

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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CANADA

Toronto on the half shell

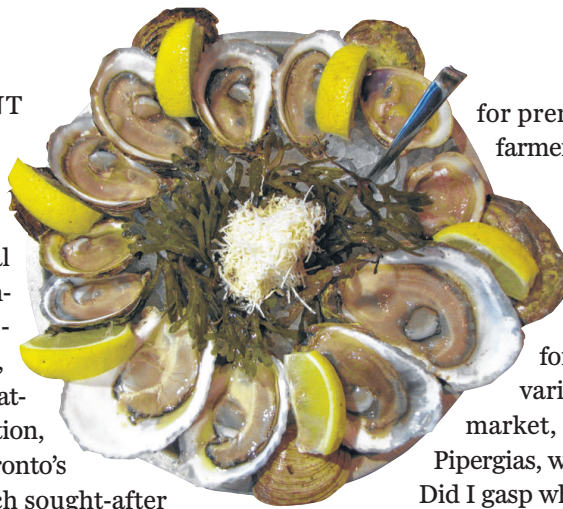
Oysters come from everywhere, by the millions, to the city mad about them, for a tourist on a tasting trek

BY NECEE REGIS | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

They don't farm oysters in this city, but they sure love to eat them.

On a recent whirlwind visit, I toured 10 restaurants, from casual neighborhood bistros to glitzy high-concept dining emporiums to no-frills oyster bars. I met with owners, chefs, distributors, growers, and shuckers; all oyster fanatics and bivalve aficionados committed to quality, education, and experimentation. My guide to the intimacies of Toronto's oyster world was John Baby, a chef who is also a much sought-after judge at shucking competitions in Canada and the United States.

Other than the qualities of each oyster that — like “terroir” descriptions for wine — reflect the area where they are grown (such as grassy, crisp, briny, buttery, sweet, metallic), the topic most discussed was sustainability. As the clamor



for premium oysters rises, so do prices and the pressure on farmers.

My solution? Get thee to Toronto.

DIANA'S OYSTER BAR & GRILL

A 30-minute drive from downtown, Diana's Oyster Bar & Grill is a sleek, glass-walled eatery (formerly a doughnut shop) in a commercial shopping district. Before settling at the bar, where a dozen East and West Coast varieties nestled in glistening ice, we visited the adjacent market, Diana's Seafood, to chat with general manager Chris Pipergias, whose parents founded the business in the 1970s.

Did I gasp when entering the market? Possibly. Curved glass display cases, spanning the length of the shop, were piled high with dozens of international varieties of oysters. On the far wall, refrigerated shelves were stacked with cases that Pipergias estimated held between 20,000 to 25,000 bivalves.

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PHOTOS BY NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Rodney's Oyster House serves about 13,000 oysters a week at its bar, including varieties from the Americas, Europe, and beyond — almost a million and a half last year.

Going solo? You're not alone

By Jon Marcus
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Traveling alone on business in Japan, Boston restaurateur Kathy Sidell made sure to find a seat one night at the bar of a Tokyo tempura joint so popular that it's always packed.

Another American had the same idea. He liked the place so much, the man said, he made it a point to stop in on the way to catch his flight home from a business trip.

For Sidell, the businessman, and an increasing number of other solo travelers, the question isn't how to find time for themselves when they're on the road. “How can you not?” said Sidell, the owner of the Met Restaurant Group. “I can't imagine in a million years sitting in some generic hotel room or an airport when you're in a city that's foreign to you without exploring the people, the culture, and especially the food.”

So many people are combining business with pleasure when



ANNIE SCHLECHTER

Hip, no-frills hotels such as Pod 39 and Pod 51 are popping up, with rooms (above) as small as 50 square feet.

they're traveling alone, the phenomenon has been given a name: the biz-cation. More than one in 10 business travelers and nearly one in four conventiongoers extend their trips for leisure purposes, the consulting firm TNS Global reports. The idea is also catching on among solo leisure travelers comfortable with going on vacation on their own — even when it's not an extension of a business trip.

“This is definitely a trend,” said Bob Diener, cofounder of hotels.com and president of geta-room.com. “More people are traveling single now than in the past. It's much more accepted, whereas in the past they might feel embarrassed. And it's been accelerating.”

One reason is that half of US adults are single, more than ever in the nation's history. Singles now make up 27 percent of all households. The proportion of single households is even higher in Massachusetts — more than 30 percent — where residents stay unmarried longer than in any other

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Mollusks by the millions in a city mad for them

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“Toronto is America’s biggest oyster city,” said Pipergias, who purchases 85,000 oysters a week for his retail shop and wholesale clients, offering between 20 and 40 varieties every day.

