

PLUS: A GUIDE *to* NC OYSTERS

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Thanksgiving dressing (*here, we don't call it stuffing*)
takes center stage on North Carolina tables P.78

4

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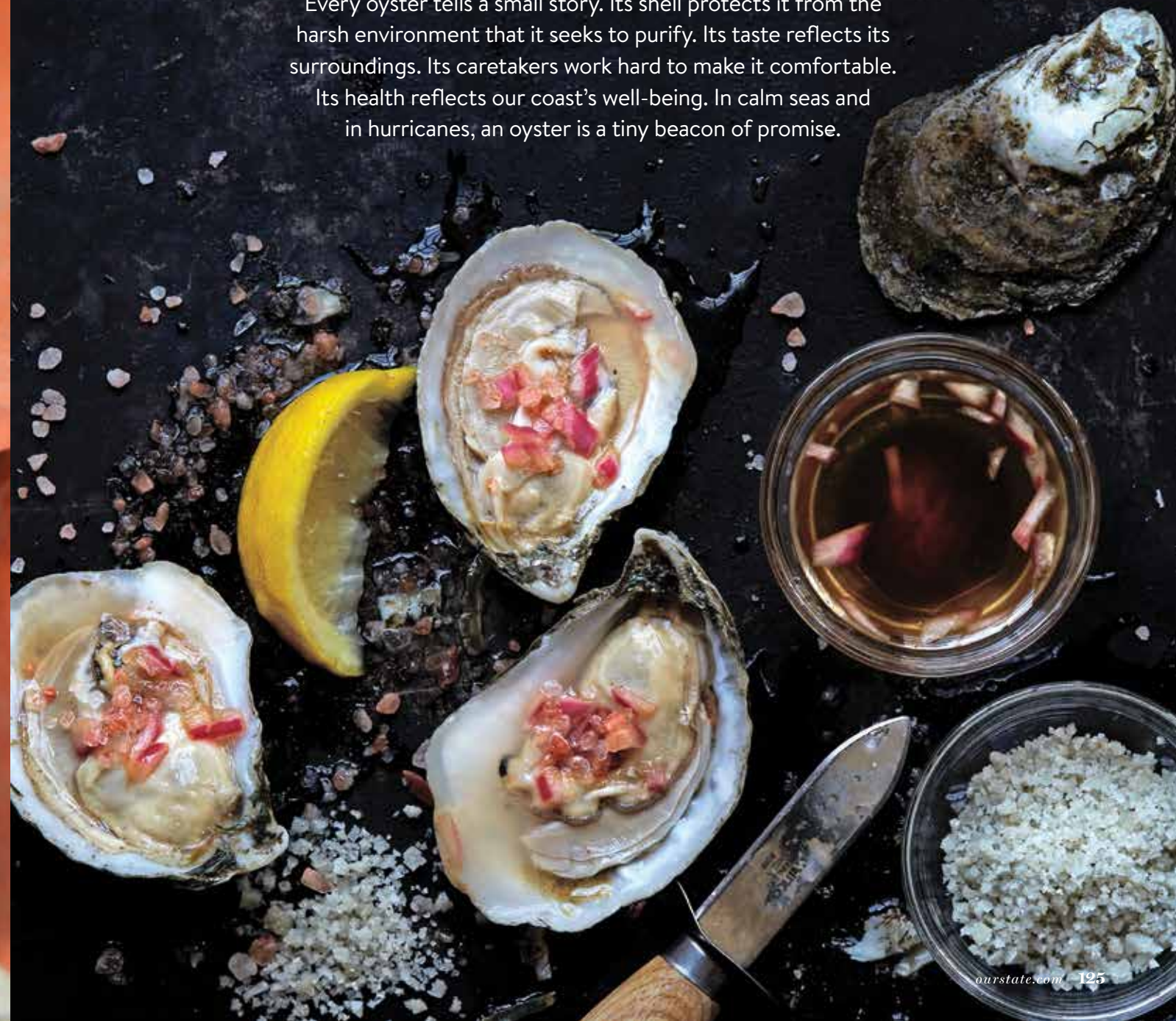
Double duty: An adult oyster can filter 50 gallons of water each day and can live as long as 20 years. Most, however, will retire to our plates, pots, and grills long before then.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STACEY VAN BERKEL

THE GUIDE

N★C OYSTER SEASON

Every oyster tells a small story. Its shell protects it from the harsh environment that it seeks to purify. Its taste reflects its surroundings. Its caretakers work hard to make it comfortable. Its health reflects our coast's well-being. In calm seas and in hurricanes, an oyster is a tiny beacon of promise.





SHUCKING 101

WELCOME *to* NORTH SHUCKALACKY

Join a veteran shucker for a lesson in the art of opening an oyster.

written by T. EDWARD NICKENS / *photography by* TYLER NORTHRUP

Writer T. Edward Nickens is a perfectionist when it comes to shucking oysters. In fact, he opened and ate a couple dozen just for this photo. That's dedication.



POKE IT



REV IT



SEPARATE IT

YOU START AT THE UMBO. Everyone knows that, even if they don't know that they know that.

Watch: You hold the oyster in one hand, the oyster knife in the other, and even if this is your first oyster roast, your first belly-up to the backyard oyster bar, your eye falls naturally on that rounded knob on one end of the mollusk. It is the prominent bulge above the oyster's hinge line. Some people call that hump the oyster's "beak." That is the umbo — a very handy term to toss about as you gain experience with this whole oyster-shucking thing — and that is where you start.

The oyster is not a Rubik's Cube, you understand, nor a theft-proof bank vault, nor an enigmatic metaphor for life's travails and opportunities. It's an oyster, and this is how you shuck it — and it would be in your best interest to learn quickly, because likely as not I'm on my fourth or fifth oyster already and you haven't cracked open a single one.

One reason I'm ahead is that I settled a few initial matters years ago. All oyster shuckers must decide if they are an open-hand or a table shucker, and one is as good as the other. I'm a hand shucker, which means that I hold the oyster in an open palm, gloved or covered with a folded dishrag, and dig in from there. Table shuckers place the dishrag on a counter or tabletop, set the oyster on the rag with the umbo facing out, fold the dishrag over the top and bear down to hold the critter in place. Either method is acceptable. I've even been known to switch things up during a marathon oyster feast.

With the oyster held firmly, one way or the other, I take the point of an oyster knife and slip it into the

shell hinge right there at the umbo. If there is art in the shucking of an oyster, this is the moment it manifests: feeling the blade tip slip into that snug little sweet spot, secure in the hinge, with purchase enough for the application of power. Now, with the knife tip in the oyster joint, I torque the handle like I'm revving a motorcycle throttle. If you merely pry up and down, you'll more likely crack the shell. But a stout motion will crack the seal. The shell halves will separate. There will be a brief moment of celebration. You will think that you are an oyster shucker. But you're really only halfway through the process, and what comes next just might be more important than all that has come before.

LET'S STOP RIGHT HERE AND TAKE A BREATHER, dredge a saltine through some melted butter and clear our minds and palates. Because you need to know that there is another way. The method described so far is known as "butt-shucking" an oyster, as opposed to "front-shucking" the bivalve. This other way is to insert the oyster knife between the shell halves on the thin side of the oyster, into what some folks call the "bill," opposite the umbo. Some of these folks even use a stout paring knife instead of an oyster knife, to keep from chipping the more delicate edges of thinner shells' lips. And some of these folks contend that it just takes too much effort, energy, and power to crack open the umbo.

None of these folks are to be listened to. I'm a dedicated butt-shucker. I have acquaintances who are front-shuckers, but all my friends go in from the umbo. Front-shucking works pretty well when



SLICE IT



OPEN IT



CUT IT

A fresh oyster is a creamy little gobbet of pure brine and flesh.

employed on farmed oysters, each one individualized, cultured, groomed like a show pony, and clean as a whistle. Our wild, natural-grown oysters can be clustered up like three layers of roof shingles, though, and so muddy that it takes a car-wash pressure wand to turn them civil.

