# *Prince Edward Island*

# JOHNNY FLYNN'S OYSTERS

*The oyster's a confusing suitor;*
*It's masculine, and feminine,*
*and even neuter.*
—Ogden Nash

I first tasted Johnny Flynn's cultivated oysters at the funky Oyster Boy restaurant in Toronto. His were my first experience of eating one raw. My partner, Nancy, who grew up in Nova Scotia, had been urging me to try one for years, seducing me with all manner of cooked oysters, but I resisted this adult rite of passage to a spinsterly age for two reasons. First, it takes but a second to swallow an oyster, but five years to grow one to market size in Canada's chill East Coast waters. Perhaps more alarming, raw means—at least in the case of oysters—that the creature is very much *alive*. Yes, the plump rise of flesh, which so resembles *that* part of the female anatomy, meets its death in your mouth. Or stomach if you do not chew. But you must chew, Oyster Boy owner Adam Colquhoun had told me, not only to release the heady flavours but to ensure the creature is still alive and fresh, and therefore not dead and skanky.

Contemplating the half decade of life that would be sacrificed for my one second of pleasure, my mind swirling with images of sex and death, I placed my finger on the sensuous swell of meat. Springy! I raised the shell to my nose and sniffed the ocean liquor. Fresh! Tipped the tender morsel into my mouth and chewed. And, oh perverse, addictive pleasure.

My partner and I began haunting the top oyster bars in Toronto—Starfish, Oyster Boy, Rodney's. We sampled our way through platters of the luscious libertines—fished from the wild, cultivated on a farm, flown in from the east coast, west coast, United States, Europe. To our palates, no other oyster could rival Colville Bay's classic sharp hit of salt, followed by a tingling sweetness and steely clean finish.

We were not alone in our lust for these gems. Adam Colquhoun told us that he is so keen to bring in the first shipment of spring oysters after ice breakup that he has flown down to Prince Edward Island, stayed with the Flynns, donned hip waders and rubber gloves, and helped with the harvest himself.

While passing a lazy afternoon at Starfish slurping up a few of the sweet sensations, I watched a chef and his wife visiting from Chicago polish off a massive platter filled with a sampling of every oyster the bar stocked. After, they each flipped over a shell, declared it their favourite, then ordered a half dozen more of, yes, Colville Bays.

Patrick McMurray is the proprietor of Starfish. He holds a Guinness Book world record for shucking (thirty-three Cape Breton Aspy Bays in one minute) and is uncommonly obsessed with the bivalve. If he were an oyster, he told me, he would want to be a Colville Bay. To the couple from Chicago—growing smugger by the minute for their discerning taste—he waxed on about its beautiful teardrop shape, deep cup, the gorgeous green of the shell, the crisp texture and bright flavour of the meat, even the tiny tuft of seaweed Johnny leaves on the shell, which makes for an eye-popping presentation of half shells on a plate of ice. "It's a perfect little oyster," Patrick pronounced. "You can't get a prettier oyster than a Colville Bay."

Across town, there are none on the menu at Rodney's Oyster House, though Rodney Clark, the man who started the oyster bar craze in Toronto in the 1990s, would dearly love to have them. As Johnny Flynn's American distributor told me, he could sell twenty-five times more Colville Bays than he does—if only Johnny would raise more. But, apparently, Johnny likes to play hard to get.

The more I learned about the Colville Bays, the more intrigued I became. With his cultivated version, Johnny Flynn had managed to improve upon what many consider the world's finest oyster—the PEI Malpeque. But how, I wondered. Was it the water, the breeding, the technique of a slow rubber-gloved hand? When my curiosity reached a fever pitch, I decided to make a date with Johnny, to find out the secrets of his craft.

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THE SHOULDER SEASONS—spring and fall—are splendid times to visit Prince Edward Island. The crowds of tourists drawn to this gleaming pearl of summer heaven are at their thinnest, while the oysters are at their fattest. Arriving the last week of June, Nancy and I are pushing the season, but I have no worries. I did my research. Summer oysters are perfectly safe to eat, though after spawning, which occurs here in late summer, they can be thin and copper-tasting. As a conservation measure, Prince Edward Island closes its wild fishery from July 15 to September 15, which may explain why that old English parson's warning against eating oysters in months without an R in the name still holds sway, even here. But oysters fished in hot weather need only be refrigerated once out of the water—something the Romans surely knew, packing them back from Brittany on ice.

Yet, when I called Johnny to make arrangements for our visit, he said something about it not being an ideal time, as it would be lobster season, and he still fishes lobster. That information hit my East Coast partner particularly hard, for she thinks the only thing sexier than eating oysters is eating oysters and lobster. We booked a cottage with a full-size kitchen.

Our two-hour drive from Prince Edward Island's Confederation Bridge to Johnny's hometown of Souris, on the southeastern tip of the island, takes us through a sumptuous summer day. Scenery unfolds as if from an *Anne of Green Gables* novel: rolling farmland, shimmering copper beaches, glistening blue ocean. While I drive, Nancy reads aloud recipes from the oyster bibles we have brought along—M.F.K. Fisher's *Consider the Oyster* and Karen Warner's and Lonnie Williams' *Oysters: A Connoisseur's Guide and Cookbook.*

Her sensuous reading of recipes I had earmarked suddenly makes me wonder about our relationship. Being two women has nothing to do with my anxiety. We have been growing ever happier during our decade together and have developed a strong partnership, albeit one with rather more defined domestic roles than I had ever expected. While I throw myself into exotic food adventures and lustily seek out new recipes, she is usually content to remain at home, by hearth and wine fridge, perfecting my first flawed dishes. Ah, but the oyster has changed all that, drawing us inexorably into this adventure together.