We tasted three straight out of the case: Eel Lake from Nova Scotia (sweet, fat, not too salty); wild Belons from Maine (pungent, metallic finish); and Shigoku, a gigas species from Washington state (small, plump, zinc, cucumber finish).

Pipergias, who watches trends, predicts that in the next five years “oyster prices will skyrocket, if not double” due to interest from the Chinese market. Indeed, his business card is in English and Cantonese. Shipments arrive on Thursday and Friday, and his customers, he estimates 80 percent of whom are Asian, line up out the door.

Diana’s Oyster Bar & Grill/Seafood Market 2105/2101 Lawrence Ave. East, Toronto, Ontario. 416-288-1588/-9286, www.dianaseafood.com.

RODNEY’S OYSTER HOUSE

It’s always “Oyster Time” at Rodney’s Oyster House. So reads the large neon-rimmed clock in this subterranean space near the financial and entertainment districts. Wood tables, chairs, and long bar create a casual vibe, as if you’re below decks in an old boat, but don’t let that fool you: People here are serious about oysters.

Founded in 1987 by Rodney Clark, this family-run, no-frills oyster bar is a fixture in the city’s oyster-scene. Considered the elder statesman of oysters in Toronto (and multiple Canadian shucking champ), Clark now grows oysters at his farm on Prince Edward Island. His son Eamon (another champion shucker), daughter Bronwen, and Julius Chapple manage the restaurant, as well as running the catering and wholesale businesses.

Eamon estimates they sold 1.4 million oysters last year, including close to 13,000 a week at an oyster bar that features a far-flung selection from the Americas, Europe, and beyond. Sustainability is on their minds.

“We’re worried about the future of the premium oyster. There’s more demand for them. It’s hard to find fishermen who want to hold onto oysters for an extra year to grow select and larger,” said Bronwen.

That said, fans of Rodney’s flock back for their selection and consistency.

Bronwen works with a Canadian vintner to produce one oyster-compatible wine each year. Sea Legs, a white wine blend, paired well with Kelly’s Virginicas, from Ireland (sweet, grassy, metallic finish), Rodney’s Oyster Depot (firm, sweet), and Kaiparas from New Zealand (creamy, citrus cucumber finish).

“We’re a boutique oyster house that doesn’t look boutique — but our product is,” said Eamon.

Rodney’s Oyster Bar 469 King St. West, 416-363-8105, www.rodneyoysterhouse.com

STARFISH OYSTER BED & GRILL

World Oyster Opening Champion (and four-time Canadian shucking champ) Patrick McMurray presides over Starfish Oyster Bed & Grill, a cozy seafood restaurant and oyster bar he opened in 2001 in Old Town, a five-minute stroll from the St. Lawrence Market.

Often, McMurray can be found at the helm at the bar — topped with oyster shells encased in resin — practicing his shucking technique on a hockey puck with his pistol grip-handled knife. Starfish serves



PHOTOS BY NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



From the top: In Toronto, the bar at Starfish Oyster Bed & Grill is covered in oyster shells; Oyster Boy in a Queen Street neighborhood; the subterranean space at Rodney’s Oyster House feels like the inside of an old boat; a server pours wine with an order of oysters at The Chase Fish & Oyster; and general manager Chris Piperglas holds an oyster at Diana’s Seafood, founded by his parents.

an international assortment of oysters, including Europeans you can’t get in the United States, such as Clarenbridge from near Galway, Ireland. (“Tastes like salted fois gras!” said an enthusiastic McMurray.)

Chatting with McMurray is like sprinting through a universe of oyster-themed ideas. Our topics included the 1835 opening of the Erie Canal (and the first oysters carted to Toronto), teaching Sri Lankans to farm oysters, shellfish recycling projects, sustainability, cancer research regarding oysters, and his new project, an oyster stout.

I’d visit again just for a pint of Scrimshaw Oyster Stout. Made with the entire bivalve — shell, meat, and liquor — the dark, thick stout had a light mineral clean sweetness up

front with a roasted flavor underneath.

As we slurped oysters from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Ireland, we commented on differences in salinity, sweetness, and texture.

“Oysters are like a Polaroid camera shot of the moment when they are harvested,” John Baby said.

