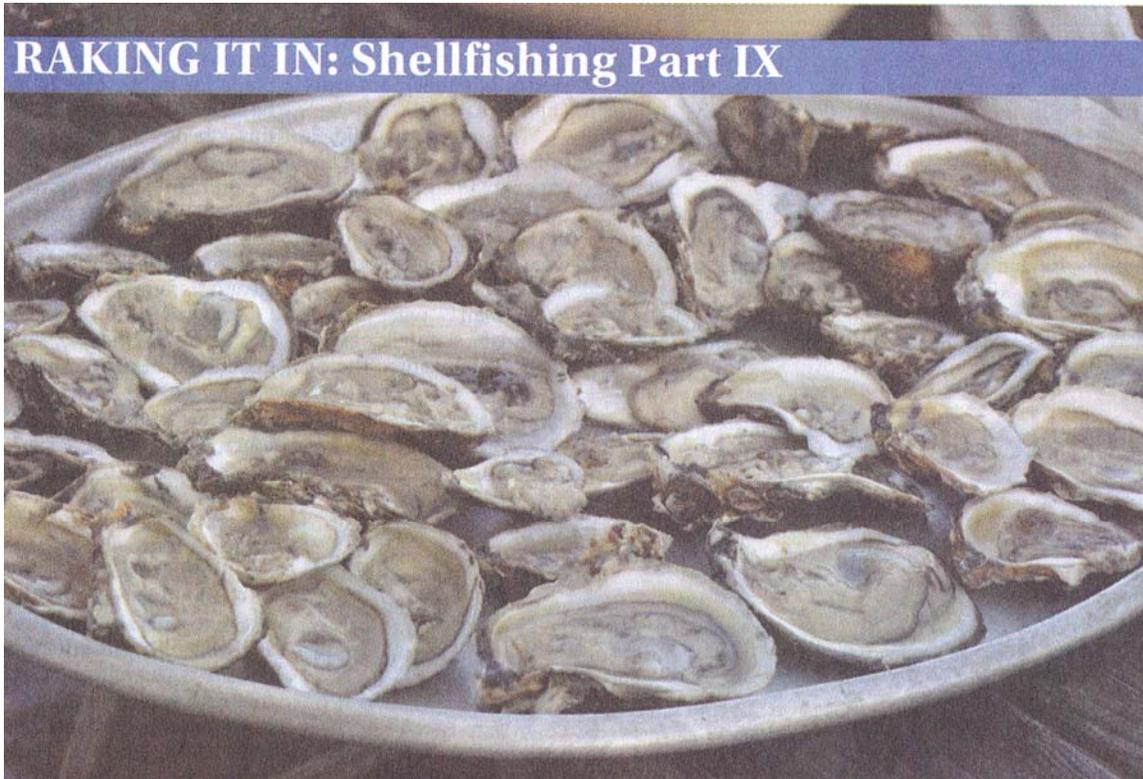


## Sucking and slurping, the sounds of the Oyster Fest



RAKING IT IN: Shellfishing Part IX

**A plate of freshly shucked Long Island Sound oysters.**

*Contributed photo*

**By RINDY HIGGINS**  
**Special to The Hour**

Shucking and slurping: the sound of oyster festivals

Shucking and slurping are as much a part of the heritage of oyster festivals today as they have been for centuries.

But nowadays, prizes are awarded (sometimes big prizes) for the restaurant worker who shucks more oysters per minute, or the public official who slides slimy oysters down his gullet faster than any other.

As sporting events go, some find these activities a bit indelicate to watch, since they don't necessarily conform to all of Miss Manners' rules for dining.

And yet showing folks how fast you can shuck oysters -- or how fast you can "slurp" them -- is a historically important and time-honored tradition at oyster festivals.

Over at Veterans Park in Norwalk during the 2011 Norwalk Seaport Association's Oyster Festival, on Sept. 10, a crowd gathered at the Heineken Entertainment Stage. Spectators cheered on the top shucking contenders, drawn from the ranks of restaurant workers, shellfishermen or just really good amateur shuckers.

Each contender faced the challenge of shucking 24 oysters as quickly and neatly as they could. After a short countdown and a starting command, the skilled shuckers wearing gloves and wielding specialty knives dug into their prey. Showing more finesse than brawn, they worked quickly with a twist of the wrist and a dance of their hands. The knife blades slipped between the shells near the hinge and skimmed around the oyster inside. With a swift motion, the shells were pried apart, liberating the oyster from its shell. Shucking oysters competitively requires precision movement, performed with one fluid motion that is both gentle and firm so as not to lose any of the precious liquid, or damage the oyster. Speed and skill are rewarded. Neatness counts.

Cleanly and completely dislodging the oyster from the shell is one of the rules. Points are taken away if the platter contains a broken shell, a cut oyster, or an oyster with grit on the flesh, if an oyster is not placed properly on the shell, or heaven forbid, if an oyster is missing from the shell. Compliance is carefully monitored by celebrity judges who in the past have included Grand Central Oyster Bar General Manager Jonathan Young. Finishing times are recorded but penalty seconds are added if the rules are not followed exactly.

*“Last year, I was ahead and was bringing the last oyster up to my mouth when I dropped it. As I picked it up again, I noticed Joe Madaffari, who was standing next to me, raise his hands up to show that he was the winner. He won, fair and square. I lost by a second, if that. I am a competitor and I like to win.”*

Many festival goers this year were watching to see if last year's winner Alfredo Gonzalez could defend his championship. Persistence (he had entered the contest for four years in a row) as well as experience (the many oysters that he has shucked over 15 years at SoNo Seaport Seafood) finally paid off for Gonzalez in 2010. He won \$500. So even though the pressure was on Gonzalez, he measured up, defended his title, and took home another \$500.

