Coast American oysters can be big or small, creamy or briny, flinty or sweet, but every one, from Nova Scotia to the Gulf of Mexico, is the same species (Crassostrea virginica). Some publicist will inevitably reduce all this to a meaningless catchphrases like "boat to table," but the chefs are motivated by something deeper—the chance to stand in the mud with local watermen to source tonight's dinner. That's the whole point, of course. They want to cook you something you couldn't eat anywhere else in the world.

GULF COAST

SOUTH CAROLINA

CHEF: Mike Lata

RESTAURANT: The Ordinary, Charleston

DISH: Applying his native New England's Portuguese influence to a low-country classic, Lata gives poached whitefish (molding an escabeche-style vinegar-marinated, studding the mix with vegetables, then adds a reminder of Charleston's importance on the spice trade route: toasted cumin, caraway, and coriander.

25-90° N THE ESTUARIES

LONG ISLAND SOUNO

CHEF: Bill Taibe

RESTAURANT: The Wheel, Westport, Connecticut

DISH: Taibe combines two hallmarks of Yankee cooking: seafood and dairy. Pulling flavor from a sunlight-drenched lobster, the sauce made from the roasted shells, and larding it over fried potatoes made aromatic with roasted leeks, lemon, and fresh lacy dill.

CHESAPEAKE BAY

CHEF: Spike Gjerde

RESTAURANT: Woodberry Kitchen, Baltimore

DISH: When rockfish are running 26 inches, Gjerde offers a full seafood menu, including collar meet (behind the grill) glazed with fish sauce, a 19th-century heirloom chili once grown in local African-American gardens.

CHARLOTTE HARBOR AND COASTAL CAROLINAS

CHEF: Donald Link

RESTAURANT: Peche Seafood Grill, New Orleans

DISH: A reminder of the city's seafaring Sicilian heritage (the French Quarter was once known as "Little Palermo"). Peche's spaghetti and seafood is built on a foundation of shells, leeks, and chile de arbol with crab stock to make a sauce for spaghetti and Lake Hermitage crabmeat.

$4.99

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