You can't pussyfoot around such an untamed animal. Grab it hard and show it who's boss. If you choose to probe the slender bill with little feints and half-hearted knife sticks, then guess what? I'm now up a dozen oysters, easy.

Once the shell is initially cracked, this is where many people goof up the shuck. A fresh oyster is a creamy little gobbet of pure brine and flesh. You don't want to muck it up with shell grit and grime. After you've motorcycle-revved the mollusk open, wipe the tip of the knife clean on your glove or dishrag. Gently raise the upper shell and use the knife to slice through the adductor muscle that holds the two shells together. Turn the oyster a quarter-turn clockwise, then cut the bottom adductor with a U-shaped sweep of the blade. If it's going straight down the hatch, slurp it out of the shell or pinch it to the knife blade with a thumb. If you're shucking oysters to serve on the half shell, use the knife blade to flip the oyster meat over, to present the more cleanly cut bottom half.

Nice work. You might be catching up with me.

OYSTER EATING IS UNDERGOING A RADICAL SEA change these days, in North Carolina and beyond. Cultivated oysters are attracting new fans who rave about the *merroir* of the various waterways like wine connoisseurs fawn over notes of tarra-gon and absinthe associated with the *terroir* of a sauvignon blanc. I'm all for it. More oysters mean cleaner water and more concern about water quality and, who knows, if the poets are correct, maybe more love for all of mankind.

But for me, much of the attraction of oyster season is getting in there among my fellow oyster eaters around a makeshift table that teeters in a backyard or on the beach. I line up, knife in hand, and jack my shoulders out a bit to clear some room. Shell shrapnel and elbows are likely to be flying, and I don't want to harm my neighbor. When the oysters are dumped, raw from a burlap sack or hot from the fire or steamer, everyone has an equal crack at the bounty. The gloves are off — or, rather, on — and we all hear the start-ing gun. I don't apologize for the gluttony about to commence. I'll pop a fresh-shucked oyster into my mouth like a peanut, maybe murmur for a half-moment about whether it's salty or sweet, then shuck another one. And another

one. As fast as I can.

I see you've pulled almost even. Bring it on, my friend. Oyster eating is no contest, but you wouldn't know that watching me. **Os**

T. Edward Nickens is a regular Our State contributor.

Still hesitant to shuck your own? We've got you covered. Grab your knife and an oyster and visit ourstate.com/nc-oysters.



THE TRADITION

A MOST RIGHTEOUS ROAST

A community oyster roast in tiny Varnamtown keeps the love of a local oyster — the Lockwood Folly — alive for another generation.

written by ASHLEIGH BRYANT PHILLIPS / *photography by* BAXTER MILLER



Marlene Varnam (right) knows her oysters. Raised on the local Lockwood Folly variety, she's been a fixture at the roasts from the start. Guests come from all over to enjoy the season's best.



IT'S ONLY RIGHT that Marlene Varnam makes the name tags; she knows everybody in town. The oyster roasters and the bucket boys, the cornbread and pickle girls, the greeters and all the countless cousins waiting with their oyster knives handy — everyone knows her as Ms. Marlene. At age 81, and after 62 Dixon Chapel Oyster Roasts, she knows who needs to do what and how to feed the hundreds of hungry visitors who will make their way down two-lane Varnamtown Road to line up under the live oaks for a noontime supper. Her perm is fresh for the occasion, and her long, shell-beaded necklace clanks against the table as she quickly writes names. “The roast is almost like a family reunion,” she says in between hugging arrivals. “Everyone always comes home for this.”

On sunny November mornings like this one, oyster roasts are happening all along the coast. The 63rd annual Dixon Chapel Oyster Roast in Varnamtown is the oldest public oyster roast in North Carolina. There are 12 notable ones in the eastern part of the state, each with their own storied histories and loyal visitors. Not only do the roasts bring locals back home, but out-of-towners from far and wide come for the experience, too, which is a blessing for small congregations like Dixon Chapel that rely on the roasts to fund everything from sanctuary repairs to filling up the gas tank for youth-group trips. But mostly, these roasts have become coastal community institutions, with everyone in town involved.

At Dixon Chapel, half of the oyster roasters aren't even church members, but at this point, they all know what to do. The roasters have been trained since boyhood, earning their spots around the fire by the time they're men. This year's volunteers are gathered around the open barrels, building great oak-wood fires. They'll hoist the grates — made by a first-time visitor from Clinton, who heard about the roast from a friend — and the oysters will cook on top, their brine hissing on the hot coals. That much never changes.

THE DAUGHTER OF A FISHERMAN, FARMER, AND oyster lover called “Shucky,” Ms. Marlene has lived in Varnamtown her whole life. For the past 63 years, she's lived across the street from the church itself. Her family, the Dixons, donated the land that the chapel was built on in the 1920s.

Ms. Marlene's oysterman husband, Carson Varnam, was her high school sweetheart, and they were married for 53 years before he passed. She still lives in the house they built from the lumber that Hurricane Hazel “provided,” she says, using house plans she'd drawn up during a high school senior project. Her high school ring, bought with tobacco barning money, still fits, too, and shines on her finger as she writes the last of the name tags. Noon is approaching, and the line of oyster eaters,

Carson Varnam's Shellfish Market, located across the road from Dixon Chapel, provides oysters for the roast. Operated by Mikey Fulford (right), the market carries local Lockwood Folly oysters when in season. Mikey's dad, Michael, helps carry bags to the church.



Standing room only: Oyster lovers from as far away as California packed the tables at the 63rd annual Dixon Chapel Oyster Roast in tiny Varnamtown, population 580.

waiting with their oyster knives and gloves, has already reached the road.

This year, just like last year and every year since 1965, the oysters are provided by Carson Varnam's Shellfish Market, which is across the road from the chapel, in Ms. Marlene's front yard. Her grandson, 40-year-old Mikey Fulford, now runs the business. All day yesterday, Ms. Marlene watched from her window as Mikey hosed down the muddy oysters in her yard, and today, Mikey's been driving them across the road in shifts: precious cargo, these Lockwood Folly oysters.

The Lockwood Folly River empties at Varnamtown, creating a freshwater and saltwater mix that gives the Lockwood Folly oyster a bright, briny flavor. "People 'round here, you couldn't give them an oyster from Louisiana or Chesapeake Bay," Mikey says. "They'll go toss them in the driveway because they're not salty. Even though those oysters are much bigger and prettier — they're beautiful oysters — people 'round here just won't eat them."

As a child, Ms. Marlene and her family gathered the oysters right out of the water and roasted them on the shore for picnics. In Varnamtown, Lockwood Folly oysters are always served the same way, with hot pepper vinegar, fried cornbread, and sweet pickles. The tradition remains unquestioned, as if it's common sense. The flavors, like the people, bring out the best in each other. Or, as Ms. Marlene says: "People like the sweet of the pickle to go with how salty the oysters are."

A CROWD 600 STRONG HAS TURNED OUT FOR THE roast, driving in from Virginia and South Carolina, Charlotte and Raleigh. The church's parking lot is full, as is the cornfield next door. Yet despite the inevitable success — they'll raise thousands of dollars — every year there's talk of it being the last Dixon Chapel Oyster Roast. This has been the case ever since Mikey can remember, but the past few years have gotten even more difficult. With a congregation of about 60, Dixon Chapel relies on community volunteers. But the town's population is only about 580, so recruiting enough people isn't easy. The oysters are harder to come by, too. And the few people left in the oystering business have to travel farther to get the shellfish.

