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Best oyster bars in America

TRAVEL+
LEISURE

By [Meredith Bethune](#), Travel + Leisure
updated 4:23 PM EDT, Wed September 17, 2014

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Hog Island Oyster Company: San Francisco, California

Happiness on the half-shell

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Wine gets 'terroir' from its surroundings; oysters get 'merroir'
- Oysters taste distinctly depending on where they're grown
- Bivalves can be shipped, but they're best enjoyed locally
- Thanks to modern refrigeration, oysters are edible year round

(CNN) -- At Portland's [Eventide Oyster Co.](#), stakes in the ice declare whether the half shells are "from Maine" or "away." It's a sign of local pride—and the importance of place when tasting oysters.

Like a fine wine exhibits its terroir, an oyster's merroir imparts a distinct flavor, from the briny Blue Points of Long Island to snappy Kumamotos of the Pacific Northwest to the bright Malpeques of Prince Edward Island.

"Everyone has their preference, as oysters take on the characteristics of the area in which they grow," says Candace Beattie of Baltimore's [Thames Street Oyster House](#). Its specialty? Mellow Chesapeake oysters, from medium-bodied to plump.

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While it's possible to ship the bivalves across the country, there's nothing better than tasting them freshly plucked from the water. Seafood lovers can safely get their oyster fix during months that don't end in "r" thanks to modern refrigeration. But storied family-run joints like [Casamento's](#) in New Orleans still close during the warmest



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months. (Spawning summer oysters are usually less flavorful than their winter counterparts.)

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Eat like a local

Oyster bars and street carts were popularized in the 19th century, when the mollusks grew in abundance and were considered an everyday food. You'll find that kind of casual vibe at southern spots like the [Original Oyster House](#) in Mobile, Alabama, and at a growing number of waterfront bars connected to oyster farms.

But our cross-country survey also turned up restaurants that take a more stylish approach. You could spend a romantic evening slurping bivalves at Seattle's bistro-like [the Walrus and the Carpenter](#). Oysters are a natural aphrodisiac, and these bars are sure to tickle your fancy.

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Hog Island Oyster Company: San Francisco, California

Located inside the Ferry Building, this airy, recently expanded oyster bar provides sweeping waterfront views of the Bay Bridge along with the company's fresh shellfish pulled from nearby Tomales Bay. Chef Christopher Laramie's menu features sustainably raised seafood like steamed Manila clams or semolina-dusted crispy smelts. Much of the produce is grown near the oyster farm.

The Ordinary: Charleston, South Carolina

Chef Mike Lata focuses on East Coast oysters with a sprinkling of choices from the West Coast at this former bank building turned sleek seafood hall. "We have several oysters that we can get locally and two within an arm's reach," he explains, "and I like to serve them side by side to highlight their differences." Wild Caper's Blades oysters from South Carolina are available at the white tiled raw bar; pickled shrimp or poached razor clams, served cold with an apple cilantro and jalapeño sauce, are another menu favorite.

Gilhooley's Raw Bar: San Leon, Texas

This cash-only dive's specialty is Oysters Gilhooley, and it makes a persuasive case that the best oyster cookery comes from the Gulf region. Shucked oysters on the half shell are dotted with butter and hot sauce, dusted with Parmesan cheese, and then wood-roasted until browned. While the dish is a year-round hit, the raw shellfish pulled from Texas waters are best enjoyed in season during the colder months.

Matunuck Oyster Bar: South Kingstown, Rhode island

As an extension of Matunuck Oyster Farm, this seafood restaurant overlooks the estuary where the shellfish grow. After studying aquaculture at nearby University of Rhode Island, owner Perry Raso started farming oysters, eventually opening a place for diners to enjoy them. "We pride ourselves on doing clam shack fare, as well as more refined options," explains Raso. While Matunuck's own steely oysters served raw on the half shell are the focus, the bar also serves a few other varieties from the smallest state, side by side to highlight their subtle variations in flavor.

