

# Awe, Shucks!



PHOTOS BY NECEE REGIS

*Competitors at the Prince Edward Island oyster shucking competition take their work seriously and when it was all said and done, Eamon Clark, bottom, was the winner.*

## Oyster shuckers roll up their sleeves in P.E.I. for a chance to call themselves champions

*By Necee Regis*

TRAVELIFE CONTRIBUTOR

**T**YNE VALLEY, P.E.I. — I posed a simple question to professional oyster shuckers at a competition in Miami Beach in 2006: “Tell me about your knife.” It was my first exposure to the wild and colourful world of shucking competitions — outside of my summer hometown’s fledgling oyster festival — and I was unprepared for their impassioned answers involving blade length and thickness, flexibility, handle shape and size and how finely to sharpen the point.

Since that day, I’ve become an unabashed fan of the sport. I’ve travelled to the U.S. Nationals in Maryland, the Canadian Nationals in Prince Edward Island, the World Oyster Opening Championship in Galway, Ireland, and many smaller venues. Along the way I’ve made friends with people from Virginia to Vancouver, Florida to Finland, and learned more than any ordinary person should know about oyster species, farming methods, the ecology of oysters, how to craft oyster beer, why tasting oysters is like tasting wine, and how best to open a recalcitrant bivalve.

And, of course, I love eating all those tasty oysters.

The Canadian National Competition — the event that qualifies one shucker to represent Canada at Galway’s international event — is hosted every summer in a community sports centre in the verdant P.E.I. countryside. The “Shuck-Off” is a signature element of the Tyne Valley Oyster Festival, a weeklong, small-time celebration that also includes a music festival, soapbox derby, trivia championship, kids entertainment, homemade suppers, Miss Oyster Pearl pageant and a parade.

“It’s a little piece of Canadiana,” said Eamon Clark, a shucking competitor from Toronto who hoped to defend his title for a record seventh year at the 2015 event. “It’s not a big production, but it’s THE production.”

On a hot and steamy Friday night, after the fried oyster and scallop supper had wrapped up across the street, inside the dimly-lit cavernous space of the sports centre, the air was crackling with anticipation. Up on the illuminated stage, a preliminary event — an oyster grading competition — was in full swing. Some of the 2,000 attendees sat in rows of folding chairs cheering on the folks on stage while others quaffed beer from plastic cups near the bar. The rest of the crowd, myself included, surrounded the 25 competitors warming up in the far corner of the room.

In shucking competition parlance, warming up means opening as many oysters as possible before the event. The male and female competitors shucked elbow to elbow within a triangular, rowboat-shaped counter, possibly designed to shield them from the hungry hoards circling like sharks. At this venue, the \$15 entry fee allows visitors to suck down all the oysters they can snag.





Most competitors are involved in the food industry as bartenders, chefs, restaurateurs, farmers and distributors. One is Daniel Notkin, who opened an eponymous oyster bar in Montreal last spring and is founder of Montreal's Oysterfest. He spoke with me about — what else — his knives.

"My dilemma is which knife to use. My competition shucking knife or the prototype?"

Notkin, who has won a number of competitions in 2015 — including the Niagara Oysterfest, Ottawa-Bytowne Oysterfest and the Boston Seafood Expo — was aiming for his first national win.

"The competitive knife is fragile — it's honed so fine. The prototype is a stronger steel with a broader blade. Great torsion. It finds the hinge a little easier," he explained.

Toronto's Landy Cannon also chatted about knives. "I looked at videos online (of previous competitions) and I realized my knife blade should be shorter. And I'm taking too long to place them on the tray."

At my side, local volunteer Carrie MacLellan watched the practice session with a seasoned eye.

"Just because someone is fast doesn't mean they'll win. It's pretty intense," she said.