"We were just tickled to get enough this year," Mikey says. He and a dozen other oysterers rustled

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"People 'round here, you couldn't give them an oyster from Louisiana or Chesapeake Bay."

up some 250 bushels. In his granddad Carson's time, 250 bushels were easily gathered in a day. Mikey and his crew tried to collect as many as they could from Lockwood Folly, but most came from Topsail and Wrightsville Beach. They didn't know whether they'd have enough until a couple of days before the roast. Ms. Marlene says they'd all been praying and God had "shined a light."

Pastor Bill Negron emerges from the crowd and makes his way to the oyster eater line. He opens the roast with a prayer, and the eaters settle in under the open shelter behind the church, built for shucking. Long, wooden plank tables are spaced apart for standing room, though many bring chairs. As if in a graceful dance, the roasters pair off, lift the heavy



When in Varnamtown: Sweet pickles, vinegar, and fried cornbread are the traditional oyster accompaniments.

One year, they ate so many oysters they embarrassed their mothers.

grates filled with oysters from the fire, bring them under the shelter, and dump the steaming shellfish onto the tables. The eaters know just when to give way and just when to begin eating. No one has to yell “Look out!” or say “Excuse me.” It’s as if every move is inherited and understood.

Little girls in aprons bring bowls of vinegar and pickles and plates of fried cornbread to the tables. Oysters are cracked open, scraped out, and dipped in vinegar; pickles and cornbread are chasers. As shells pile up, boys arrive with buckets to collect them. A changing wind blows smoke from the fires to the tables, and then it shifts again. All of this is happening in sight of the church graveyard where Carson and the rest of Ms. Marlene’s family are buried.

Ben Lewis sits and shucks with his cousin Don Sellers, who just turned 80. They’ve been coming to the roast every year since they were teens growing up in Supply. Ben laughs that one year, they ate so many oysters they embarrassed their mothers. “They were so good, I couldn’t stop,” he says. Across the table, their pal Ron Farmer, a barber from Charlotte, is working his way through his pile of oysters just as he has for 33 years. One of Ron’s clients has flown his plane from Matthews to be here with them. “It’s not quite like a family

reunion,” Don says. “But near about that.”

Ms. Marlene is still flitting about, visiting with distant cousins and old friends. Occasionally, an oyster catches her eye, and she stops long enough to crack it open. And then she’s off again. She finds the unofficial “Oyster Queen,” Sabrina Varnam, who is also kin to everyone. After growing up in Varnamtown in a family of shrimpers and oysterers, Sabrina left for college and honored her home by studying sustainable fishing practices and coastal ecosystems. A few years ago, she was asked to give a speech about oyster shell recycling to 400 people at a Carolina Recycling Association Conference. “I thought, ‘What can I do that’ll make all these people pay attention to me and remember what I say?’” she says. The answer came to her, in her own Varnamtown way: She made a tiara out of Lockwood Folly oyster shells to wear during her speech. “And gosh,” she laughs with pride, “everyone sure did listen.”

Sabrina was once one of the little girls handing out cornbread. She has a 4-year-old now, and she can’t wait for him to be big enough to eat oysters. “I want him to understand our marshes and estuaries,” she says. “I want my son to grow up and appreciate the water, family history, and culture. It’s a dying breed.”

Back at the roasting barrels, it’s the younger, quicker men who are lifting the grates and carrying oysters to the tables. The older roasters tend the fires; many of them are the last shrimpers and oysterers of Varnamtown. Roaster Kenny Hewett says that a couple of years ago, the last boatbuilder in Varnamtown retired. He pulls a card from his wallet. On it is a picture of his boat, one the builder designed: Folly Girl, gliding on the river, the water reflecting shimmers on her hull.

There’s no way to live without loss, and the folks in Varnamtown know that all too well. Mikey worries about the disappearing Lockwood Folly oyster. There’s no way to live without loss, and the folks in Varnamtown know that all too well. Mikey worries about the disappearing Lockwood Folly oyster. “It’s a shame because it’s one of the best oysters you can get anywhere,” he says. Ms. Marlene is concerned that she’ll see the last of these oyster roasts one day. “Every year, we wonder if we’re gonna be able to keep doing it because there’s getting so few of us,”

Ashleigh Bryant Phillips is a writer from Woodland. Her work documents rural North Carolina.



THE FARMER

An OYSTERMAN'S CALLING

The education of oysterman and teacher Ryan Bethea started on land with one brave slurp. Now, his sustainably harvested Harkers Island oysters are prized throughout the state.

written by JASON ZENGERLE / photography by BAXTER MILLER

Harkers Island oysterman Ryan Bethea cultivates distinctive oysters, but you'll find them on only one restaurant's menu: Herons in Cary. The rest are sold to customers on the very day they're plucked from the bay.

Bethea takes sustainability to new heights. To keep his oyster beds clean, he prefers to paddle to his farm, rather than motor in. He harvests by hand, gathering oysters in pillowcases instead of plastic containers.

RYAN BETHEA COULD BE mistaken for a tourist, nudging his kayak into Westmouth Bay on a bright summer morning. Above this quiet stretch of Harkers Island, a lone osprey traces lazy circles in the crystal-line blue sky. In the distance, the silhouettes of wild horses on Browns Island are visible through the thicket. Paddling these gentle waters, Bethea seems to be just another vacationer, taking in the wonders of the North Carolina coast.

But Bethea is going to work. A few hundred yards from shore, he slows his kayak in the shallows. This is it: his oyster farm. Oyster farming is a notoriously difficult job. It can take two years to grow an oyster for harvesting, and, even then, only about half of an oyster farmer's crop is viable. That's to say nothing of the harvest labor itself. Bethea likes to quote a fellow oysterman who jokes of their shared vocation: "It's basically moving a bunch of sharp rocks with food in them."

And yet, Bethea has decided to up the degree of difficulty. He refuses to use a motor-powered boat to reach his farm, instead relying on his kayak. He doesn't have a davit — or any other mechanical contraption — to lift from the water the hefty cages that hold his oysters; all he has are his arms. Bethea even frowns on plastic, preferring to collect his mollusks in a pillowcase. "We try to do it 100 percent all-craft," he says.

Technically, there is no "we," but Bethea is reluctant to take full credit for the success of his oysters. As the founder and sole employee of Oysters Carolina, he is an evangelist — and, quite often, a poster child — for North Carolina's suddenly hot oyster industry. For years, the state lagged behind its Southern Atlantic neighbors when it came to bivalves. Oyster farmers in Virginia, for instance, made \$15.9 million in sales last year. Those in North Carolina, by contrast, made \$2.4 million. But that was up from \$1.1 million in 2016, which was up from a mere \$260,000 in 2005. Meanwhile, the amount of water licensed for oyster farming in North Carolina continues to grow — from six acres in 2011 to more than 200 acres currently.

Bethea's 5.25 acres in Westmouth Bay play home to, at any given moment, some 300,000 oysters. About half of them are a distinctive, extremely salty oyster that Bethea has branded the Beau Sel, which won the North Carolina Seafood Festival's "Oyster of the Year" award in 2016, just 18 months after he went into business. Increasingly, people outside of North Carolina are beginning to notice Bethea, as well as the state's other oyster farmers. "We're the up-and-comers on the East



Bethea's oysters mature in cages until they reach the perfect size. In 2016, the Beau Sel was named "Oyster of the Year" by the North Carolina Seafood Festival.

Coast," says Chuck Weirich, a marine aquaculture specialist with North Carolina Sea Grant. Or as Bethea says, "We're kind of creating a brand as a state for an elite oyster."

AT FIRST GLANCE, BETHEA, 33, WOULD SEEM AN unlikely oysterman. He grew up in landlocked Durham, where his father was the assistant city manager, and studied political science at Appalachian State and geography at North Carolina Central. He eventually became an educator, teaching science and social studies to eighth-graders at a public school in Franklin County. Throw in his magnificent hair and relative youth, and no one's going to mistake him for one of the

grizzled fishermen on *Wicked Tuna: Outer Banks*.