And that thought turns my mind to wondering if the little devils (literally called that by the Mi'kmaq Natives of Malpeque Bay) really are an aphrodisiac. Certainly, they have a storied reputation—as a staple at any half-respectable Roman orgy or at the breakfast table of a cavorting Casanova who stoked his libido by sucking back a dozen a day. One PEI bumper sticker we see hails them as "Nature's Viagra."

From my research, I gleaned that oysters are very good for you, but not that there's a direct spark from a wee oyster to, well, let's just say they're packed with zinc, which helps metabolize testosterone, which makes the prostate gland healthy and happy indeed. Their few modest calories are also chock full of protein and a medicine shelf of vitamins, plus iron, copper, magnesium, calcium and phosphorous. To get your recommended daily allowance of all this good stuff, you need only eat four or five medium-sized oysters a day. My theory is that a famished Roman soldier or starving American colonialist would feel pretty good after eating five, sated with a dozen and raring to reproduce after a few bushels.

And Johnny? According to one long yarn circulating through a Toronto oyster bar, he saves the shell of every oyster he ever eats—and there's a massive pile of them behind his house in Prince Edward Island. Which makes me wonder, should we be expecting a Don Juan in hip waders?

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THE COLVILLE BAY OYSTER COMPANY crouches on a poetic, windswept stretch of red sand shoreline across the water from Souris. The company sign hangs discreetly on the side of a cedar-shake garage, not on the front where you might actually see it from the road. Inside is a tiny twenty-six-by-thirty-two-foot government-inspected processing plant where Johnny and his family grade and pack the catch for shipping two times a week. A few steps down the beach is the Flynns' old family homestead, a small white bungalow where Johnny's eighty-two-year-old mother still lives. And there, standing in a small boat in the turbulent ocean inlet of Colville Bay, is Johnny Flynn himself.

He looks every inch the typical fisherman, wearing a sou'wester, red-plaid wool jacket and rubber boots. And although he could use any modern mechanism to gather oysters on his private beds, he is fishing, as islanders have done for more than a century, with tongs that resemble giant salad forks, scooping the molluscs off the ocean floor. As he rows into shore, I take in his trim black beard salted with grey, his massive suntanned forearms and a handsome cherub face that manages to look happy and sad all at once. And then those Irish blue eyes, the very colour of the sun-splashed sea.

He's shaking my hand before he's out of the boat, inviting us into the house to meet his mom, who's suffering badly with arthritis. Soon the whole Souris clan is dropping by—Johnny's wife, Mary Jane, a smart and attractive redhead; his younger brother, Leo, who lives across the street; an assortment of Johnny's three children and Leo's two; neighbours and cousins from town. The gathering seems like a family reunion, but this is just watching six o'clock news with mom.

Oyster farming, Johnny tells me, has enabled him to bring his family even closer together. Back in 1998, when the business began showing "a glimmer of hope," Johnny, then forty-one, persuaded Leo, then thirty-eight, to leave his home renovation business and join Johnny fishing lobster and raising oysters. Last year, Mary Jane left her job as a nursing manager to keep the books and fill orders. A major goal, Mary Jane tells me, is to build a company that will enable their children to stay home and make a living. As Johnny says, "I get Darwin, but I'm also spiritual. I guess I believe that community-minded sorts are the fittest to survive."

Well, this is something I wasn't expecting—an oysterman with profound ideas. I feel a weird twinge. But maybe it's just Johnny's gentle ways—he kisses his mom goodbye before he leaves. Or maybe it's the soft salt air. Or maybe it's the oysters, for Johnny, bless the man, sends us to our rental cottage with three dozen.

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OUR HOME for the next week could not be more perfect for our mission to learn about Johnny's oyster operation. Situated on a high shore cliff, it has a wraparound deck with a hot tub and panoramic views of Colville Bay. At the southeast end, the bay opens onto the Northumberland Strait and dramatic sunrises. At the northwest end, it channels into the mouth of the Souris River—site of Johnny's farm and heart-swelling sunsets. Incoming and outgoing tides create a natural flush that funnels plankton-rich tidal waters right over Johnny's oyster beds. Not that we can see them, as it's high tide and whatever magical contraption he employs is under water. Still, I sense what's lurking there will help the PEI oyster industry find its way back from nearly a century of hard times.

A bit of history is required at this point. Although Prince Edward Island is the oyster's most northerly home, the bivalves were once so plentiful in Malpeque Bay, which gives its name to the island variety, that early settlers—the Acadians—fished them out of the bay and spread them over the land as fertilizer. The completion of the Intercontinental Railway in 1876 connected Canada's eastern provinces to markets in Montreal and Toronto and beyond, and Prince Edward Island quickly became famous for its Malpeques—prized not only for their exquisite taste but also for their hardiness.