Indeed, the competition involves not just speed but also skill. Oysters must be opened as quickly as possible without sacrificing presentation, meaning each finished tray should look as if it were being served at an elegant oyster bar. Penalties are added by a panel of judges, who evaluate each oyster for cut or damaged meat (3 seconds), oysters out of the shell (30 seconds), grit or shell in the oyster (3 seconds) and other variables, including blood.

As is the tradition in Tyne Valley, competitors marched to the stage to the sound of bagpipes and took their seats in the sweaty limelight. Their names would be called in heats of three with interludes of music to allow the judges to inspect the trays. The atmosphere was both tense and congenial as the first competitors approached the tables, each receiving a box of 20 oysters from which they choose 18 to open. And then it was time to begin.

"THREE, TWO, ONE . . . SHUCK!"

Sounding much like a carnival barker, emcee Jeff Noyes called the play-by-play action — visible on a large screen — and roused the crowd into noisy participation. As the shells flew, the audience hooted for their hometown favourites, including many who travelled from Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa and beyond. After signalling they were finished shucking by tapping the table with their knife, the shuckers' individual timekeepers recorded preliminary scores before carefully moving trays to the judges' table.

The previous year's champion is always the last to shuck — he or she takes the stage solo. When six-time winner Eamon Clark approached the table, the cheers intensified. Could he do it again?

While the final score was being tabulated — and the shuckers had scattered for beers and backslaps — traditional music by Richard Wood on fiddle and Gordon Belsher on guitar kept the atmosphere lively. I meandered past the snack bar (selling hot dogs, burgers, nachos and such) and T-shirt vendors before stopping at



While the competition might be intense, a festive mood always prevails at the oyster championship, thanks to the contributions of island musicians and their down-home entertainment.

### Just the facts

• The two largest oyster shucking events in P.E.I. happen in mid-summer (Tyne Valley Oyster Festival) and late September (Shellfish Festival). Tyne Valley Oyster Festival <http://www.peioysterfest.com/>; Shellfish Festival, Charlottetown <http://peishellfish.com/>

#### Places to stay:

• Hilltop Acres B & B and Guest House — Simple and friendly accommodations in renovated 1930s home. Located a short drive from Tyne Valley. Includes country breakfast. Call 902-831-2817 or go to <http://www.bbcanada.com/hilltopacres>  
 • The Holman Grand Hotel — Contemporary luxury in the heart of Charlottetown. Call 877-455-4726 or go to <http://www.theholmangrand.com/>

#### Where to slurp oysters on the island:

• Claddagh Oyster House — 131 Sidney St., Charlottetown / 1-902-892-9661 / Stylish downtown restaurant serving a changing selection of premium oysters and locally sourced seafood.  
 • Malpeque Oyster Bar — 10 King St, Malpeque Harbour / 1-902-836-3999 / Rustic, family-run, seasonal oyster bar and restaurant overlooking scenic Malpeque Bay.  
 • The Lobster Shack - 8 Main St., Souris / 1-902-743-3347 / In addition to lobsters, this beachside shack specializes in distinctive Colville Bay oysters.

• For more information on P.E.I.'s oyster festivals, go to <http://www.tourismpei.com/>

• Go to <http://www.peioystersociety.ca/> to learn more about the P.E.I. Oyster Society

the P.E.I. Aquaculture Alliance booth. Freshly shucked oyster in hand, I recited the oath that swore me in as a member:

"Cradled on the waves,  
 I swear to honour  
 On this borrowed day,  
 The P.E.I. Oyster Society  
 By the grace of this  
 Salty Kiss."

Finally, close to midnight, all the shuckers were summoned back to the stage. Noyes held his head in disbelief while shouting the winning results: "With a preliminary time of 1 minute, 16 seconds, with an adjusted score for penalties of 1 minute, 37 seconds, Eamon Clark is the winner — in Canadian record time."

The crowd roared its approval as Eamon hopped on the shucking table, shaking a celebratory bottle of champagne before facing his audience and popping the cork. •

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