But Bethea has always liked the water — and all that it provides to eat. As a child, his family went to Emerald Isle every summer, where he learned to clam and fish. Later, during his summers off from college — and, eventually, a six-year break from school — he bartended in beach towns like Beaufort and Charleston. But it wasn't until his early 20s that he tried his first oyster. "I think I ate probably two dozen the first time I ever tried one," he recalls. "It was really like zero to 100." As a bartender at Durham's Blu Seafood and Bar, he began to refine his palate. "Some are going to be salty and kind of lemongrassy," he says, launching into a rhapsody about oysters' many varieties and flavors. "Others are cucumber or melony or taste like hay." He could go on.

Bethea's love of oysters might have remained strictly gustatory if, about 10 years ago, he hadn't stumbled across an article in the North Carolina Farm Bureau's quarterly magazine. The story celebrated the North Carolina coast — which, thanks to the shape-shifting Outer Banks, had been spared much of the industrial development that occurred alongside the more easily navigable ocean waters off of South Carolina and Virginia — as a prime spot for oyster farming. But the story also lamented that there were so few oyster farmers in North Carolina to take advantage of the excellent conditions. It struck a chord with Bethea. His great-grandparents had been farmers, and he had occasionally thought of following in their footsteps. He loved the water. "I've got a lot of state pride, and oysters are delicious," he says, "and two and two came together."

Bethea went back to school at NC Central to finish up his undergraduate degree, and then

FORGET ABOUT THE "R"

Like much about oysters, the story of why you can now eat them year-round has something to do with sex. Eating oysters was once a cool-weather affair, an eagerly awaited season celebrated only during months that contained the letter R. That's because a wild oyster spawns in summer: Whether its gonad is swollen for spawning, or deflated and flavorless after, neither condition brings out a bivalve's best.

But fall temperatures put an end to spawning, and those same oysters

are once again plump and back on the menu: roasted over firepits on chilly afternoons, baked into Thanksgiving dressing, and stirred into Christmas stews. While this calendar shaped our oyster-eating culture for generations, it proved no match for scientific innovation. In the 1980s and '90s, researchers put a spoke in the oyster's reproductive wheels with a process that stops the mollusks from spawning. The result is an oyster that tastes like its wild cousins, but is sterile. These are our

cultivated oysters, and they make up most of the market in North Carolina.

The oyster seed still grows in our estuaries and marshes; it just doesn't reproduce. If that sounds odd, think of seedless watermelons. "That's the technology that they use," says Dave Cerino, an aquaculture specialist. "People don't think that's creepy; they just think, 'Great! I don't have to spit out little black seeds.'" Even better: Now the world is your oyster all year long.

— Robyn Yiğit Smith



On a little more than five acres in Westmouth Bay, Bethea tends his Beau Sel oysters. One cage can hold 400 harvest-size beauties.

studies and science to eighth-graders. On Friday night, he'd drive out to Harkers Island and spend all day Saturday and Sunday tending to the oyster farm. "It was a beast," he says. Eventually, it became too much. At the end of the school year in 2017, he left teaching to do aquaculture full-time. He loved his students, but he loved his oysters even more.

THE WATER ON BETHEA'S lease is only shin-deep at low tide. He secures his kayak and begins wading through the oysters he's raising. All of them

started life here as oyster seeds — specially bred by scientists at the University of North Carolina Wilmington or by Jimmy Morris, the father of Bethea's old mentor at NOAA — inside mesh bags in the farm's nursery section. When they mature, Bethea moves them to metal cages, where they'll grow until they're ready for harvest. It's a hands-on operation, examining them, moving them. "I touch them eight or nine times before they leave the farm," he says.

Like a proud father — and a talented salesman — he names them, too. Native Sons are the giant ones that resemble chicken cutlets. They're best roasted, he says. The tiny, delicate Beau Sel oyster is quite salty and best eaten raw. Then there are the Sea Monsters, his most popular oyster. During the winter months, the Sea Monsters have a greenish hue, which comes from a type of *Navicula* algae that only blooms in the cold waters off the coast of North Carolina and France; the oysters that grow there filter the water, staining their gills green. Their briny taste is a result of the salinity level of the water in Westmouth Bay — which, thanks to the nearby Atlantic, is 31 to 33 parts per thousand, just slightly less than you'd find in the ocean. "The Sea Monster is supposed to have antiviral, antibacterial qualities to it," Bethea explains. That's owing to the algae. But it's the flavor of the bay that makes

them such a hit, he says. "I think the reason people love our oysters so much is because they're so salty."

Oysters Carolina is very much a boutique operation on the sales side, as well. "We want people to eat our oysters the day we pull them out of the water," he says. That means Bethea doesn't do business with wholesalers, since his oysters would sit in a distribution warehouse. Knowing what he does about human nature, he won't do a CSA either: "I feel like people would get their basket and not eat it that day." The only restaurant Bethea sells to is Herons at the Umstead Hotel and Spa in Cary — 100 oysters every Friday. "They loved the fact that it was *that* day," he says. "They loved the fact that they'd run out *that* night."

The rest of his oysters are sold to individuals or for private events. A bit like the farm-to-table restaurant on the TV show *Portlandia*, which presented diners with a dossier on their food ("The chicken you'll be enjoying tonight, his name was Colin"), Bethea shows his customers pictures of the oysters from when he harvested them, complete with a time stamp — proof that the oysters were living in the bay that same day.

On this morning, he sloshes through the shallow water in his waders, selecting 100 or so oysters for a party he's catering that evening for the provost at Barton College in Wilson. He pulls out his phone to take a picture of the order. Some he'll roast; some he'll serve raw. All will be gone too soon for the guests.

His process is discerning, but it's for a greater good. If Bethea once appreciated oysters only as a food, he now values them as an essential part of a delicate ecosystem. "Oysters are a keystone species," he says, which means that their presence allows other living things to thrive. He plucks a crab and a juvenile redfish from an oyster cage. He points out the flourishing sea grass growing on the edge of his farm. "There need to be oysters to have this other development," he says.

It's a lesson he tried to impart to his students when he was teaching science. And even out here, among the marsh grass, part of the teacher remains. He's helping develop a curriculum for a new state-mandated aquaculture initiative, which he hopes will produce the region's next generation of oyster farmers. "When you say, 'OK, you can go to

college for four years and become an accountant,' that doesn't get them excited," he says. "But being on the water and working in the elements, working with their hands — that's the kind of stuff they feel good about."

For Bethea, it took the taste of that first oyster to draw him in — and it's still what excites him about oysters today: the taste of the sea, the flavor of Harkers Island. He pulls one from the pile, recalling the first time he ate one of his own oysters. "I was super nervous," he says, popping the hinge with his knife. "After all that work, I didn't want to be let down." The nerves are long gone, but the wonder remains. "Its heart is still beating," he says, admiring the Sea Monster. He tips the shell to his lips, and it's gone. But in the quiet of the bay, his satisfied sigh lingers. **O**s

Jason Zengerle writes for GQ magazine and The New York Times Magazine, among others. He lives in Chapel Hill.



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"Some are salty and kind of lemongrassy. Others are cucumbery or melony or taste like hay."
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Bethea snapped up the lease, but he needed a day job while he got his farm up and running.

With his degree from NC Central, he was eligible to teach in North Carolina public schools thanks to a lateral entry program. In 2015, he took a teaching job in Franklin County. Then came the hard part. Five days a week, Bethea taught social

Raleigh chef Sunny Gerhart (left) and Southern Shores chef Daniel Lewis stock their oyster bars with North Carolina's finest. At Gerhart's St. Roch Fine Oysters + Bar, the two chefs discuss what makes our oysters so special.