The island's harsh winters have much to do with both. The oyster feeds hard through the spring, summer and fall, packing on so-very-sweet-and-good-for-you glycogen-rich protein. Then, when the water plunges below freezing, the oyster seals its shell and hibernates until spring. While a limpid Florida cousin might last a week out of the water, Malpeques, with proper refrigeration, can survive up to four months (easily a month in your refrigerator—though so will the smell), making them easier to ship to distant markets. When the PEI oysters arrived at a 1900 Paris exhibition, judges declared them the best in the world. During that heady time, some five hundred boats hauled four million pounds a year out of Malpeque Bay alone.

Alas, the fishers virtually cleaned out the bay. Oystermen brought in stock from New England to replenish it—likely the source of a mysterious and contagious disease that, by 1915, nearly wiped out the fishery. Though it had no effect on humans, Malpeque disease killed 90 percent of the oysters in the bay.

To restore its wild fishery, Prince Edward Island looked to cultivation techniques developed in France in 1857 under Napoleon III. Surviving PEI stock had developed a resistance to the disease, so experts here set out collectors (anything from egg crates to drainage tile covered in a fresh thin-set coat of cement) to capture young oysters, called seed or spat. They redistributed the spat to shallow bays and estuaries, in the hopes of establishing new oyster beds. Easier said than done. As late as the 1980s, the entire island produced just two million pounds, half the haul of Malpeque Bay in its glory years.

In the early 1990s, a few large PEI mussel producers travelled to France to study oyster cultivation first-hand. Mussels—dubbed the poor man's oyster—grow in the same waters but are much easier to cultivate, and the producers had scored big, building a $24-million-a-year industry that produces thirty-seven million pounds of the famous Island Blue. They intended to do the same with oysters. The mussel men and a number of commercial fishers, using a government aquaculture program that offered interest-free loans for five years, invested millions of dollars attempting to adapt the French technology to mass-producing the finicky oyster. They lost millions.

Johnny is telling me this story in the middle of the night. Why has he woken me up to tell me this? Oh, right. It's pitch-black and spitting rain, and Johnny, Leo and I are on our way to fish lobster. My wake-up call came at 3:15 A.M. Leo still seems half asleep, but, this time of the morning, Johnny's a regular chatterbox. He tells me that in 1993 he bought eight boxes of mature oysters and tossed them in a saltwater inlet up the coast, to see if they would survive the winter. Back then, he was fishing cod along with lobster, but, stung by the 1992 moratorium on cod, he was casting about for ways to make money and "keep busy" the ten months of the year he wasn't fishing lobster. He had tried other careers as a young man—worked on northern survey crews and western oil rigs, considered teaching history and spent a year studying at the University of Prince Edward Island, did a stint in the Coast Guard—but he was always drawn back to Souris. He grew up here on the mixed farm his father worked on as a labourer—lean support for Johnny and his three brothers. But the idea of combining his father's passion for farming with his own for fishing appealed to him. After ice breakup in spring, when Johnny discovered his experimental oysters had lived, he invested $3000 in oyster seed and equipment and jumped into his new venture with both rubber boots.

The most critical choice an oyster farmer can make, he says, is selecting the water. Turns out, the best piece of ocean for raising oysters Johnny's way was right out front of the old Flynn homestead, on Colville Bay. As Johnny says, "The opportunity was looking me right in the eye."

As we motor out of East Point harbour in Johnny's boat, I ask him why we're heading out in the middle of the night to fish lobster. "After all, they're in the traps," I say. "No fear of them going anywhere." I might ask why he's fishing lobster at all, with his oyster farm thriving.

"Well, there's tradition," Johnny hollers over the motor, "and the sea's usually calmer. And I guess if there's a breakdown, there's time to fix the boat and get back out there."

Well, that's the rational explanation. Then Johnny admits that he loves the ocean. He loves her fierce, calm, warm, cold. He loves her changeable ways. "Nothing wrong with a snowstorm in winter," he says. "Gives you a chance to stay in and read a book." But I suspect he loves the ocean most in the still quiet dark, just before sunrise.

The sea wears a black silk dress. The air is a soft kiss, the moon a steady pull.

"Big spring tide at a full moon," Johnny says. "Old-timers called them bull tides."

"Really," I say. "That's kind of suggestive."

"Hmm," he says.

Although he was raised Catholic and takes his children to church—"more for the community" than anything—Johnny seems to worship a more elemental spirit. He's always saying things like, "Mother Nature will look after you." Or, "You have to work with Mother Nature." Or, "no matter what, she'll always give you a good kick or two in the arse."

Johnny and I have only a few minutes to chat before he locates the first set of traps with his Global Positioning System. His brother, Leo, slipping a hook into the water, catches the yellow buoy marker. Johnny winches up the first trap, hefts the hundred-pound wooden cage the last couple of feet over the side of the boat by hand. He pushes it along the side to Leo, who shakes out the lobsters, baits the trap with herring and pushes it to the back of the boat in time to catch the next one Johnny winches up. They work, steadily, without talking, until they've fished the six traps. Johnny wheels the boat in a circle while Leo pushes them back in the water, then Johnny speeds onto the next set—fifty in all; we will fish some three hundred traps over the next seven hours.

Leo gives me the easiest job, using a bander to slip elastic bands on the snapping claws of market-size lobsters. I work hard. I want to impress Johnny. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's the oysters we ate last night.

The sea drips with sex. Leo flips over every lobster to check for females—males have larger and harder forelegs. Ovulating females have great grape clusters of black eggs bulging from the outside of their tails. Leo throws these back in the water along with large females between about two and four and a half pounds (good breeders). As well as all the little ones, those under half a pound.

