

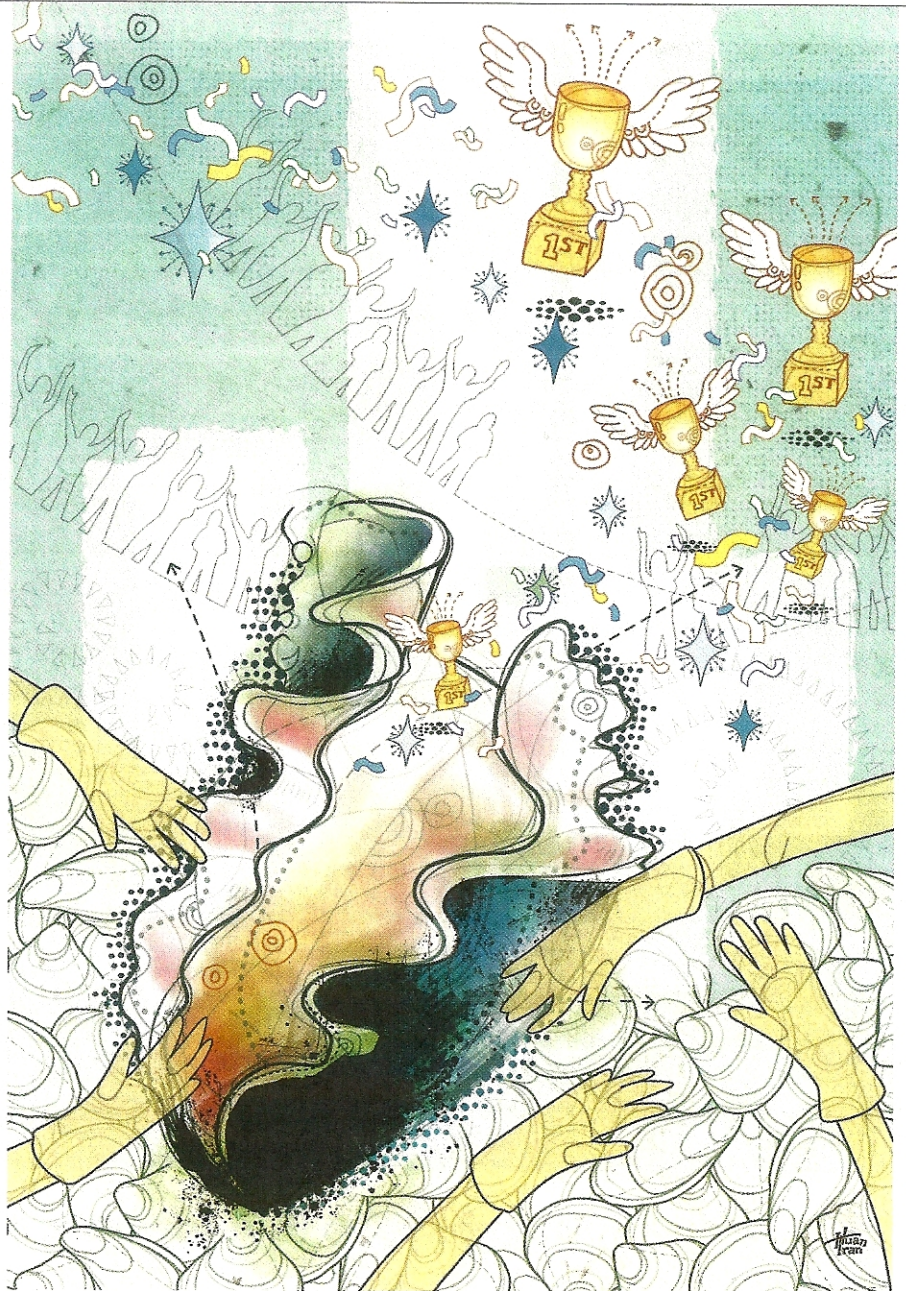
Open Wide

Oyster shucking is as much an art as it is a necessity. And a host of world-class shuckers have perfected their own techniques for getting to the slimy, wet, tasty morsel inside the shell. By Necee Regis

S **ST. MARY'S COUNTY** points like a ballet dancer's foot into the waters of the Potomac and Patuxent rivers and the Chesapeake Bay. So it makes sense that this peninsula, south of Baltimore and Washington, D.C., surrounded as it is by natural habitats of oysters, blue crabs, sea turtles, great blue herons, snowy egrets, and all manner of aquatic wildlife, is home to the National Oyster Shucking Championship.