THE MUST-EATS



OYSTERS *to* KNOW

The Southeastern coastline is known as “the Napa Valley of oysters,” and North Carolina’s inlets, shoals, and estuaries are particularly rich terrain for briny bivalves. But such abundance can be baffling, so we asked oyster growers, sellers, and chefs where to start.

written by ROBYN YİĞİT SMITH / *photography by* CHARLES HARRIS

ATLANTIC
EMERALD

CULTIVATED
Available January to March

WHERE THEY
GROW 'EM

North River, Carteret County

WHY WE
LOVE 'EM

UNC Chapel Hill marine scientist Niels Lindquist and fisherman Dave “Clammerhead” Cessna have patented an invention that nourishes and encourages the growth of oyster populations. Their Sandbar Oyster Company cultivates a highly prized “green-gills” oyster called the Atlantic Emerald. For centuries, France claimed bragging rights to the green-gill oyster, which gets its shocking color from feeding on algae with a blue-green pigment. Turns out, that same algae blooms naturally during the winter months on our coast, and brave locals Down East have been eating green-gills for years.



HOW TO
EAT 'EM

Naked and “absolutely raw,” says Daniel Lewis, chef and owner of Coastal Provisions Oyster Bar and Wine Bar Café in Southern Shores. The algae imparts a subtle grassy flavor, and when it’s gone, so are the oysters. The season is short, sweet, and not to be missed.

CEDAR ISLAND
SELECTS

CULTIVATED
Available year-round

WHERE THEY
GROW 'EM

Cedar Island Bay,
Carteret County

WHY WE
LOVE 'EM

“The gold standard for a nice-sized, meaty oyster,” says Lin Peterson, co-owner of Locals Seafood, a homegrown NC distributor that connects customers to growers like Jay Styron and his wife, Jennifer Dorton, on Cedar Island. Their oysters have a perfect balance of salty and sweet, and often have green gills in the winter, too. “An oyster is a natural, wild product,” Styron says, pointing out that the flavor of his oysters is determined by the weather, tides, and the bivalves’ food sources at harvest time. “I like to think our oysters are like vintages of the week.”

HOW TO
EAT 'EM

Chef Sunny Gerhart, owner of St. Roch Fine Oysters + Bar in Raleigh, says that these are perfect just as nature made them. “With raw oysters, I like to first try a few plain to feel it out,” he says. “After that, I like a ton of horseradish and some hot sauce. I want tears.” But Styron grew up eating his the local way: raw with a drop of apple cider vinegar and a pinch of salt. To gussy them up now, he and Dorton roast them on the grill, topped with garlic, herbs, Parmesan cheese, white wine, and Worcestershire sauce. “With garlic bread to sop up the juices,” he says, “you’re good to go.”

CHADWICK
CREEK

CULTIVATED
Available year-round

WHERE THEY
GROW 'EM

Chadwick Creek near Bayboro,
Pamlico County

WHY WE
LOVE 'EM

This low-salinity oyster — creamy and white, with a clean finish — gets its delicate flavor from the brackish estuary waters at the mouth of Pamlico Sound. Chris Matteo was a hedge fund trader and analyst in Chapel Hill when he and his wife fell in love with the Inner Banks and purchased a 110-acre property with deeded oyster beds near the Intracoastal Waterway. According to oyster purveyor Peterson, mild oysters like Matteo’s appeal to those new to oyster eating. “It’s like eating flounder versus bluefish,” he says. “It’s a gateway oyster.”



HOW TO
EAT 'EM

Chefs appreciate lower-salinity oysters because they have more control over flavor. Chef Lewis says this plump oyster with a well-formed cup is excellent steamed, with melted butter. Chef Gerhart dresses his in thyme-rosemary-cayenne butter and Parmesan cheese for a turn under the broiler.

CORE
SOUNDERS

CULTIVATED
Available year-round

WHERE THEY
GROW 'EM

Jarrett Bay, Carteret County

WHY WE
LOVE 'EM

Salty but not *too* salty, with a hint of minerality, these oysters taste like their home: the sound. Adam Tyler of Core Sound Oyster Company is a fisherman who gets harvesting help from his 11-year-old son, Charlie. During cold months, his oysters feed on the same algae as the Atlantic Emerald, giving them green gills. (The rest of the year, Core Sounders are *not* green — but are just as delicious.) “That algae only blooms when the water is gin-clear and the sunlight can hit the bottom to allow it to grow,” Tyler says. Come December, he starts seeing signs of the bloom. “There’s no set date for it,” he says. “When it happens, it happens.”

HOW TO
EAT 'EM

This oyster holds up well steamed, roasted, fried, or baked. When cooking an oyster, Chef Lewis says to look for meat that is whiter, which usually means it will be creamier and heartier: “The clearer and more translucent oysters are the ones that tend to shrivel up to nothing when cooked.” But Tyler says there’s nothing like eating Core Sounders fresh from the water, right on the boat. Still, these oysters shine through any preparation: “Sometimes I make Oysters Rockefeller, just to spice things up around the house for me and my boy.”

CRAB
SLOUGH

WILD
Available November to March

WHERE THEY
GROW 'EM

South side of Oregon Inlet,
Dare County

WHY WE
LOVE 'EM

This wild oyster is beloved by generations of North Carolinians who grew up shucking them at winter oyster roasts. But it’s also known for the tiny pea crab often tucked inside the shell. (Go ahead, eat it, too!) Easy to shuck, this is an oyster for all ages and a timeless taste of inlet waters. Many a wild oyster may call itself a Crab Slough, but a true Slough (pronounced *slew*) only comes from the specific body of water in Dare County that shares its name.



HOW TO
EAT 'EM

These plump beauties are great roasted until just poached in the brine inside their shells. “If you’re in North Carolina in the wintertime, that’s your oyster,” Chef Lewis says. Slurped raw will do just fine, too. Lewis likes to dip his in Hogwash Mignonette, a twist on the classic French sauce: vinegar, jalapeño, cracked pepper, and cilantro. “I encountered it traveling up the Sonoma coast 20 years ago,” he says, and now it’s a mainstay on his menu.

SLASH
CREEK

CULTIVATED
Available year-round

WHERE THEY
GROW 'EM

Sandy Bay, Hatteras Island,
Dare County

WHY WE
LOVE 'EM

Katherine McGlade had a degree from Columbia University and a sweet corporate job when she had an epiphany about spending the rest of her life behind a desk. Now, she spends her days motoring out to her oyster beds, accompanied by her springer spaniel, Merit. “I tend to be pretty confident in my ability to learn things, so I guess I just brought that to learning how to drive a boat and how to be an oyster farmer,” says McGlade, who co-owns her small-batch oyster company with her husband, commercial fisherman Spurgeon Stowe. These OBX bivalves are a happy medium in size, and a standout in briny flavor. “Hatteras has some of the most pristine water anywhere on the East Coast,” McGlade says. The proof is in the clean taste of her oysters.

HOW TO
EAT 'EM

Chef Lewis calls this variety “a little Mack truck of an oyster.” Meaning: Raw, this oyster has great flavor. Plus, they’re easy to shuck, so you’re likely to find them at oyster bars. “It’s beautifully grown, super clean,” Chef Gerhart says. “It’s got this nice emerald color and lines. And I’m not even talking about the oyster yet — this is just the *shell*!” What’s inside is even better.

SAVAGE
INLET

CULTIVATED
Available year-round

WHERE THEY
GROW 'EM

Oregon Inlet, Dare County

WHY WE
LOVE 'EM

The big, briny flavor of these oysters comes from the treacherous — or, rather, *savage* — inlet they call home. “I think our location is one of the best you can have,” says Bobby Smith, who’s navigated these powerful currents for more than 30 years as a charter boat captain and commercial fisherman. When he and his wife, Stephanie, started oystering last year, they invested in cutting-edge equipment that could survive the inlet’s infamous conditions. Now, they’re growing oysters faster than just about anyone. Catch the Smiths on their boat, along with Chef Lewis, on an upcoming episode of the Travel Channel’s *Delicious Destinations*.



