

## 'Destination Oysters' draw in diners

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Special to The Hour

If it's true that "the world is your oyster," as the old saying goes, then it is equally true that the world's oysters are Norwalk's and Westport's.

Oysters harvested here are served in fine dining establishments all across America, from the elegant Pier 4 on the Boston waterfront, where "Norwalk oysters" practically leaps off the menu, to high-end New York restaurants such as the legendary Oyster Bar at Grand Central Station, where chef Sandy Ingber and his staff serve more than 1,000 Norwalk oysters every single day.

"The Norwalk Blue Point is a destination oyster. It's our best-selling item," Ingber says. "People know it and they ask for it. It's the most popular oyster on the menu." The unique relationship between the restaurant and the city is due in part to the fact that for 40 years the Grand Central Oyster Bar actually has leased acreage in Norwalk, which is tended by Norm Bloom.

In 1985, 75 percent of the oysters served at the Grand Central Oyster Bar were from Norwalk. Back then, there were only 10 types of oysters being farmed. Today, there are 30 different types of oysters from around the world, Ingber says. Still, the Norwalk Blue Point accounts for a brisk 25 percent of his oyster sales. Ingber serves the oysters on the half shell, or as cooked as Oysters Rockefeller or fried.

And it's not only Norwalk oysters on the famous menu: the Oyster Bar also goes through 1,000 Norwalk clams per day: little necks, cherrystones, topnecks and steamers, served raw, as clams casino, steamed or fried.

Closer to home, visits to gastronomically delightful places this summer reveal the inspiration and creativity behind fresh and local shellfish preparations. The chefs and owners know they are lucky to have access to these resources, and take pride in their presentations of local oysters and clams.

The local varieties lend themselves to a myriad of cooking methods and tasty recipes to satisfy both simple and gourmet palates. Some chefs offer the salty sweet delicate flavors served raw, whereas others offer them chowdered, steamed, fried, grilled, or in a combination of other ingredients.

Over at The Boathouse at the Saugatuck Rowing Club on Riverside Ave. in Westport, Alex Miller, a longtime associate of executive chef John Holzwarth, asserts that recipes at the newly open-to-the-public restaurant "are inspired by Mediterranean cuisine but through a New England looking glass." The décor -- teak and holly wood floors and soft yellow walls --- bespeaks the rustic elegance of an old fashioned wooden yacht.

At the table, the shellfish couldn't be fresher. The restaurant overlooks the Saugatuck River where their oysters get their start. The Saugatuck River is just the right brackish water in which to start these sought-after delicacies. As a reminder of its shellfish origins, The Boathouse has opened an outdoor oyster bar right on the patio at river's edge. Whether walking from the nearby Metro North commuter train or arriving by car, many are finding this a refreshing summer evening respite.

"Using local ingredients in our recipes is about building a sense of community and sustainability", says Miller. The local company Westport Aquaculture delivers shellfish two or three times a week, a total of at least 600 oysters.

Miller and Holzwarth prefer classic recipes with a twist: roasted oysters prepared with red wine verjus and bread crumbs, then quickly broiled, still lusciously fresh and juicy with a surprise crunch. They serve oysters on the half shell with pickled shallot mignonette. Another favorite: oysters flavored with pungent pickled ramps, a wild leek, which is only available during a brief three-week window in late spring. Clams are served either raw or in a sauce over pasta. One shellfish meal is mussels prepared with a lobster stock made by first brewing lobster shells until the shells break down to nearly a powder, and then strained, into which they add zucchini strips for color and texture. Whatever the presentation, they serve an average of 45 lunches per day, 30 dinners per weeknight and up to 120 per night on weekends.

Miller tells home cooks that "preparing a great home shellfish meal can be basic and easy. You don't need to do much to have a fantastic meal. The key is to buy fresh and local."

Diners entering La Villa on Bay Street in Westport face a large wall mural depicting the Portofino seaside panorama, immediately suggesting the idea of a fine seafood dinner. Owner/chef Michael Sornatale uses Westport oysters and clams in his cooked-to-order Italian-style meals.

"If you don't see something on the menu you would like, just ask," he says. But his menu already offers a wide variety of alluring meals. His seasonal preparations use fresh, local and organic ingredients. He serves clams raw or oreganato. Clams and mussels are cooked in tomato sauce or white wine or may be added along with shrimp and calamari in a choice of marinara or fra diavolo sauce over linguine.

His summer offering is raw clams spiced up with a side of aoli made of garlic, horseradish, lemon and homemade mayonnaise. Winter doesn't stop Chef Sornatale from satisfying the discriminating tastes of patrons wishing for local shellfish. During the cold months, he prepares heavier dishes such as creamy clam chowder or clams and mussels baked in garlic, cheese, oregano, bread crumbs in his own vegetable broth.

One of Westport's most beloved citizens became as well known for his culinary contributions as for his contributions on the silver screen. Paul Newman co-founded with Michel Nischan the upscale restaurant called The Dining Room to promote local and organically grown ingredients. Appropriately, it adjoins the Westport Country Playhouse, which Newman and his wife actress Joanne Woodward did much to revive.

