

The Next-Generation Oyster Bar

A new crop of modern day oyster shacks have opened around the country, elevating the raw shellfish game to new heights.

By Matt Duckor



photo by Linda Pugliese, food styling by Anna Hampton, props from ABC Home, Sur La Table

We all harbor some romanticized version of the oyster bar in our minds: a wait staff that may or may not give you the time of day, barebones but dignified decor, cold beer and wine, and, most importantly, impeccably sourced seafood that was simply prepared or expertly shucked and tasted of summer.

But when nearly every trendy restaurant started to offer oysters on the half shell, the oyster bar was in danger of losing a bit of its luster.

No more. Thanks to the growing popularity of oysters—and an expanded interest in where they come from—the oyster bar is reinventing itself. These days, waxing poetic about that perfect Dodge Cove specimen isn't strange in our shellfish-obsessed world. That means that shoebox-sized joints shucking upwards of a thousand oysters a day are suddenly viable again and, well, cool.

Across the country, in New York, Seattle, Charleston, Boston, and Portland, accomplished chefs are leaving high-end restaurants jobs to erect briny temples near the sea dedicated to oysters and their raw-bar brethren.

The modern oyster bar still has a deep respect for seafood culture and the traditions that the establishments of yesterday got right. The seafood is as fresh as possible, menus are straightforward and don't offer esoteric, quotation-surrounded "takes" on classic dishes, and hospitality is still king.

But the chefs at these spots aren't content with just reinventing the wheel. They're expanding on what the very definition of what an oyster bar can be, from an extensive menu of vegetable dishes to a killer wine list designed to make wine nerds drool. (And the part-time college kids have been replaced by an accomplished wait staff.)

Here are five ways that the new generation of oyster bars are rewriting the rulebook—and how to bring those flavors home.

1. UP YOUR MIGNONETTE GAME



photo: Courtesy of Eventide Oyster Co.

At first glance, [Eventide Oyster Co.](#) in Portland, Maine looks like any number of the handsomely appointed oyster bars—a wood-paneled, stone-topped bar, charming outdoor patio enclosed with thick braided boating rope, and some really well-executed branding on the menu. But keep an eye on the plates coming out of the kitchen—plates of delicate crudo, lobster rolls served in a steamed Chinese bao buns, and ramen adorned with smoked ham hock and wavy noodles made in-house—and you'll quickly realize that there's some accomplished cooking happening on the other side of the dining room's seafoam-blue walls.

Amid all that, oysters are rightly still front-and-center. Over a dozen varieties are separated into the categories "From Maine" and "From Away" and are displayed on ice in the giant granite trough that sits atop the bar. Somehow, while you're going to town on oysters with names like Norumbega, Winterpoint Selects, and Ebenecook, it's their toppings that deserve the most attention grabbing. Chef and co-owner Andrew Taylor says he was "struck by how uncreative other oysters bars were" before he opened Eventide in 2012. "It seemed like all they had was mignonette and cocktail sauce," he says.

Thus, Eventide's oyster "ices" were born. The idea of putting a flavored ice (aka "granita") atop an oyster isn't exactly revolutionary, but Taylor and his team upped the game. Taylor serves the ice on the side for the customer to add themselves ("By the time you get an oyster with ice already on it from the kitchen, it's watery") and deploying off-the-beaten-track yet insanely delicious flavors like horseradish, Tabasco, and pickled red pepper. Eventide's ices are the easiest way to up your oyster game, and they're dead simple to make at home.

Get the Recipe: [Oyster Ices](#) (*pictured above*)

2. GO BEYOND THE FRENCH FRY



photo: Courtesy of The Walrus and the Carpenter

Long gone are the days when French fries were the only vegetable on the menu at an oyster bar. Chef Renee Erickson at Seattle's [The Walrus and the Carpenter](#) created a "garden" section on her menu with a regularly rotating list of dishes that reads like a greatest hits album of seasonal produce.