HOW TO
EAT 'EM

“This one steams really nicely,” says Chef Lewis, who also likes them broiled with garlic butter and lemon. When it comes to toppings, simple is often best. Ingredients should enhance the rich and salty goodness of an oyster. Try baking them with a little bacon.

DEVIL
SHOAL

CULTIVATED
Available year-round

WHERE THEY
GROW 'EM

Ocracoke Island, Pamlico
Sound side, Hyde County

WHY WE
LOVE 'EM

These meaty oysters with moderate to high salinity and a sweet finish are grown by Hyde County natives Fletcher and Heather O’Neal of the Devil Shoal Oyster Company. The O’Neals have five kids, which, in aquaculture terms, means 10 extra hands. It takes that many to tend these oysters that are grown in bags a short boat ride from Ocracoke. Fletcher describes his oysters’ salty punch as “old-school,” reminiscent of the wild oysters near Ocracoke Inlet. Folks inland agree: You’ll find these on many an oyster bar menu.

HOW TO
EAT 'EM

Chef Lewis points out that an oyster tastes like the last drink of water it had, and these oysters slurped up cool, mineral-rich seawater. It’s easy to down a dozen on the half shell. A squeeze of lemon is all this oyster needs to bring out its natural attributes.

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY WENDY HOLLENDER

THE COMMUNITY

BOUNTY *in the* MARSH

Farming and fishing were a way of life on this island at the tip of Pamlico County. Then hurricanes brought rising waters. Now Lowlanders farm a new crop, one that comes from the sea.

written by ELEANOR SPICER RICE / *photography by* STACEY VAN BERKEL



Working boats were a common sight on the Pamlico River near Lowland last spring. Since Hurricane Florence hit the community with storm surge, feet of rain, and flooding from upriver, it remains to be seen how many of the area fishermen who were pushed out of their homes will return. Robbie Mercer (opposite, left) and Ivan Ireland, owners of I&M Oyster Company, say they aren't going anywhere.



LOWLAND IS RIGHT WHERE the state stops, only three feet above sea level, at the end of a long road 36 miles from New Bern, across the sound from Belhaven. It's lonely and wild. Black bears climb pear trees, and salt marsh mosquitoes rise from the reeds to greet you. Because it was separated from Beaufort County by the sound, Lowland joined Pamlico County instead. Then the Intracoastal Waterway was built in the 1920s, slicing the town and its neighbor, Hobucken, from the rest of the state, bounding it on all sides with water as Goose Creek Island. All along, its hundreds of residents farmed and fished as families.

Muff Potter was raised in Lowland in the 1940s and '50s. "I grew up on a small farm, about 25 to 30 acres," he says. "I farmed with my daddy, and we

supplemented by fishing."

People first fished by sailboat, Muff says. When motorboats came and fishing technology improved, fishermen hauled in more and more seafood.

"They could put larger nets out there, larger dredges, and cover more bottom," he says. "In the '50s, when I was about 9 years old, the shrimping in the Pamlico Sound played out. What happened was, these big trawlers were raking the bottom and taking away the food source for the shrimp and crabs."

One by one, the fish houses shuttered.

Scooter Leary is the last Lowlander who makes his living fishing in the island's waters. "I've been fishing almost 60 years, since I was 10 years old," Scooter says. "I got my fishing from my dad. I went out and fished with him nighttime and daytime, and I learned the trade with him."

He harvests crab and fish, and progs for wild oysters. Lowlanders call it "progging" for oysters — dragging a chain to feel for oyster rocks deep beneath the water's surface. "There's an art to it. I hold the cable in my hand," Scooter says. "I can feel it shaking on the rock's edge. You can tell the difference between oysters and other shells, if you know how it *feels*."

IN AUGUST 2011, IRENE YAWNED AT THE MOUTH OF the Pamlico River for more than two hours. She wasn't strong for a hurricane, but she was persistent. Her northeast gusts blew waters from the Pamlico and its tributaries onto shore; crests spread across the land like a warm, wet hand. Brackish water crept up Lowland's front steps, then lapped at floorboards, and finally made itself at home in all but six of the nearly 200 houses in the coastal

community. Fish swam in garages; unpiloted boats drifted across fields.

The water washed over Zool Ireland's duck hunter's camp at the end of the road. The cinder-block structure was built by his father in 1948 and opened to the sound. It was once a fish and crab processing plant, a co-op, one of six on the island. Fishermen across Goose Creek Island brought their bounty from the sound, resting their boats in small creeks cut through the marshland.

Zool's son Ivan came back after the waters receded and found the fish house smashed. He looked around and saw his whole homeplace, the island, gone, too.

"Irene tore this place near about down," he says. "I couldn't stand to sit here and see this go down to nothing. Me and my wife, Pam, and Dad put together the resources to put it back."

The building on Goose Creek Island that's now home to I&M Oyster Farm has been tested by storms for 70 years. Florence blew its doors out, but it's still standing.



Last spring, Ivan, Robbie, and their crew pulled cages filled with Pamlico Sound's Bounty oysters onto their boat.

After more than 30 years at sea together, Robbie and Ivan were ready to come home.

Repairing a building is one thing; rebuilding an existence requires more than tools and stone. Ivan had to find a new way of life for Lowland, built from the old one.

FOR THE PAST THREE DECADES, IVAN MADE A living the way many Goose Creek Islanders did: He fished for scallops on commercial boats along the East Coast. The work kept him away from home for weeks at a time, as his boat navigated the narrow gap between nature and government regulations.

Before that, he'd worked with his family and neighbors at the plant at the end of the road. He picked steamed crabs and packed fish. His friend Robbie Mercer worked there, too, when they were kids.

Robbie and his father ran the boats that Ivan and other Lowlanders fished from. As children, Robbie and Ivan played at Zool's plant together.

As adults, they fished together from Robbie's father's commercial boats. After Irene, and after more than 30 years at sea together, they were both ready to come home to Lowland. "The problem was, I didn't know how to do anything but work," Robbie says.

LOWLANDERS WERE MADE FROM THE LAND, BUT they are people of the water, and they need to fish.

"The water is something that gets in your blood," Muff says. "And Goose Creek Island people are probably some of the most independent people there are. They don't like bosses, and they don't like to be ordered around. In fishing and farming, you can do that. You are on your own."

Answering only to the weather, fishermen kept their families in Lowland and climbed aboard boats for weeks at a time to fish up and down the coast — from Canada to Florida to the Gulf of Mexico — chasing tides and schools, pulling life from the water to make their own lives. And they always came home.

After Irene, their homes were gone. The ground was left salty by Irene's surge, and farming grew poor. Duck hunters moved onto farmland, and lifetime residents gave way to seasonal visitors. Federal regulations squeezed small fishermen out of business. Ivan's family's packing plant was in ruins.



One of the perks of being an oyster farmer: Robbie enjoys homegrown lunches on the half shell.



Ivan looked to his lifetime at sea. He had spent years along the northern Atlantic Coast. He'd watched men pull oysters from the water in cages like crab pots, growing them like soybeans in waters where they used to catch them wild.

He came to Robbie with an idea. Everything about Lowland, made new. Farming in the sea. They formed I&M Oyster Company. "Pam and I got in the car and drove all the way to New York," Ivan says. "We went to oyster farms along the coast and asked questions, and we learned how they did it."

THE WATER IS DIFFERENT UP NORTH. COOL weather hangs around longer and big storms batter — but not as often, and usually more gently. The salinity is different, too. Through trial and error, Robbie and Ivan had to learn how to grow oysters in North Carolina's waters. "Me and Ivan went at it like two mad dogs, and we killed a lot of oysters in the process," Robbie says.

After a couple of years, they figured it out.