Starfish Oyster Bed & Grill 100 Adelaide St. East, 416-366-7827, www.starfishoysterbed.com

OYSTER BOY

Oyster Boy may be small, but its dedication to oysters is enormous. (“Mollusks for the Masses” is its slogan.) This cozy 45-seat storefront restaurant is a neighborhood hot spot for sampling a select and changing variety of oysters harvested from sustainable sources on both coasts of Canada.

“We don’t have a large selection, but we have really good ones,” said owner Adam Colquhoun, who opened the place on Queen Street West with John Petcoff, back when “there was nothing” much else happening in the neighborhood.

We sat at the long chopping block wood bar and chose among four Prince Edward Island varieties — Cascumpec Bay, Oyster Boy Malpeques, Colville Bay, Cooke’s — and two New Brunswick — St. Simon and La Caraque. Oysters are priced by place of origin and also size: choice, medium, and large.

“It gives the consumer an idea that the longer the oyster stays in the water, the more it costs,” said Colquhoun. Oyster Boy buys its product directly from the men and women who fish. “We’re friends with our growers. We express joy and support.”

Oyster Boy 872 Queen St. West, 416-534-3432, www.oysterboy.ca

JOHN & SON’S OYSTER HOUSE

John Belknap went to school to study finance and ended up owning an oyster bar.

“I was riding the subway one day and noticed that no one was smiling or happy. I re-



alized how easy it is to get caught up and have 20 years go by,” said Belknap.

With fond childhood memories of visiting Rodney’s Oyster House with his brother and dad, he got a job and worked there for a decade. Five years ago, Belknap opened John & Sons Oyster House in the downtown financial district. (A second location recently opened uptown.)

“I wanted to open a place that feels like it’s been here 20 years. A rowdy oyster bar, something a bit tucked away and hard to find,” he said.

Located on a one-way street in a warren of downtown towers, the place is tricky but not impossible to find. The interior is upscale and friendly, a maritime pub with marble bar, wood tables, linen napkins, and enormous windows that look out on the narrow street.

Focused on sustainable seafood, they serve six to 12 varieties a day, depending on the season and availability. I slurped two oysters I had not previous-

ly tasted, Mallets from New Brunswick (zingy, salty, firm, seaweedy) and Malagash Thrumcaps from Nova Scotia (salty-mild). The presentation was basic yet fanciful: Oysters lounged atop crushed ice on metal pie plates, decorated with seaweed, fresh shredded horseradish, and lemons.

John & Son’s Oyster House 56 Temperance St., 416-703-5111, www.johnandsonsoysterhouse.com

THE CHASE FISH & OYSTER

I found my first wild pearl in a Colville Bay oyster at The

IF YOU GO . . .

Where else to eat
Big Daddy’s Bourbon Street Bistro & Oyster Bar 212 King St. West 416-599-5200 www.bigdaddys.ca

A New Orleans-themed restaurant featuring four to seven varieties at any given time.

Ceilí Cottage 1301 Queen St. East. 416-406-1301 www.ceilicottage.com

An Irish pub and oyster bar from the folks who run Starfish, serving Irish oysters and Malpeques.

Pure Spirits Oyster Bar 17 Tank House Lane 416-361-5859 www.purespirits.ca/home Stylish-casual restaurant in the Distillery District serves eight to 10 varieties daily.

Wallflower 1665 Dundas St. West 647-352-5605

Intimate restaurant where owner-chef Jane Ferriss features only one variety a night.

Chase Fish & Oyster, a chic financial district eatery featuring seasonally changing sustainable seafood and a raw bar. Black, not white, the size of a lentil, I might have swallowed the pearl if John Baby didn’t spot it. We sat at the polished marble bar where it was easy to read the day’s oyster selection on a chalkboard, and watch the shuckers and bartenders at work.

Since opening last August, the kitchen has been run by chef de cuisine Nigel Finley, who has specialized in seafood throughout his culinary career. When it comes to oysters, Finley seems pleased by the public’s recent attention.

“Oysters are becoming a very popular item,” said Finley. “Four to six years ago, oysters were just oysters. You threw on hot sauce and drank them with vodka. Oyster education is growing exponentially, which is good to see.”

Our bivalves arrived in an iced bowl with fresh-grated horseradish, lemons, rhubarb mignonette, and a dropper bottle of hot sauce.

“We decided we didn’t want to offer 20 kinds of oysters. We want five or six that are the best at any given time,” said Finley.

The Chase Fish & Oyster 10 Temperance St., 647-348-7000, www.thechasetoronto.com

Necce Regis blogs about oysters at www.necce.com. She can be reached at necceeregis@gmail.com.

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