Leo uses a gauge to measure. Sometimes he'll size a lobster two or three times—not for the measure to go his way but the lobster's. With a four-and-a-half-pound female, it's like tossing twenty bucks back into the sea. Leo will say, "That'll make Johnny cry." And Johnny will holler, "Nope, I don't care."

It's not as though any authority on shore is going to measure as thoroughly. But the two brothers have made their pact with the ocean. They look after her, she'll look after them.

This spring, they're getting $4 to $6 a pound for lobster, some $100,000 for two months' work; their expenses take about half that. In the off-season, many lobster fishers go on unemployment—virtually an East Coast ritual that irks the brothers.

"This is easy compared with oyster farming," says Leo.

"This is a two-month paid holiday!" shouts Johnny.

Finally, the sun pushes light into the sky, and the sea changes into a smoky grey outfit, then a shimmering blue silk as the sun pops over the horizon. With that blast of orange comes warmth. And Rankin Family tunes from the stereo in Johnny's wheelhouse.

We were alone in the dark, now the water is dancing with lobster boats, springing between traps and flinging about buoys to the tune of fiddles and flutes. At 8:30 A.M., when my hand is cramped from banding, we stop for sandwiches. At 10:30, when I'm about to flop face first into my bin of lobsters, we're finished and cracking open cold beers, soaking up the sun.

"I think I could enjoy this," I say, "on a day like this."

"First nice day we've had since the start of the season," says Johnny. "But one nice day makes you forget all the rest."

On the way into harbour, Johnny tells me that he named his boat after an Irish king. "Well, after buying it, I guess I'm Owen Mor, too."

Then he sends me home with a dozen lobster.

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I RETURN to the cottage exhausted, famished and somewhat perturbed, for when Johnny drops me off, he tells me that on top of oyster farming, on top of lobster fishing, he has been doing research on his family tree. He located his long-lost American cousins and invited them to Prince Edward Island and, lo and behold, they accepted *immediately*. He expects them to arrive any minute. His voice quivers with excitement. Mine does not. For they, rather than I, will get to hang with Johnny for the next two days.

Nancy and I turn our attention to eating. She has been up just long enough to fetch a pot of fresh sea water, to boil up the lobster I have brought home. We lunch on the front deck, with Johnny's oyster beds in constant view. The tender claws are full and bursting with sweet ocean flavour. We make a dessert of raw oysters, tarted up with a drop of fresh lemon juice or twist of pepper or a dollop of Tabasco and two of vodka.

There is just enough time for an afternoon nap and then, deliciously, it is supper. We shuck and slurp raw oysters while cooking up a pasta sauce of lobster and oysters in cream and tarragon. And then, after a hot tub, it is time for a bedtime snack—oysters sautéed in a dash of butter, garlic and wine and slathered on toast.

The next morning, we breakfast on oyster and lobster Benedict, then hurry our morning hot tub to make an oyster chowder for lunch, which goes very nicely with a lobster roll. But as we eat, dreamily looking over Johnny's oyster beds, we start to wonder about that other old saying—that you are what you eat. This is disconcerting, for oysters are shamelessly lascivious creatures. Juveniles born into the sea settle down quickly enough, secreting a gluey substance that cements them in one place for life, usually an old shell in an oyster bed. They then pass the rest of their days gorging on seafood and enjoying staggering amounts of group sex.

Not surprisingly, the lusty little molluscs have only a few lonely cells dangling in place of a brain. Yet, they possess prodigious sex glands that swell during spawning to obliterate all other organs. And what adaptable and potent gonads they are. Maybe male one season, perhaps female another—all the easier to seduce whoever lives next door—the transsexual trollop spews millions of eggs or billions of sperm into the water each season. A group of presumably excited mathematicians once calculated that if a single oyster's ova were fertilized through five generations, she could produce a brood of full-grown offspring equal to 250 times the volume of the earth. Such is the fecundity of a species that has staked its four-hundred-million-year existence almost entirely on passion. If Darwin had confined his studies to the oyster, he may well have coined a different theory: survival of the sexiest. Yet, an oyster has only a one in a million chance of surviving to adulthood, which is where the finicky work of the oyster farmer comes in.

After an afternoon snack of grilled oysters à la M.F.K. Fisher—pop open a shell, add a little butter, "some pepper, some breadcrumbs," close and set on the barbeque for a minute or two—we decide that we simply cannot stand it anymore.

"I can't wait until Tuesday to see Johnny Flynn," I confess.

"Neither can I," Nancy also admits.

This is odd. Worse, it's only Sunday.

We stroll to the end of Souris Beach for a closer look at Johnny Flynn's oyster beds. We flop cross-legged on the sand not far from an endangered piping plover nesting area. We crack open beers and contemplate our predicament: We are two gay women falling increasingly fond of a PEI oyster farmer.

"It's the oysters," I say.

I'm not sure if Nancy believes me. Her right eyebrow shoots up. "Would you turn straight to be with Johnny Flynn?" she asks.

"No," I say, "Absolutely not."

"But what if Johnny turned into a woman?"

"He'd have to shave his beard…."

But we are not oysters. Unlike them, we cannot change our sex willy-nilly. Nor do we want to.

"It's nothing," I say. "We're running out of oysters, that's all."

"Maybe," says Nancy. "When do you think we can get some more?"