"We always try to have the fried oysters that someone is craving when they come to an oyster bar," says Erickson, "but we also have other things like the garden dishes that you wouldn't normally expect—people come here for that now."

Take the spiced carrot salad, dotted with brightly acidic currants, pistachios, and sweet honey. It's a dish that exhibits the level of simple sophistication available at Erickson's award-winning and more upscale sister restaurant The Whale Wins, but diners can enjoy them alongside a dozen oysters and a pint of Double Mountain Brewery's Dry Hopped Pale Ale.

Just don't get too caught up in the vegetal glory here—the fried oysters are not to be missed.

Get the Recipes:

[Chioggia Beet Borani with Feta and Toasted Sesame Seeds](#)

[Spiced Carrot Salad](#) (see below)



photo by Linda Pugliese, food styling by Anna Hampton, props from ABC Home

3. YOU CAN PICKLE THAT



photo: Courtesy of The Ordinary

Conventional wisdom says that seafood can be raw, fried, grilled, or poached. This next generation of oyster bars introduces a new option to the mix: pickling.

The pickled shrimp have been on the menu at [The Ordinary](#) in Charleston, SC since the day the restaurant opened in 2012. It makes sense that chef-owner Mike Lata intends to keep them there. A Southern staple, the shrimp are one of the more refreshing things you could ask for on a hot summer (or winter's) day. Lata adds cumin and coriander to the pickling liquid for an earthy, herbaceous note that separates The Ordinary's version from the one diners might have grown up with.

If you're making them at home, the prep time is quick (about two minutes, the rest of the cooking happens as the shrimp rests in the brine), which means less time in front of the hot stove.

Get the Recipe: [Pickled Shrimp](#)



photo by Linda Pugliese, food styling by Anna Hampton, props from ABC Home

4. MAKE OYSTERS INTO A REAL MEAL



photo by Morgan Ione Yeager Photography

At the prototypical oyster bar, the only option for anything resembling an entree is the day's "whole fish," either fried or grilled and served unadorned. Stop into [Row 34](#), in the newly revitalized waterfront neighborhood of South Boston, and you'll find dishes that combine the composed food of higher-end restaurants with a stripped-back simplicity of the modern oyster bar.

"We wanted a place where people would come in and have a beer and oysters and maybe stay for dinner," says chef Jeremy Sewall, "and 99 percent of them stay for dinner."

There are house-made pastas, a steak, and even a burger you can top with fried oysters, togarashi aioli, and cole slaw. But it's dishes like the pan-seared

bluefish with charred corn and tomato salad speak to Row 34's mastery of tasty simplicity—fresh, seasonal ingredients without too many components to distract from the freshest fish Sewall and his team can find.

Get the Recipe: [Seared Bluefish with Charred Corn Warm Tomato Salad](#)



photo by Linda Pugliese, food styling by Anna Hampton, props from ABC Home

5. BEYOND BUDWEISER AND BEAUJOLAIS



photo: Courtesy of Maison Premiere

Good news for everyone who loves wine (everyone): Chilled-to-death Pinot Grigio is a thing of the past. There's no need to be afraid to order a glass of wine at an oyster bar anymore. At [Maison Premiere](#) in Brooklyn, NY, co-owner Krystof Zizka has managed to tap into the holy trinity of cool by creating a haven for seafood lovers, cocktail nerds, and wine snobs.

It's hard to believe more people hadn't taken oyster bar wine lists more seriously (especially on a bottle-list level) before Zizka opened Maison Premiere in 2011. After all, sparkling wine and crisp, mineral-driven whites are two of the best things in the world to pair with oysters.

With nearly 200 bottle selections, Maison Premiere has a larger wine list than many full-fledged restaurants. Guests can score anything from vintage bottles of blockbuster Champagne's like Krug and Dom Perignon (\$355 and \$395, respectively), to the type of geek-out-able wines that fill the dreams of sommeliers around town like bottles from legendary Jura producer Pierre Overnoy (Arbois-Pupillin 2011, \$115) and Morgon's Jean Foillard (Côte du Py 2012, \$160 served in magnum).