Nischan carries on the tradition at The Dressing Room by using fresh and local clams and oysters that he buys from a Westport shellfish cultivator. Besides serving the traditional oysters on the half shell, dinner guests come specifically asking for his quickly roasted oysters with shaved shallots and fresh thyme butter. Chef Michel raises the bar with his steamed clams which are served with a tomato confit, pancetta lardons, and fiddleheads on flaxette toast points.

The effort spent finding the Sunset Grille at the far side of the Norwalk Cove Marina is well worth the reward: a stunning seasonal three-way view of the Norwalk River where Osmar Orozimbo, loyal chef of Sunset Grille, adds French and Asian influences to his native Brazilian background. "We have a beautiful location here right on the water," Orozimbo says, "but the real focus is on the customer. When a customer comes here the first time, the experience has to be good, so that the customer returns." To keep them coming back, he purchases shellfish right off Norwalk's oyster boats, up to 1,200 clams and 600 oysters per week.

He serves local little neck clams and oysters raw on the half shell. Also, his clams are featured in a clam chowder and in a bouillabaisse. His most sought after recipe is linguine with white clam sauce where he uses the clam's natural juices in the white wine sauce. He alters the offerings in the fall when he adds favorites like oysters casino.

Situated on the Norwalk River overlooking a marina, Harbor Lights Restaurant lends itself to a panoramic perspective of life on the river. The warm orange walls and yellow ceiling create just the right mood for sunsets. Demand for local shellfish is so great in the summer that eight bushels a week might not be enough to meet the demand.

Owner Chris Javriolidis just goes a few blocks over to Norm Bloom and Son and selects little neck clams, cherrystones and oysters, right off the boats. He stocks an extensive raw bar for both lunch and dinner, as well as classic appetizers such as steamed little necks and Oysters Rockefeller. For awhile, Javriolidis had taken the Oysters Rockefeller off the menu since it took longer to prepare than any of the other choices and held up the serving of starters to hungry patrons. But when people kept asking for this delicious combination, he put it back on the menu despite its timing challenge.

The restaurant also serves up a drink called 'oyster shooters' which includes vodka, Tabasco sauce and a few raw oysters. This drink harks back to the days before refrigeration when putting oysters in vodka was found to be a good way of preserving them.

Javriolidis and his family own several restaurants in the area (including Overton's, Rouge and East Side Café). "Many restaurants on the water are seasonal or serve fried seafoods," he says. "Here, at Harbor Lights, we focus on our food. Being on the water is an added plus. Because business is slower in the winter we can actually spend more time with fancier recipes and be more decorative with our presentations. Also, the winter scenery outside is so beautiful. People don't realize how beautiful the river in winter can really be."

At Splash Restaurant at Longshore Park in Westport, diners anticipating a special experience walk along curving wave-like mosaic walls to a table with an expansive view of the Saugatuck River. When patrons inquire about where the restaurant gets its various shellfish, David Repp, chief chef, points right out the window to the river. "That's where they start. How fresh is fresh!" says Repp. The restaurant serves raw clams and steamers, in addition to about 1,500 local oysters a week, some served icy cold with a mignonette sauce, some fried, or, steamed in a unique curried coconut broth. Aficionados gorge on the all-you-can-eat oysters at Sunday brunch.

Bryan Maclarney stays busy preparing local fare as owner of Rory's in Darien as well as Blue Lemon in Westport. Tucked into a discrete corner at 15 Myrtle Lane, Blue Lemon has been open eight years. The décor reflects the summer beach and sky with its blue and yellow tones. A sense of intimacy pervades the cozy atmosphere and limited seating. This ambience extends even to its loyal staff who enjoy spending down time fishing together.

It is clear that Maclarney cares about Long Island Sound: "It's cleaner than it used to be. In addition to fish like striped bass and tautog (blackfish), the shellfish from these waters are delicious and abundant." He personally likes to eat oysters and clams from local waters. At Blue Lemon, he serves Norwalk oysters raw on half shell with a green apple mignonette. At the sister restaurant Rory's in Darien, he serves a rendition of clams casino, using local clams. His specialty there is Cajun fried oysters, served open face with on corn bread with an aioli sauce. He has cooked up this popular po' boy adaptation for wine tastings to the raving reviews of his customers.

The informal The Beach Burger in Norwalk serves up local fried oysters in a variety of ways. It offers an angus burger topped with three fried oysters, with arugula and citrus vinaigrette. Oyster rolls are served up with a choice of fried or raw. The really hungry crowd devours the house specialty: a bucket of fried oysters.

In addition to nearby restaurants, there are several seafood markets that honor "go local, go green" where one can purchase fresh-caught shellfish to make dinner at home. Westport's Whole Foods Markets sells clams and oysters from Westport's waters. Westport's Westfair Fish and Chips sells Norwalk oysters and clams. All the clams and Blue Point oysters sold at Pagano's in Norwalk are come from local waters. Order up a clambake from Norwalk's Capt'n John's and you'll get clams from Norwalk. At Sono Seafood in Norwalk, one can purchase clams and oysters fresh off the market's boats.

In summary, there are lots of ways to enjoy our local shellfish. At all of these places and many more like them, diners are experiencing the pleasure of bringing the seashore to their lips and then washing down their meal with a cool drink on a hot summer evening. What could be better?

**Watch for the two remaining articles in the Raking It In series: Lore and Lure, and Local Festivals.**

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