After much debate, we decide finally, and to our great relief, that we have come to care for Johnny like a brother. Which makes us think instantly of a scheme to lure him to us—a family reunion, hosted by us. So what if we are not family? We will invite Johnny, Leo, their wives, their children and all their American cousins—the whole damn clan of Flynns back in Ireland if they show up—for oysters at our cottage at happy hour.

I call Johnny, and he's thrilled with the invitation—and I know why. He's haunted, even inspired, by his father's struggle to forge a living on this tiny, remote end of Prince Edward Island, rather than leave as so many others have, as his cousins' mother did. Johnny's bursting with pride for this place, and he wants to show his American cousins the island's huge potential and even bigger heart.

But the man's not one for boasting, at least not about himself. The locals we rent the cottage from are stunned to find out his oysters sell in Toronto—let alone that we're here to write about Johnny. When we ask for Colville Bay oysters at a pub in Souris that overlooks the bay, the waitress says she'd never heard of such a thing. Johnny himself jokes about an elderly woman in town who always asks how his mussels are growing. He always says, "Great, they're doing just great."

So I will play the Food Writer from Toronto, and we will spread the glory of Johnny. The thought makes us giddy.

We drive an hour and a half to the island's lone winery at Little Sands, returning with a Rossignol Chardonnay, and also a fruit cranberry wine, which goes surprisingly well with oysters. We set up a shucking bar in the kitchen. Nancy whips up her irresistible version of Oysters Rockefeller, which has very little to do with the classic recipe other than the oysters.

At six o'clock, Johnny, Mary Jane and Leo arrive with their American Cousins. They are three middle-aged sisters from Pennsylvania who have never shucked an oyster, reel at the thought of eating one raw and know nothing of Johnny's fame. They are putty in our hands.

As Johnny sits at our makeshift oyster bar, arms crossed, beaming, we teach the sisters to shuck. We tease and cajole them into trying raw oysters, to much shrieking and delight. Finally, we move the party to the deck for the pièce de résistance, a view of Johnny's oyster beds at sunset, served up with Nancy's Fellers—an oyster on the half shell, doused in garlic butter, topped with grated Gruyère cheese, then broiled for two minutes.

Mary Jane, who doesn't like raw oysters, loves Nancy's Fellers. Leo, who has never eaten a cooked oyster, laps them up. Johnny eats three in rapid succession, cheese dripping into his beard.

And the American Cousins?

They pounce on them and they do not stop eating, until there is only one. The oldest sister points out the conundrum. The middle sister suggests sharing it. The youngest sister says, "I will stab you with my fork if you so dare as touch it." And then, before the older sisters can take the dare, the youngest plunges her fork into the heart of the Feller and eats it.

Nancy and I bask in our happy success, for the Cousins have fallen as hard for Johnny and his oysters as we have. Alas, Johnny departs, though not before leaving us with another bag of oysters.

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WE FILL THE NEXT DAY by visiting other farms. There are some 750 private oyster leases in Prince Edward Island. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans charges only $10 an acre for oyster and mussel leases, but it isn't issuing many more, as new housing developments are getting dibs on the island's increasingly precious shoreline. Consequently, farmers can turn around and "sell" established, successful leases for anywhere from $5000 to $15,000 an acre.

But visiting other oyster farms makes us homesick for Johnny's. At one, run by a large mussel producer, employees do the actual fishing while the owner works a calculator back in the processing plant. At another, ten employees alight on the beds one day a week to harvest, grade and ship. This operation seems more like banking than farming. Rather than raising oysters from seed, they purchase two- and three-year-old oysters, deposit them on the ocean bottom, then withdraw them two or three years later when the oysters have reached the minimum market size of three inches. Two partners show off the farm by driving us around in a state-of-the-art, $50,000 harvester boat that blows water onto the ocean bottom and stirs the oysters up a conveyor belt. The thing sounds like an industrial vacuum cleaner and would surely scare the life out of Johnny's endangered piping plover, not to mention any birds nesting along these shores.

Between visits to farms, we manage to sample the island's bounty of cooked-oyster dishes. Tyne Valley, near Malpeque Bay, is home to the Canadian Oyster Festival and The Landing Restaurant, where the specialty is an old family recipe—oysters coated in a light batter and deep-fried for one minute. The delectably tender morsel is perfect for an oyster virgin's first taste—the deep-frying mutes the commanding notes of sea and mineral.

At Carr's Oyster Bar at Stanley Bridge, we spend a sunny afternoon on the deck overlooking the harbour, sampling oysters steamed in a wine and garlic broth, an easy and delicious dish to whip up at home.

When it is time for dinner, we visit the gorgeous Dalvay by the Sea, a stand-in for the White Sands Inn in the movie *Road to Avonlea.* Here, we sample chef Andrew Morrison's latest specialty: six oysters seared with lemon, cilantro and black truffle oil. The taste is otherworldly.

But the highlight of our tour is a sampling of PEI varieties with champion shucker John Bil.

But first, a few tasting notes. Like wines, oysters can be distinguished by their species (think Chardonnay), their region (say, Napa Valley) and the waters (like vineyards' soils) they grow in. Starting with species, three are widely available commercially.

The *Crassostrea gigas*, or Japanese oyster—such as the Kumamoto—is now cultivated in the Pacific coastal waters of the western United States and Canada. We suspect it migrated to Toronto oyster bars only because East Coast varieties are iced under in winter. Connoisseurs with their sophisticated palates will wax on about the gigas possessing hints of melon, cucumber, grass and metal. Which means they taste like seaweed and copper.