Today, they work out of Zool's old processing plant. Half of the plant remains a camp for duck hunters. The other half is an oyster farming operation. There is a tank for baby oysters, called spat. A tumbler to knock off jagged edges and to sort by size. A saltwater tank to ensure that each shellfish has the perfect level of saltiness. And a stack of cages to keep their crop. These implements are

Through trial and error, Robbie and Ivan had to learn how to grow oysters in North Carolina's waters.

where the human influences stop. The oysters are grown in the wild.

IT'S EARLY ENOUGH IN THE DAY THAT THE SUN hasn't quite made it over the trees. Ivan and two young Lowland men, TJ and Richard, take a 25-foot Carolina Skiff down the river to harvest. Beyond the hum of the boat's motor is a duck blind tucked in the reeds, the only sign that humans exist, have ever existed. Cormorants dive for fish. Red-winged blackbirds sit impossibly high on reeds along the shore, singing songs that sound like the water itself. The sky spreads big, from reed tip to reed tip, from sea to treetops.

The men carry hooks on long staffs called catch-poles, and they quietly motor to 10 acres marked by pylons where the Pungo River meets Oyster Creek



Ivan and his father, Zool, still call the end of the road on Goose Creek Island home.

and flows into the mouth of the Pamlico River. There, waters flow gently to Pamlico Sound. This is where Irene yawned seven years ago, and now it's where the oysters grow. The oysters live in cages and open their mouths to the mouths of these rivers, filtering, washing the water.

TJ hooks oyster cages one by one and pulls them to the boat, a cage for each order that needs filling. Each cage holds all forms of sea life hiding between shells, wiggling in spreading puddles on the boat's bow. This is the harvest. Back at the farm, the men will sort and bag them, bushels and pecks. These oysters are called Pamlico Sound's Bounty, named for the water that gives them their plumpness and flavor.

Last year, growers across the state's waterways requested more than 50 permits to lease more than 150 underwater acres.

Robbie and Ivan are still tinkering, learning, discovering. They have the only tank in the state capable of raising the oysters' salinity during times of heavy rainfall. The operation is growing, bringing in a new generation of fisherpeople, Goose Creek Islanders like TJ and Richard, who come from generations of people who made their lives on the water.

MUFF POTTER STILL KEEPS THE LAND HE FARMED as a child. He visits it, walks on it, stands in Lowland.

"I go across the high-rise bridge over the Intracoastal Waterway to Lowland," he says. "I look out toward the east and the southeast. It's a beautiful sight to see all the woodland and all the water. But when you go across the bridge and come down, you see house after house that's empty and going away."

Between hurricanes Irene and Florence, the population dropped below 200 on the island, where more than a thousand once made their lives.

"This year is the first time I've ever known in my lifetime of 73 years that no crops are planted here," Muff says. "The only ones that are planted are for the duck hunters to bait the ducks."

But just past that wild land, beyond the end of the road, a new crop grows. **Os**

Eleanor Spicer Rice is a science writer who lives in Raleigh with her husband, Gregory, the son of a Lowlander.





Dr. Lexia Weaver, a scientist who manages restoration projects for the North Carolina Coastal Federation, leads a team of volunteers at Camp Trinity in Pine Knoll Shores.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BAXTER MILLER



THE SHELL SAVERS

STICKING TOGETHER

If there's one thing oysters like, it's hanging out with, near, and on top of other oysters. So to make them comfy, volunteers are gathering up used shells and recycling them into new beds for bivalves.

written by SUSAN STAFFORD KELLY



THE STORY OF OYSTER SHELL recycling is really the story of oyster love, even though, for all their wink-wink associations as an aphrodisiac, the love life of your typical bivalve isn't terribly sexy. In North Carolina, a nice, warm, seawater bath of above 68 degrees puts romance — such as it is — in the air, triggering oysters to reproduce. Our East Coast oysters are “broadcast” spawners, releasing millions of eggs and sperm into the water to be fertilized.

Trocophore. Veliger. Pediveliger. All are 50-cent terms for a fertilized, developing oyster. Suffice it to say that the wild baby bivalve grows what looks like an eye and a foot, and begins searching for food and something hard, known as a substrate, to attach itself to: a rock, a pier, a tire, a piece of driftwood. But given its druthers, an oyster is happiest, like most of us, on familiar territory — i.e., another oyster shell. Another oyster shell indicates that water circulation and algae supported those who came before: *If this marsh was good enough for Grandma and Grandpa, I can thrive here, too.*

Hence oyster beds, those unlovely clusters of sharp-edged shells. What looks to you like stitches on the soles of your bare feet looks like home to an oyster.

ENTER THE NORTH CAROLINA Coastal Federation. Founded in 1982 “to protect, educate the public, and advocate for water quality and shoreline,” the nonprofit has a staff of more than 30, 12,000-plus members, and 3,000 active volunteers. In partnership with the state’s Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF), the Coastal Federation has worked to establish and preserve oyster habitats. “We’re creating no-harvest sanctuaries for oysters,” says Dr. Lexia Weaver, who supervises the central regional office of the Federation in Newport.

They’ve accomplished this task with recycled oyster shells, which come from both backyard oyster roasts and restaurants. “If you shuck it, don’t chuck it!” has been the slogan for the state’s oyster

Sam Bland (left) and Dr. Weaver do the finishing work by hand, taking shells out of mesh bags and arranging them into beds where new oysters can attach and reproduce.



Bill Trimyer's "bucket list" includes picking up oyster shells (here at Coastal Provisions in Southern Shores), loading them into the bed of his truck, and dumping them out at a designated collection site.



shell recycling effort, and throwing away oyster shells is actually illegal, no different than pitching a computer or paint can into your trash container.

For a long time, this is how it worked: People left truckloads of shells at dedicated state recycling centers. The DMF transferred the shells to barges and blasted them into designated areas with high-pressure fire hoses. And volunteers with the Federation collected donated shells bucket by bucket, "raked" them by hand into mesh bags, then headed by boat for specific drop sites, identified and permitted by the DMF.

The Federation also works with quarries to purchase limestone rock, known as "marl," and deposit these basketball-size chunks in specific areas to create riprap, or a foundation for oyster colonies. Unlike your average pier piling, marl has plenty of calcium carbonate, which is a major component of natural oyster shells, and therefore beneficial to oyster growth.

Oyster shell recycling isn't just good for the environment and on-the-half-shell slurpers. "Homeowners along the Intracoastal Waterway have become a great source for habitats," Weaver says. "They find us by word of mouth." Anyone who lives near moving water — and under the perpetual

threat of storms and hurricanes — is concerned with erosion control. In the face of Mother Nature's high winds and roiling waters, oysters hold their ground. Literally.

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**"If the owner says,
'I throw them
away,' I say, 'How
about throwing
them my way?'"**

.....

RECENTLY, THE LEGISLATURE voted to discontinue the state's role in the recycling effort, but the Federation has forged ahead. It's looking to buy state recycling equipment and continues to use the shells in both living shorelines and oyster restoration projects. So the collecting goes on, and that

means that faithful volunteers keep pulling on their gloves and making their rounds. It's sweaty, smelly, heavy, dirty work, but Bill Trimyer isn't much fazed. "Good news: No flies," he says of the colder weather this time of year. "Bad news: The shells still stink." Trimyer, 73, is a retired pastor, hospital chaplain, and current online professor. Three years ago, while sitting in a Charleston cigar bar, Trimyer met a fellow from the DMF in Wilmington who was talking about oyster shell recycling, and who put Trimyer in touch with the right people.

