



Sunken Treasures

Maine's cold waters
create beautiful bivalves

BY GINA DeCAPRIO VERCESI

Reaching down over the side of the floating wooden dock, Ryan McPherson, owner of Glidden Point Oyster Farms, hauls a heavy metal cage from the water and plucks a handful of mottled, grayish-white mollusks. Pulling a shucking knife from his pocket, he removes the top of a dense, cragged shell with nary a flick of his wrist and offers the bottom half to me. I admire its opalescent interior, noting the way the shell's deep cup creates a perfect little bowl in its center.

The creamy bivalve nestled inside lies bathed in a cold, bright liquor of its own making. Glancing skyward, I tip the shell's contents into my mouth and am instantly filled with the briny essence of ocean. The oyster itself exudes a delicate salty sweetness, crisp and fresh without the slightest hint of sand.

Beyond the dock, mid-coast Maine's Damariscotta River sparkles in the early May sunlight. A boat motors past and Ryan waves. Eight oyster farms make their home along the river, a region that produces some of the country's best bivalves.

"We have the coldest, deepest water for Eastern oysters," McPherson says, deftly shucking another and passing it to me with the pride of a new parent. "That's what gives Glidden Points their rock-hard shells and plump, dense meat." I slurp again. Whatever went into the local, environmental cocktail, the results are sublime.

COURTESY KELSEY GROSSMANN/GLIDDEN POINT OYSTER FARMS

Glidden Point
Oysters

Comeback Trail

To most people, Maine means lobster, but the same chilly coastal waters that nurture the state's famed crustacean also produce bountiful bivalves. "Oysters in these parts have a high glycogen content that makes them buttery smooth with lots of lipids," says Sebastian Belle, executive director of the Maine Aquaculture Association. "Oysters in other areas don't have that. Or they have it briefly, but not consistently."

Oysters have been a food source for people living along the Damariscotta for more than 2,000 years. Middens, heaps of oyster shells 30 feet deep and a half-mile wide, line the riverbank and date back to around 200 BC. But a combination of overharvesting, rising sea levels, and pollution from colonial-era brickyards and sawmills eliminated the population of *Crassostrea virginica*—the region's native Eastern oyster.

Maine's oyster renaissance spawned in the early 1970s at the Darling Marine Center in Walpole, where University of Maine professor Herbert Hidu developed the state's earliest aquaculture program. After a parasite wiped out attempts to cultivate European Belon oysters, research turned to reintroducing Eastern oysters. By the mid-1990s, a handful of oyster farms were successfully planting *Crassostrea virginica* in the Damariscotta.

Since then, Maine oyster aquaculture has blossomed into an industry that supports more than 80 commercial growing leases along with countless home growers from as far south as Biddeford and as far north as Mount Desert Island. In 2016, Maine produced 2 million pounds of oysters valued at more than \$5 million.

Maine Is Your Oyster

Last August, with support from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration National Sea Grant Program, the Maine Sea Grant officially launched the Oyster Trail of Maine (see "Blazing the Trail") in collaboration with the aquaculture industry and the Maine Office of Tourism.

"We're trying to help people see oysters and aquaculture as a tourism opportunity," says Catherine Schmitt, Maine Sea Grant's communications director. "With Maine and seafood, oysters are still relatively new. People who have been visiting for decades don't think of Maine as a place for oysters."

Though still in its infancy, the trail offers Vacationland visitors and residents a resource for locating and tasting a variety of Maine oysters, often within sight of their home waters—waters that instill unique flavor profiles to oysters that mature beneath the surface. Some people refer to this as merroir—terroir of the sea—but Schmitt cautions against highfalutin foodie talk.

"Oysters are an everyman's food," she says. "Our goal is for people to eat oysters on the body of water where they're grown—to get as close as possible. It's exciting that they're becoming so readily available."

New York-based Gina DeCaprio Vercesi has a passion for Maine. This is her first story for Northern New England Journey.



Clockwise from top: Ryan McPherson hoses down a crate of Glidden Points at his Damariscotta River oyster farm. A verdant array of Nonesuch Emeralds chills out at The Shop in Portland. Abigail Carrol of Nonesuch Oysters shucks an Abigail Pearl during a tour of her Scarborough Estuary growing site. Farm manager Jeff Auger of Mook Sea Farm checks on some young oysters. Maine hatcheries like Muscongus Bay Aquaculture and Mook Sea Farm raise hundreds of millions of tiny seed oysters every year.

Blazing the Trail

The ways to navigate Maine's oyster scene are as varied as the bivalves themselves. Here are a few examples from the **Oyster Trail of Maine** (find details on these and others at oystertrailmaine.org).

In Scarborough, self-proclaimed accidental oyster farmer Abigail Carroll of **Nonesuch Oysters** stands at the helm of Maine's oyster tourism movement, offering educational tasting tours on the Nonesuch River throughout the summer.

In Portland, **Maine Foodie Tours** takes aquaculture enthusiasts cruising on beautiful Casco Bay for tastings with Bob Earnest of **Chebeague Island Oyster Company**.

Along the Damariscotta River, oyster seekers can join either land-based or river tours with the growers at **Glidden Point Oyster Farms**. Nearby, **Damariscotta River Cruises** offers a memorable oyster-tasting adventure complete with cocktails and Captain Chip's humorous narration. But for the full oyster monty, join the folks at **Mook Sea Farm** along with other Damariscotta River oyster growers at the **Damariscotta River Oyster Celebration** from June 14 through 16. Oyster tours, dockside cocktails, and a tide-to-table dinner are all part of the festivities.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: GINA DECAPRIO VERCESI (3); COURTESY KELSEY GROSSMANN/GLIDDEN POINT OYSTER FARMS (2)