The *Ostrea edulis*, or European oyster, is the variety the French predominately cultivate and consume—some 143,000 tons a year. Call me a home girl, but I nearly gagged after tasting their notes of rusting metal.

Our clear favourite is our own *Crassostrea virginica*, which grows along the east coast of North America from the Gulf of Mexico to their northernmost range in Prince Edward Island. The Florida Gulf, Maine Glidden Point, Cape Cod Cotuit, New Brunswick Caraquet and PEI Malpeque are all from the same family, yet there's a reason why folks in New Orleans douse their regional oysters in Tabasco and hot salsas while islanders here chase theirs down with nothing more than a cold beer.

As M.F.K. Fisher suggests, a southern oyster is like a Southern belle—"listless and bland." But our PEI oyster—courted by four seasons, from sultry summer to frigid winter—is a tangy tart, bursting with flavour.

And yet, as John Bil so aptly shows us, all island oysters are not the same. Malpeques can grow in waters just ten minutes apart and taste different, which is one of the reasons farmers like Johnny Flynn name their brands, usually after the water they harvest in. Water temperature, salinity, bottom soil, vegetation and even current conspire to make each unique. Tasting PEI brands side by side is rather like tasting Chardonnays from different vineyards in a region or even different slopes in the same vineyard.

So we sample, slurp and chew. Trying each is still like the first raw one I ever had—there is that ritual, a hot and bothered buildup to that tiny explosion of salt tang on the tongue.

We find that the oysters from the south shore, which opens to Northumberland Strait—from Hillsborough River, Clyde River and Bedeque Bay—have decidedly less salt. They're both milder and creamier, with a soft vegetable aftertaste. Oysters from the north shore and eastern tip, which opens to the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the vast Atlantic—Cascumpec Bay, Conway Narrows, Raspberry Point, Stanley River, South Lake and Colville Bay—have that classic Malpeque flavour. They're saltier, with a sweet hit on the chew, and a clean-steel finish. We prefer the north shores, and still love Colville Bays the best.

Our loyalty may well explain why a pek (a box of 100 to 120 small-size choice oysters) wholesales for 10 percent more than most Malpeques. As John Bil explains, oysters are still an esoteric product that requires a huge amount of trust. "A brand shows that the producer is taking care. And every time you open a box of Colville Bays, it's a great box of oysters."

But today we have none.

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WE AWAKE, stirring to fantasies of gravel flying from the wheels of the American Cousins as they leave Prince Edward Island. *Ciao bellas!* Finally, we will have Johnny to ourselves. And today we are to see his oyster beds.

But at noon, Johnny calls. Big tears in his voice. He spent the morning saying goodbye. It clearly got to him. It's his daughter's last day of school and, to cut his long story short, he's throwing over the Food Writer from Toronto for his kid's school-end concert.

"At least the guy's got his heart in the right place," Nancy says when I hang up the phone.

I hiss until I have released a good bit of steam. Then grin. For I have worked Johnny's guilt to secure two dates for the next day—one to see his oyster beds right after lobster fishing, the other for dinner with Johnny and Mary Jane at our cottage.

But the next day, he doesn't call at noon as we had agreed. Or at one o'clock, or two. At three, I call him on his home phone. I call him on his cell phone. Ring, ring, ring. Outside, big storm clouds gather over Colville Bay. As lightning cracks and thunder rumbles, the Food Writer from Toronto marches out to the shore cliff, stamps her foot and screams with the fury of Lear: "What the hell do we have to do to get into Johnny Flynn's oyster bed?"

Five o'clock arrives, but Johnny does not. At six, just as we're about to throw in the towel on our dinner date, Johnny and Mary Jane appear, right on island time, apparently. Johnny offers me ten lobsters, a bag of oysters, a loaf of his mom's homemade bread and an apology. Johnny refuses to hand over the bread until I forgive him. The loaf lingers between us.

Family is only half his excuse this time. One of the giant mussel producers on the island who also cultivates oysters dropped by for a visit. Johnny says the two spent the afternoon as farmers do when it rains, "standing in the workshop talking about how to grow a better oyster and solve the world's problems."

I would have loved to hear that conversation. In clandestine cell phone calls Johnny made to me during the Cousins' visit (he has an endearing habit of thinking deeply about my questions, then calling me later with his answers), he talked on and on about limiting production, keeping prices high so farmers can take the time and care to produce a quality product and still make a fair buck. He credits the big producers for helping rebuild the PEI oyster fishery into a $7.5-million concern, but also criticizes them for being secretive. "They don't share research that could help others get a start and be successful," Johnny told me. "I'd hate to see two or three monopolize the industry. I'd rather have competition from a hundred small producers like me." Indeed, he served as president of the island aquaculture association for six years, playing, as he says, "cheerleader" to other producers. He claims his door is open for anyone to come and see his operation. "I've got nothing to hide," he says now. "Anyone can come and see my oyster beds."

"Except the Food Writer from Toronto," I say.

Johnny whips back the loaf of bread and comes out with the other half of his excuse. After the oyster producer left, he says it started to storm. And his eighty-two-year-old mom gets nervous in a thunderstorm, so Johnny sat through it with her.