A modest affair back in 1967, the event has evolved into a two-day extravaganza that is part of the St. Mary's County Oyster Festival. Every year, on the third weekend in October, competitors — referred to as shuckers — converge to claim the title of best in the nation and thus win the grand-prize ticket to Galway, Ireland, for the Guinness World Oyster Opening Championship.

On this warmer-than-usual fall day, the shuckers competing are 17 men and six women, who hail from elsewhere in Maryland and from places as near and far as Virginia, North Carolina, Massachusetts,



Florida, and Washington State. They are the crème de la crème of the oyster-shucking world — many have placed first in regional competitions, and some are even repeat national champions.

This diverse and colorful group has three things in common: a fiercely competitive spirit, a love of oysters, and an opinion on how best to open a shell in a competition. The latter involves the method of attack (where to insert the blade), choice of equipment (knives, gloves, eyewear, water bottles, rags, lucky charms), and strategy (time versus perfection).

For the uninitiated, oyster shucking — at least at this level of competition and skill — is all about strategy, or finding the right balance between speed and perfectionism.

George “Hannibal” Hastings, 53, is a two-time national champion from Baltimore who got his nickname while competing in the internationals.

“In Ireland, the announcer calls the event like a horse race. Everyone is given a random nom de plume so the judges don’t know who is who. I got the name Hannibal, and it stuck,” Hastings says.

The rounded front of the oyster, I learn, is the bill; the opposite edge is the hinge. Hastings demonstrates how he and his brother Bob, 50, pry open a recalcitrant bivalve.

"I put the round side down on a board and stab the oyster in the bill, slipping the blade between the two shells. I pick it up and sever the muscle from the bottom shell — which is like scratching my palm with the knife," Hastings says. He then flips it over, discarding the top shell, and presents the glistening oyster on the flat half shell. It happens almost faster than I can observe.

"If you open an oyster at the bill, you're a stabber," he says.

William "Chopper" Young, 41, won the first competition he entered in his hometown of Wellfleet, Massachusetts, in 2002. He employs a different technique. "I'm a side guy — a hacker — one of a few," Young says. "Bob and George are stabbers. This is stabbing country."

"Chesapeake Bay oysters are suitable for stabbers because of their thick shells. They're heavy. You can stab down and not go through them," says Allison Paine, 27, also



If You Go

St. Mary's County Oyster Festival is held annually on the third weekend in October in St. Mary's County, Maryland. The National Oyster Shucking Championship is part of this event. www.usoysterfest.com

Where to Stay

Fairfield Inn

22119 Three Notch Road, Lexington Park

(301) 863-0203, www.marriott.com

Doubles: \$119

Comfortable and spacious guest rooms close to the fairgrounds

Where to Eat When You're Not at the Fair

Sandgates Inn

27525 North Sandgates Road, Mechanicsville

(301) 373-5100

Entrées: \$13 to \$27

Steamed local crabs, oysters, clams, sandwiches, and pizza on the Patuxent River

from Wellfleet. She has competed for two years. "I'm a regular back-shucker," she says, meaning she pries it open at the hinge.

THE MORNING OF the competition, the shuckers gather at the far end of the St. Mary's County Fairgrounds in "the practice barn," where the St. Mary's Optimist Club sells raw shucked oysters with lemon wedges and cocktail sauce. It's an opportunity for competitors to limber up while opening local oysters, and there's a camaraderie as they greet friends, catch up on gossip, and compare methods and knives.

Scotty O'Lear, 41, from Panama City, Florida, is here to defend his national title. His accomplishments could fill a book: 10-time Florida state champion, three-time U.S. National Oyster Shucking Champion, plus lots of titles from smaller competitions.

"My daddy had a shrimp boat. I started shucking oysters at Mr. G's bar when I was 14. At 19, I entered my first competition. It took me 39 seconds to win \$500," he says.

I ask if he has a special knife, and he holds it up.

"It's a modified Dexter S120," O'Lear says. "Sharpened." He grins and gets back to work, grasping the knife with his bare right hand while his left hand, which holds an oyster, is protected by two black rubber gloves.

"You have to have a real sharp knife, and it takes a lot of practice. It took me 10 years to be number one," says Deborah Pratt, 54, from Jamaica, Virginia. Pratt was taught how to shuck by her sister Clementine Macon, 52, who is also competing. The sisters grew up along the Rappahannock River, where their parents shucked oysters for a living. In her 22 years of competitive shucking, Pratt has been the National Oyster Shucking Champion three times and was second in the world in 1997.

While the shuckers warm up, I stroll the festival grounds. The air is redolent of smoky pit beef, sweet-potato fries, oyster chowder, Maryland ham, oysters grilled with garlic-butter sauce, and beer. I sample my first funnel cake; it's crunchy, hot, and dusted with powdered sugar.