Taylor Shellfish Samish Farm Store: Bow, Washington

Family-owned Taylor Shellfish Farms already operates three oyster bar locations in Seattle, but the best ambience is found at its farm store 90 minutes north of the city. A day trip to this bay-side shack, tucked into the tall pine trees and rocky terrain, is ideal during the



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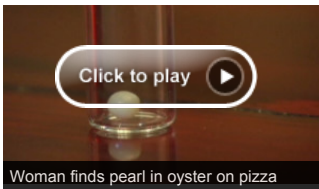
warmer months of the year. It provides little more than picnic tables and grills. Eaters are encouraged to shuck their own Shigokus and Kumamotos, but the store's employees will do it for a small fee.



America's Best Margaritas



Bacon whoopie in the USA



Woman finds pearl in oyster on pizza

Island Creek Oyster Bar: Boston, Massachusetts

Are oysters aphrodisiacs? This is the place to find out, as Island Creek happens to be one of America's most romantic restaurants. The muted color palette and massive wall of cages filled with oyster shells were inspired by the sunset over nearby Duxbury Bay—the location of owner Skip Bennett's oyster farm. He and chef Jeremy Sewall highlight its bounty, along with shellfish from several nearby sources, and work closely with fishermen and farmers to secure local ingredients. The menu credits fellow oyster farmers like Don Wilkinson of Plymouth, Scott and Tina Laurie of Barnstable, and other purveyors by name.

Grand Central Oyster Bar: New York City

This institution within Grand Central Terminal serves about 2 million oysters annually to suited businessmen and tourists beneath its vaulted tiled ceilings. Open since 1913, the swanky bar has featured bivalves from all over the Western Hemisphere; a sign above the long wooden bar lists the day's particular varieties. Its famed oyster pan roast, with gently cooked Blue Points floating in a cream sauce with chile and paprika, is one of the longest-running menu items in New York City.

Merroir: Topping, Virginia

It's worth the hour-long drive from Richmond just to soak up this restaurant's view of the Rappahannock River flowing into the Chesapeake Bay. Merroir is linked to Travis and Ryan Croxton's [Rappahannock Oyster Company](#), a pioneer in reviving the region's oyster industry after years of environmental degradation. The menu is built around the company's three different oyster varieties—all grown in different parts of the Chesapeake. They vary in salinity and sweetness depending on where they're grown in relation to the mouth of the bay and proximity to the Atlantic Ocean.

Eventide Oyster Co.: Portland, Maine

Turquoise walls make a fitting backdrop for this overflowing oyster bar, where stakes in the ice categorize the bivalves as "from Maine" or "away." The Old Port area restaurant does New England classics like lobster rolls and chowder along with creative offerings like Kim Chee Ice or cucumber ginger. Eventide's Chinese-style steamed bun, filled with crispy fried oysters, tomato, and tart pickled daikon, red onion, and jalapeño, is a standout.

The Original Oyster House: Mobile, Alabama

For more than 30 years, this family-friendly restaurant on raised pillars over Mobile Bay has served seafood with a southern accent. Gulf oysters arrive at your table on the half shell, either raw or chargrilled. And there's plenty of the fried goodness you'd expect: fried pickles, fried crawfish tails, and fried grouper with grits. Turn up at dinnertime to savor a coastal sunset complete with egrets and salty sea breezes.

The Walrus and the Carpenter: Seattle, Washington

An ornate spiny chandelier hovers above chef Renee Erickson's zinc oyster bar in the hip Ballard neighborhood. About a dozen oyster varieties representing the West Coast, from California to Alaska, are piled into wire baskets, topped with ice, and labeled with chalkboard



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signs. Diners also dig in to comforting seafood dishes like grilled sardines and scallop tartare with cucumber and dill mousseline.

Travel+ Leisure: See All of the Best Oyster Bars in America

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