*Damn it*, I think. *Family, again.* Still, I remind him that I'm here to write about him, that we've flown sixteen hundred kilometres to see his oyster beds and that tomorrow is our last day and we really have to see them.

He promises, right after lobster fishing. Crosses his heart even.

I take the loaf of bread.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, I refuse to let Johnny out of my sight, which means I am back on the boat fishing lobster at 4 A.M. Today, the ocean swells with eight-foot rollers, and I nearly lose my week's oyster gorge. After emptying the traps, we must haul in all three hundred of them for the winter, which takes a few trips back and forth. Our day drags on, to three o'clock in the afternoon.

Then, finally, we are pushing off shore into Colville Bay—to see the Promised Land at last. We motor the few feet out to the rearing grounds on an aluminum barge, a platform Johnny and Leo use to work on the water. Sarah, Johnny's youngest, comes along with us. She's a bright sprite of a ten year old, but was just a glint in Johnny's eye when he started in the oyster business over a decade ago, so we call her Oyster Girl.

She has carrot-orange hair and her father's determined blue eyes, and she makes one thing clear to us: We are taking her dad away from his real responsibility on end-of-fishing day, which is helping her build a bonfire on their beach, where the Flynns will all gather the next night to watch Canada Day fireworks soar over Colville Bay.

Compared with the other farms we visited—some as large as two hundred acres—Johnny's operation is tiny, comprised of Johnny's fifteen acres and Leo's ten. Rather than specializing in one aspect of oyster cultivation, they do everything—raising the seed from spat to finish, a seed-to-harvest cycle that takes a minimum of four to five years. "It's the farmer in us, I guess," says Johnny. "It takes patience and sometimes being stubborn, but we get real satisfaction from seeing an oyster grow up."

Johnny kills the engine and Oyster Girl hands him an oar—clunking me on the back of the head as she does. In a quiet hush, he poles us over three acres of oyster-rearing grounds. Here, Johnny's secret is finally revealed, though, as Johnny kept telling me all week, it's not much of a secret. While the big mussel producers tried to adapt the French Table method to grow oysters cheaper and faster, Johnny read up on the traditional approach and stayed true to it.

In August, about three weeks after the oysters spawn, Johnny and Leo put out some four hundred collectors at the mouths of two rivers at opposite ends of the island. In days, millions of wild spat—each the size of a grain of pepper—will cement themselves to the collectors. After the brothers retrieve the collectors, they knock off the minute flecks—a laborious process they perform by gloved hand. They then take the minuscule oysters out to the French Tables, which are foot-wide, wire-grate platforms that sit in long rows about a foot above the ocean floor. Attached to these by bungee cords are hundreds of Vexar bags made of a heavy plastic mesh. Johnny pulls a bag on board—it's slightly larger than a ten-pound potato sack. Inside are thousands of seeds the size of Oyster Girl's baby fingernail. They're exposed at low tide, covered at high. The "baring off," Johnny believes, makes the oysters "feed harder" when they are submerged. This is organic farming at its best—the oysters feed naturally on phytoplankton in the water while also filtering hundreds of gallons of water a day, which actually cleans the water.

If all goes well, the spat will grow to the size of a dime before winter, add an inch over the next summer, reach two inches by their third summer, at which time they're ready to spread on the bottom of Colville Bay, to reach their full size over the next summer.

But as the oysters grow, Johnny and Leo have to thin each bag several times during the year—if overcrowded, an oyster won't feed well and can even suffocate. They bring the bags to shore and empty the oysters onto a grader—three wire grates with holes of varying sizes. When they shake them through, the grater knocks off irregular shell formations and sorts the oysters into like-sized piles. Over the years, Johnny has discovered that oysters grow better if returned to a bag with similar-sized mates. It's one of the tricks, as Mary Jane teased at dinner the night before, that Johnny has picked up from walking around his farm at low tide "thinking like an oyster."

Johnny's meticulous approach requires a huge amount of work. Each thinning takes up to three weeks. During their busiest season, fall leading up to Christmas, they can spend twelve hours a day tonging, grading and packing oysters into plastic-coated cardboard boxes for shipping in refrigerated containers, by truck or plane. And each winter, to prevent freezing in the shallow waters, they must sink the bags in about twelve to fourteen feet of water. From seed through packing, Johnny estimates they will handle each oyster at least a dozen times—that's a lot of contact when you consider Colville Bay ships about a half million a year.

"Most people find the French Table method too labour-intensive," Johnny says, "but it works for us." So he holds true to it, using only the help of two university students during the summer. His philosophy is to be both his own boss and his own employee, responsible for getting things done and close to the action to know exactly what needs to be done. “You have to get your rubber boots and rubber gloves on and go out and work it yourself.”

Johnny drops the bag back into the water. As he poles on, Oyster Girl scoops a starfish from the deck and places the creature in the palm of my hand.

“They eat baby oysters,” she says.

“Hmm,” agrees Johnny. “Suction cups on the legs pry open the shells just a crack, then it slides its stomach inside the shell and eats the oyster right there.”

But the Vexar bag protects the oyster from the nasty starfish and other predators. The tables also keep the wee guys from sinking into the silt bottom of the ocean and suffocating.

We glide over to the maturing beds, covered at high tide by about six and half feet of water. The bottom is studded with thousands of oysters that glow an eerie grey under the surface. “They just sit there,” says Johnny, “but we can’t ever forget they’re living creatures. We try not to step on them. We try to treat them with dignity.”

