

Northwest *palate*

FOOD, WINE & TRAVEL OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

FOODIE GIFTS THAT *dazzle*

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CULINARY TREASURES

A GUIDE TO
2008
Best Wines
& Trends

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Romancing the Mollusk

Story and Photos by Allen Cox

Do oysters display terroir in the same way wine does?

Chef Justin Gordon of The Oyster Bar on Chuckanut

Drive near Washington's Samish Bay thinks so!

Washington's Chuckanut Drive leaves Skagit Valley and ascends cliff-side above Samish Bay, offering some of the coastal west's most scenic vistas as it winds its way to Bellingham. The constant currents of Rosario Strait flow beyond the bay, and in the west the emerald hills of the San Juan Islands mingle with the charcoal clouds of a brooding sky. The scent of brine rides the breeze, drawing my attention to row after row of oyster racks resting atop acres of mud exposed by the lowest tide in more than two decades.

I find The Oyster Bar on Chuckanut Drive perched among towering conifers above the oyster beds. The cozy restaurant is housed in a structure dating from the 1920s that has lived through many incarnations, and even on this drizzly weekday afternoon, it's packed to capacity.

According to owner Guy Colbert, the restaurant owes its reputation to its remote, quintessentially Pacific Northwest setting. But people don't dine at The Oyster Bar for its location alone. The restaurant's namesake is the draw, and its chef, Justin Gordon, has accumulated an abundance of knowledge about oysters—both local and imported—and reveals a passion for working with this native ingredient.



The cold waters of the Rosario Strait and the shallows of Samish Bay, seen here at low tide, combine to create ideal conditions for growing different oyster varieties.

Smoky, mildly fruity, buttery sweet, a melon-like finish. Terms used to describe wines? Probably. But these descriptors and many others are part of Chef Gordon's vernacular when talking about oysters. Bays and inlets up and down the West Coast are divided into appellations, not unlike wine-growing regions. And, like wines, the oysters possess distinctive characteristics determined by a combination of variables. "Growing method, water temperature, circulation, depth, and exposure to the elements all come into play," explains Chef Gordon, referring to what shapes an oyster's personality by the time it reaches maturity and the dinner table.

The oyster racks of Samish Bay keep the developing mollusks above the muck, dissuading predators and resulting in a cleaner, more presentable shell and the opportunity for the animals to feed on the nutrients that flow through Rosario Strait's cold, oceanic current. At low tide, exposure to the open air allows the shells to undergo

the slow process of hardening, a firmer (as opposed to brittle) shell being more compliant come shucking time. The rack method of growing used in Samish Bay, according to Chef Gordon, produces the desirable flat-topped, deep-cupped shell that is nature's perfect vessel for half-shell presentation.

The beaches of the Samish Bay appellation yield at least five oyster varieties: the crowd-pleasing Kumamoto, the versatile Pacific, the award-winning Virginica, the European Flat with its salty flavor reminiscent of caviar, and a promising newcomer—the Shigoku. On his menu, Chef Gordon features Samish Bay varieties, most commonly Pacifics and Kumamotos, often alongside those from other regions such as South Puget Sound, Whidbey Island, and British Columbia, offering a tasting tour of various appellations.

"The cold flow of water through Rosario Strait just beyond the bay gives the local oysters a crisp, fresh taste and a longer growing season," Chef Gordon says



A popular dish at The Oyster Bar on Chuckanut Drive is Chef Gordon's Baked Oysters with "Champagne" Dressing, combining the tingle of sparkling wine with the creamy freshness of Pacific oysters.

as he shucks three Samish Bay varieties for me to sample. He explains that the local Kumamotos take three to five years to mature, and that a Kumamoto grown in Samish Bay will have a slight saltiness compared to one grown elsewhere, such as South Puget Sound. “But different varieties of oysters grown in the same waters also have their own unique characteristics,” he adds.