In true county-fair tradition, there are arts and crafts for sale, a livestock barn, an

entertainment tent, historic displays, and an amusement park with a Ferris wheel. But best of all, there is the 28th annual National Oyster Cook-off, during which nine competitors — culled from more than 200 nationwide — prepare their recipes for crowds that watch their every move. Last year's winner serves oysters tagine with apricots, while another chef finishes garnishing a batch of crispy chipotle oysters.

The cook-off winners are announced from the shucking stage, which is in the center of a small racetrack. It's almost three p.m. when the chefs depart and the first shucking competitors arrive for the preliminary heats.

Each shucker receives 24 oysters. Results are tallied based on both speed and presentation. Penalties added for imperfections can ruin a good time: A broken shell adds one second, an oyster off its shell adds two, and a dirty or cut oyster adds three. The worst infraction, a missing oyster, adds 20 seconds to the overall time.

"You have to slow down to avoid penalties," O'Lear says.

At the end of day one, six men and all the women advance to the finals, including O'Lear, Young, Pratt, and Paine. The best competitors will face off for the title of National Oyster Shucking Champion.

On day two, the tension in the air is palpable. Some competitors drag on cigarettes or sip beer. Others practice their moves, opening imaginary oysters just as golfers practice their swing without a club. Some receive massages or stretch from side to side. Cathy Milliken from Virginia clutches a pink stuffed animal and chats on her cell phone. Her nonchalance is deceptive: I'm told she's a three-time women's champion and a speed demon when it comes to opening oysters.

It's time to begin. The women compete first. One snaps on tight purple surgical gloves, while others wear pink or yellow dishwashing gloves. Paine dons stretchy nylon Atlas gloves, which are form-fitting and have rubber palms and fingertips.

As each woman finishes, her oysters are whisked behind the stage, where three judges from the Watermen's Association of

St. Mary's County scrutinize them for flaws. After the judging, contestants serve their oysters to the crowds in the grandstand. Cathy Milliken, the new women's champion, carries her tray to raucous cheers.

Now it's the men's turn.

"5, 4, 3, 2, SHUCK!"

When O'Lear competes, his entire body moves. In one continuous sequence, he grabs an oyster, inserts his knife blade, and, slightly dipping and weaving, pops it open and places it on the tray before twisting and reaching for the next oyster to begin the dance again.

Young is more staccato in his approach. Discarded shells arc off the stage and land in the grass with each flick of his wrist. Zeferino Bonifacio's movements are small and precise, and Mike Martin's Florida Gators hat hides his expression.

The crowd collectively holds its breath. The stakes are high, though not as high as in some regional competitions, where the winner can walk away with \$5,000. First-place winners in each category here are assured a \$300 check, but the greater incentive is to claim the championship title and win a ticket to the internationals in September.

"C'mon, Chop! Keep 'em clean!"

"Go, Scotty!"

"Go, Mike! Let's go! Let's go!"

O'Lear raises his arms and steps back. A collective yelp escapes the crowd: "Whoaa!"

But O'Lear's quick time is no match for Young's careful presentation. After penalty points are added, William Young wins by 3.4 seconds.

The suspense resumes as Milliken and Young mount the stage for the final heat. The band plays "My Little Runaway" as the shells fly. When the shuckers step back from their respective trays, arms raised, there is nothing left to do but wait.


Mike Guy, past president of the Lexington Park Rotary Club (which sponsors the event), is this year's Oyster King. Sporting a crown and a red velvet cape with ermine trim, Guy calls the competitors to the stage for the doling out of lesser prizes while we anticipate the final tally.

At last, the national champion is announced. I'm surprised by my emotional response as Young dedicates his win to a good friend who unexpectedly passed away the previous week.

Young hoists his trophy in the air and poses with the Oyster King as photogra-

phers snap his portrait as the official 2007 National Oyster Shucking Champion.

And then it's over. The grandstand empties as smoothly as an hourglass. Hugs and thumps on the back circle through lingering shuckers and their friends. Calls of "see you next year" bounce across the field as the sun hovers near the horizon and shadows lengthen. Vans are packed. Doors slam, and

wheels kick up gravel as this happy crew drives away. Dust flickers and swirls, illuminated in the late-day honey-colored light. A half moon climbs above the grandstand, and before I know it, I'm alone in the grassy expanse. It's time to find my car. See you next year, indeed. 

NECEE REGIS is a travel writer for the *Boston Globe*. She has never met an oyster she didn't want to eat.