Before Johnny can ask for them, Oyster Girl races for the set of tongs lying on the front of the deck. Nancy and I duck this time as she swings the ten-foot-long sticks over our heads and hands them to her father. Johnny scolds her to be careful. She sulks but not for long, for, with one scoop, Johnny tongs up about fifty market-size oysters, and Oyster Girl is at his side, begging him to shuck one for her. She’s the only one of Johnny’s children who likes raw oysters. As we contemplate the freshest ones we’ll ever eat—right out of the water—she whips the half shell to her lips and her face breaks into a wide smile as she swallows the mouthful of summer ocean. For me, it is more like a mouth-puckering hit of warm salt that leaves me gasping for a cold beer.

As Johnny shucks us another round, I ask him about future plans. Will he get bigger? Expand into South Lake, where he also has a lease?

He looks over his oyster beds and shakes his head. “Really,” he says, “we’re right where we want to be.” There’s always risk in working with Nature—say a poor spat season, another Malpeque disease, a red-tide algae bloom that can close shellfish waters for a season, even years. But things are going his way now. After losing half his oysters through the first two winters, he has reduced mortality to about 10 percent a year. About 80 percent of the oysters he raises are choice, which commands top price. He's also starting to sell directly to restaurants, including Catch in Calgary, and he'd like to do more of that. "The trick now," he says, "is to just keep doing what we've been doing, keep consistent, keep in the rhythm of it all." And then, he says, he will consider expanding.

And if someone were to come along, I ask, and offer him a million bucks for it all? I regret the question as soon as I ask, for Johnny's sea-blue eyes water up.

"No," he says. "No, I couldn't ever. This is home."

He hands the tongs back to Oyster Girl, who dances them to the front of the barge. Johnny starts up the motor and steers us back to shore. As Nancy and I step onto the beach, Johnny nods to the pile of freshly fished oysters and asks if we want to take some back to Toronto.

Truthfully, we want to take everything home—Johnny Flynn, his family, his oyster farm, his sunrises and his sunsets. But we will settle for his oysters, if we must.

# Prince Edward Island

## Nancy's Fellers

This is a seductively easy appetizer to make, and your guests will fall in love with them, if not you for serving it. Even friends who don't like raw oysters lap these up. Count on 3 to 4 shucked oysters per person, so buy 12 to 16 for four people.

You can cheat the shucking by placing the oysters on a baking sheet in an oven preheated to 350°F (180°C) for 5 minutes. The shells will open slightly. Discard any that don't open, as they could be funky. With a knife, pry off the top shells and discard. Reserve the bottom shell with the oyster meat. Run a shucking knife or sharp knife under the oyster to cut the adductor muscle from the shell, but return the oyster to the shell.

For the cheese, Gruyère or Monterey Jack work nicely.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 3 | cloves garlic, minced | 3 |
| 1/2 cup | butter | 125 mL |
| 12–16 | shucked oysters on the half shell | 12–16 |
| 1/2 lb | grated sharp cheese | 250 g |

Sauté the garlic in the butter in a sauté pan over low heat.

Turn the broiler on to high. Place the oysters in the half shell on a baking sheet. Spoon the garlic butter over each oyster; top with the grated cheese. Broil the oysters until the cheese browns, about 1 to 2 minutes.

Serve the oysters still in the half shell, but beware: The shells will be hot to the touch. Accompany with thick slices of baguette.

*Makes 4 servings.*

Credit: Nancy Lyons, Toronto, Ontario.

## Oyster Boy Oyster Stew

Adam Colquhoun, owner of Oyster Boy on Queen Street West in Toronto, runs a "Shuck U" class one Saturday a month. While teaching a small group of students how to shuck, he dispenses eclectic knowledge of the mollusc and spouts Zen-like aphorisms such as, "Oysters give their life to you."

This recipe comes with a caveat: Boil the stew gently and do not overcook the oysters—unless you like them rubbery. The ingredients in this recipe are too delicate to reheat, which means you'll have to eat this delicious stew all in one sitting, but that won't be too difficult.

Oyster liquor is the juice inside the shell; when shucking, catch and reserve any of this juice running off to use in the recipe.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2 tbsp | unsalted butter | 25 mL |
| 2 tbsp | minced shallots | 25 mL |
| 2 tbsp | minced leek (white part only) | 25 mL |
| 1 cup | cubed cooked PEI potatoes | 250 mL |
| 1 tsp | finely chopped fresh thyme | 5 mL |
| 1/2 cup | dry white wine | 125 mL |
| 2 tsp | Worcestershire sauce | 10 mL |
| 2 cups | 35% cream | 500 mL |
| 1/4 cup | oyster liquor | 50 mL |
| 4 drops | hot sauce (such as Tabasco) | 4 drops |
| 12 | raw, shucked oysters | 12 |
| | salt | |
| | freshly grated nutmeg for garnish | |
| | chopped parsley for garnish | |

Melt the butter in a saucepan over medium-low heat. Sauté the shallots and leeks in the butter until soft. Add the potatoes, thyme, wine and Worcestershire sauce; cook for 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in the cream, oyster liquor and hot sauce. Bring to a gentle boil. Add the oysters; heat through, about 30 seconds. Season with salt. Top with freshly grated nutmeg and chopped parsley.

*Makes 2 servings.*

Credit: Adam Colquhoun, Oyster Boy, Toronto, Ontario.