A sampling of the bounty from Samish Bay confirms Chef Gordon’s claim. The freshly shucked Kumamoto goes down with a sweet flavor and buttery texture, the saltiness barely discernable. The small Pacific demands attention with a medium saltiness and a classic, full-bodied flavor. New to Samish Bay, the Shigoku is rich and creamy with a subtle finish that reminds me of cucumber. When topped with a spoonful of Chef Gordon’s pickled ginger salsa, all three varieties come alive on the palate. It’s difficult to choose a favorite.

Besides presenting it *au naturel*, Chef Gordon showcases the oyster’s versatility by applying some heat. Oysters baked with his vinegar-kissed “Champagne” dressing impart a light, refreshing tang. The panko-crusted, pan-fried version could easily slide by with a squeeze of lemon and a side of tartar sauce, but Chef Gordon chooses to pair the crispy morsels with an uncommon twist—sour apple aioli—the combination of tart and creamy adding new dimensions to the briny basic ingredient.

Along with the landscape’s postcard-perfect views, accessible via one of Washington’s oldest scenic highways, oysters have long been a part of the inherent character of the Chuckanut region. And, while no one can improve upon the area’s natural beauty, Chef Gordon has unleashed his creativity on the oyster, elevating the experience of visiting this unique part of the Northwest to a new level.



Northwest-based freelance writer Allen Cox specializes in travel, culture, and lifestyle stories. This is his first piece for Northwest Palate.

Baked Oysters with “Champagne” Dressing

*Courtesy of Chef Justin Gordon,
The Oyster Bar on Chuckanut Drive, Bow, WA*

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| ½ cup Northwest sparkling wine | to allow the flavors to mingle. |
| ¼ cup Champagne vinegar | Shuck the oysters: loosen |
| 3 tablespoons finely diced | them from their shells with a |
| tomatoes, peeled and seeded | careful turn of the oyster knife, |
| 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil | leaving them and their liquor |
| ½ cup olive oil | in the half-shells. Place the half- |
| 2 tablespoons minced shallots | shells on a bed of rock salt in a |
| 1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice | shallow baking sheet and pour a |
| 2 dozen small, live Samish Bay | spoonful of dressing onto each |
| Pacific oysters in their shells | oyster. |

Whisk the sparkling wine, vinegar, tomatoes, basil, oil, shallots, and lemon juice in a bowl and set aside for 15–20 minutes

Bake at 400°F for 8 minutes or until juices are sizzling. Be careful not to overcook.

Arrange 4–6 oysters in their shells on a plate. Serves 4–6.

Chef Gordon’s Oyster Tips for the Home Cook

The menu at The Oyster Bar on Chuckanut Drive provides a dual-step primer for the oyster-eater: “Kiss it off the shell and crush it on the palate.”

But what about advice for those wishing to delight their guests at home with an iced platter of oysters on the half-shell or a steaming serving of baked oysters? Chef Gordon offers a few basic tips for selecting, storing, and preparing fresh oysters.

Raw oysters in the shell should be alive; if the shell is loose or opens easily, give it a proper burial in the trash.

Like us, oysters must breathe; do not close live oysters in an airtight container. Cover them with a damp towel, store them in the refrigerator, and use them within five days of purchase, the sooner the better.

“Do not select oysters that are too large,” Chef Gordon advises. “They should be one bite, not two.”

As always, the proper tool does the best job. “Use an oyster knife to shuck the oyster,” Chef Gordon cautions, “not a kitchen knife or a screwdriver.”

When baking oysters or serving them raw on the half-shell, keep the liquor or sauce from spilling out of the shell. If baking, arrange them on a bed of rock salt to keep them even and standing upright. If serving them raw on the half-shell, arrange them on a bed of crushed ice.

Chef Gordon also offers two fundamental guidelines for selecting wines to serve with oysters: “Choose a white and stay away from anything with oak, such as oaky Chardonnays.” His personal favorite oyster companions both hail from Oregon’s Willamette Valley: Andrew Rich “Croft Vineyard” Sauvignon Blanc, and Cristom Vineyard Pinot Gris.

A reliable retail source for ordering a delivery of fresh, live Samish Bay oysters is Taylor Shellfish Farms: visit them online at taylor-shellfishfarms.com or call 360-766-6002.

