



historical tidbits

Oyster Orchard

A big circle of oyster love

By Judy Colbert

It's not in the state constitution, but you should eat oysters as often as possible. If you bought them in their little homes, you're asked to recycle to the Shell Recycling Alliance <http://OysterRecovery.org/shell-recycling-alliance>. It's almost a political duty.

"Oysters eat algae, and that is significant to ... keeping our waterways clearer of both nutrients and sediments," says Bryan Gomes, who's worked for the Oyster Recovery Partnership. "One adult oyster can filter upwards of 40-50 gallons of Bay water daily.

"When Captain John Smith came into the Chesapeake in 1607," says Gomes, "their boats would run aground on the oyster reefs that came all the way to the surface." As oysters can live for 20 years and grow almost an inch a year, it's understandable that they have become a popular source of food. Then, the shells were tossed aside. They weren't thrown back in the water for future oysters to use as a home base.

Patty Baker, a KI native, says, "I know the industry was very big in the Kent Narrows; I remember when there was always a mountain of shells where The Narrows restaurant now sits, and growing up in Stevensville we had oyster shell driveways from Langenfelder's in Love Point, which was also the choice for many unpaved roads on the island."

"Today we have about two percent of the historical numbers of oysters John Smith saw then," says Gomes. "Low harvest numbers are due in part to degraded water quality, disease and predation, and over-harvesting."

In 2009, oyster farming on leased water bottom was legalized, opening up to 600,000 acres of the state's portion of the Bay. In 2010, Governor Martin O'Malley signed the Shellfish Aquaculture Leasing Bill, which ended restrictions on the amount of space that could be leased and eliminated prohibitions in many areas.

Scott Budden, of Orchard Point Oysters in Stevensville, is an oyster farmer doing his part. His parents, avid sailors, moved from Annapolis to the Eastern Shore in 1983. They bought a farm named "Orchard Point," thus the name of his company. Budden started farming oysters in 2015 after a decade in Washington, D.C. as a corporate financial analyst. His company now has 25 acres of oyster farms with surface floats that produce oysters that he says are "sweet, plump, and sustainable." In 2018, the company expanded when partners Brian Connelly and Hal McBee, Jr. joined the team. Steven Gerike, production manager, is the fourth member, joining in 2021. They are part of an industry with more than 1200 Bay oystermen producing more than 300,000 bushels (about 100-150 oysters per bushel) annually.

"Orchard Point Oyster Company raises sustainably farmed oysters in the Chester River and Eastern Bay, in some of the northern-most tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay. Grown in surface floats that gently tumble our oysters in the wind and the waves, our oysters have a deep, consistent shell cup," says



Budden. "Plump and satisfying, Orchard Point oysters have a buttery minerality and gentle brine that reflects the sandy shorelines and rich aquatic grasses of our Upper Bay farm locations— an unforgettable flavor unique to our oysters. These beauties are the mainstay of our production. Wave-tumbled in surface floats to achieve a deep cup and a firm shell for easy shucking, our oysters are carefully cultivated in small batches on our two farm locations. All of our oysters are harvested to order for maximum freshness and are rigorously tested to ensure the cleanliness of our product."

As with other oyster farmers, Budden grows triploid oysters, "which are sterile, so they spend their energy getting plump. They're usually harvested when they're about three years old because chefs have developed recipes for this size oyster," says Budden. However, they also have limited quantities of Orchard Point Primes (OPPs), four-inch plus oysters that typically take four years to reach their generous size. "We grow these specifically to be enjoyed on the grill, prepared in a skillet, or as an ingredient (hello, oyster stew and stuffing!). Even after cooking, our OPP's are still satisfyingly plump and substantial. The 'Porterhouse' of our oysters, they are sure to wow diners and home cooks alike."

Orchard Point oysters are available at numerous restaurants along the Eastern Seaboard. They're also available through an oyster club subscription with a rotating selection from Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia, with local pickup and delivery options. "Conveniently located in Thompson Creek Biz Park, the Shuck Shop is easy on/off for beachgoers and offering savings vs. steep beach prices," says Budden.

Judy Colbert is the author of *It Happened in Maryland*, and *It Happened in Delaware*, Globe Pequot Press.