"I wasn't nervous about it. I just wanted to do the best I could this year," Gonzalez said. "And I am really happy about how I did."

Back in the late 1880's when the oyster industry was in its heyday and when shucked oysters were in huge demand, shucking emerged as a sport. As Mark Kurlansky writes in his book "The Big Oyster", shuckers working as boat deckhands or as hirelings in oyster packing companies got paid by the piece. The average shucker could open about 650 oysters per hour. Spending hours side by side, they developed a competition which livened up the repetitive work of opening oysters. Rivalries led to regional contests that took place in a different town each year. In Manhattan, it was held at Grand Central Terminal.

The modern Norwalk and Milford oyster festivals and the one at Oyster Bay, N.Y., just across the Sound, are part of a much larger movement and "shell-a-bration". The ritual has been carried on more often than not at Norwalk Seaport Association's Oyster Festival since 1981. It is actually part of a much larger process that takes place across the country. In Wellfleet, Mass., or Milford, Conn., a winner can take home \$1,000, and the right to compete for the national title.

Oyster festivals in 17 states lead to the National Oyster Shucking Contest in St. Mary's, Maryland, in October.

In addition to those in the U.S., there are oyster festivals in Australia, Canada, England, France, Ireland, Northern Ireland, South Africa, and other countries. Shucking oysters has become an international sport with strict rules and big prizes.

The winner of each national contest is flown to Galway, Ireland, for the International Oyster Opening Championship held in September. In 2008, the international contest had the first U.S. winner in 32 years: William "Chopper" Young, a self-employed fisherman from Wellfleet, Mass.

The world championship in Ireland began 57 years ago when a hotel manager in Galway created the festival to draw attention to his then under-occupied hotel. The timing coincided with the traditional opening of the oyster season and the idea was soon also embraced by Guinness Brewery. The festival starts when the mayor of Galway ceremoniously slurps down the first oyster.

And speaking of slurping . . .

Having Norwalk city fathers slurp live oysters at the Norwalk Oyster Festival is always part of the fun. On Sunday, Sept. 11, as notables such as Mayor Richard Moccia, Chief of Police Harry Rilling, State Senator Bob Duff, and others gulped down these live animals over and over again, against the clock, to the raucous encouragement of onlookers. As the slurping round finished, the judges realized that there had been an error in the number of oysters each competitor had received. A rematch was called, the number of oysters checked and rechecked, and another round of slurping began.

Last year's winner, Joe Madaffari, the athletic director at Brien McMahon High School, won the race again and took home a second trophy.

But this year, Mayor Moccia really wanted to win.

"I will make a concerted effort to win this contest," he told this correspondent before the event.

"Last year, I was ahead and was bringing the last oyster up to my mouth when I dropped it. As I picked it up again, I noticed Joe Madaffari, who was standing next to me, raise his hands up to show that he was the winner. He won, fair and square. I lost by a second, if that. I am a competitor and I like to win.

"The important thing is that everyone is there to have fun, with the public laughing and enjoying it all. I happen to like raw oysters, but I do bring my own hot sauce!"

That whole scene is reminiscent of the once-bustling life of oyster taverns in New York City. Could those on stage actually beat the record set at a New York City competition in 1887 by one James Anderson, who ate 165 oysters in 15 minutes, or even come close to that set by a certain Mr. Smyth, deemed the "Oyster Eating King" in 1924, who downed 132 in the same amount of time?

Civilization is tamer now and the slurping is timed, rather than quantified. The question today is how fast you can swallow a dozen Blue Points.

The original Oyster Fest in 1978 began before the Norwalk Seaport Association was founded. The objective was to draw attention to the then revitalization of Norwalk and to remind the public of the city's highly acclaimed shellfishing and maritime history. And it's all for a good cause: support for the Sheffield Island Lighthouse and the Association's educational programs.

The festival has come a long way since the days when one could park right on the field and just walk in with no admission charge, listen to a military band, purchase arts and crafts or some food, including shellfish, while the kids could try their hands at some games.

The 34th annual Norwalk Seaport Association's Oyster Festival attracted nearly 30,000 attendees who could enjoy the 80 exhibits, (about 35 more than last year), amusement rides, Pirate's Cove activities, and a variety of food stands. Thousands of young people came on Friday and Saturday nights to jive to the 90's rock bands.

But Norwalk's maritime history still takes center stage at the festival. The crowd-pleasing oyster shucking and slurping contests, displays of oystering artifacts, oyster boats along the dock including Hope (the 1948 relic of the bygone era of sailing oyster boats) as well as food booths serving raw and fried oysters are reminders of the city's famous oyster heritage.

In a Westport winter, the clam takes front and center. It is the focus of a contest pitting chefs of local restaurants against one another. The 4th Annual Chowdafest in Westport, an event created by Jim Keenan, benefits the Connecticut Food Bank. The 2,000 attendees find this a delicious way to warm up on the Saturday of Super Bowl Weekend as they taste and judge various soups and chowders from approximately 20 restaurants.

The public serve as judges in each of three categories: classic New England chowder, creative chowder, and soup/bisque. Mansion Clam House in Westport, Southport Brewing Co. in Southport and Nicholas Roberts Gourmet Bistro in Norwalk are returning to defend their respective championships.

Whether it's clams or oysters as the stars of local festivals, these events honor the tradition of harvesting shellfish from the world renowned "gardens under the sea" in Westport and Norwalk.

*Rindy Higgins, a commissioner of a local shellfish commission and trustee of a conservation association in Massachusetts, was a marine educator for more than 20 years at The Maritime Aquarium. Her "Raking It In" series discusses the benefits and challenges, techniques, ecology, and cultural heritage of shellfishing in Norwalk and Westport waters.*