Roughly once a week, Trimyer, one of 20 such volunteers, makes the rounds of restaurants in Nags Head to collect oyster shells. First stop on this day is Coastal Provisions in Southern Shores,

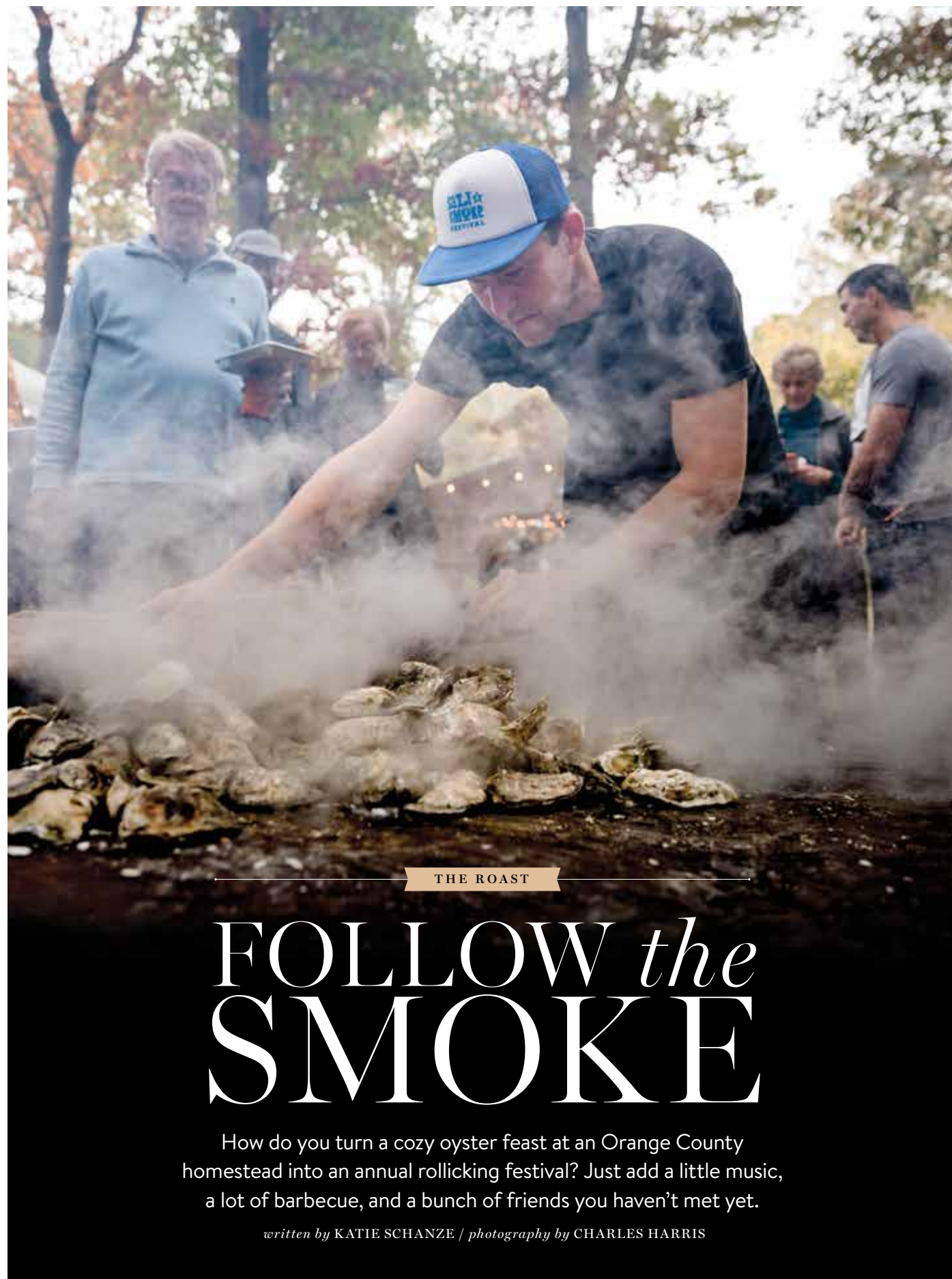
a gourmet market and wine bar that specializes in oysters. During a typical week, owner Dan Lewis says, Coastal Provisions will shuck 2,500 oysters — 1,600 on “half-shell Wednesdays” alone. “People are just eating more oysters than they used to,” Lewis says, and he’s dedicated to “getting the shell back to the sound.”

There’s nothing high-tech to the task. Participating recycling restaurants dump their shells into plastic buckets with lids and handles — your typical Lowe’s work bucket, which holds about 100 oysters — and place them out back. Trimyer fetches and hoists the buckets into the bed of his Ford truck, drives to a drop-off pile not far from the Coastal Federation office in Wanchese, dumps his treasure with a clatter, then returns the buckets to the restaurants.

“Sometimes I stop at a restaurant and just walk in and ask what they do with their oyster shells,” he says. “If the owner says, ‘I throw them away,’ I say, ‘How about throwing them my way?’” Today is one of those days. Trimyer stops in at a newish eatery called Steamers, requests the owner, and makes the ask. At first, the fellow is wary. But wary becomes cordial, and cordial becomes eager when Trimyer explains his purpose. “Leave me three buckets,” the owner says. He points to Trimyer’s truck, where a turquoise “Oyster Shell Recycling” decal is affixed to the windshield. “And can I have one of those stickers for my restaurant window?” Indeed he can. Another convert to the cause. And, hopefully, in time, another bed for a bivalve. **Os**

Susan Stafford Kelly is a novelist and frequent contributor to Our State.





THE ROAST

FOLLOW *the* SMOKE

How do you turn a cozy oyster feast at an Orange County homestead into an annual rollicking festival? Just add a little music, a lot of barbecue, and a bunch of friends you haven't met yet.

written by KATIE SCHANZE / *photography by* CHARLES HARRIS



Back behind the farmhouse at Rock Quarry Farm, oyster fans and barbecue devotees gather together for the annual Salt & Smoke Festival, a party that celebrates North Carolina's food traditions.



Chef Kevin Callaghan has turned a down-home get-together into an event for the national stage. Salt & Smoke festivals have been held everywhere from Quebec to Colorado. “You don’t have to be from the South to appreciate the food, the feeling of togetherness,” he says.

It was then that Callaghan, chef and owner of Acme Food & Beverage Company in Carrboro, thought to himself: We have to do this again.

TONIGHT, ON A SLIGHTLY WARMER FALL EVENING six years later, Callaghan wears a soft blue apron over his crisp white chef’s shirt, a white dishrag hanging by his side, and a backward baseball cap as he lines up fresh oysters in big buckets of ice on the counter. A shucking knife in his hand, he pops open a half-dozen or so oysters, lines them up on a small metal tray, and hands it to the next person in line. Nearby, those who prefer their oysters roasted wait for the next batch as smoke from the fire drifts past.

What started as a small party among friends is now a full-on festival called Salt & Smoke. But while the guest list has grown over the years, the idea behind the event remains the same. “That first party, it just sort of turned into a shindig,” Callaghan says. “We see it as a celebration of the end of the season and the deep traditions in North Carolina.”

These days, the get-together is held at Rock Quarry Farm, not far from that first field. In addition to the buckets of oysters and the local beverages, there’s also a whole hog cooking in a smoker, bluegrass bands, a photo booth, and a fortune teller. There’s even a roast-your-own s’mores bar.

THE NIGHT WAS FREEZING, but Kevin Callaghan felt warm sitting on a stump, watching embers dance above a three-story bonfire, surrounded by foodie friends in a farm field in Orange County. He also felt full. They’d brought big plastic buckets of fresh oysters from the coast and boxes of wine that they drank from red Solo Cups. They’d brought beer and marshmallows. Pans of Callaghan’s cornbread and a pot of collards seasoned with pork necks sat next to the fire. This, after all, was a celebration of the flavors of fall, and of friendship.

It started snowing, but near the fire, flakes evaporated before landing: a snow globe in reverse.

With the smoke rising and the snow falling and everyone gathered around eating oysters, “It was magic,” Callaghan says.





Mother-and-son team Camille and Miles Andrews turned an abandoned homestead into a warm, inviting gathering place. The sign in Camille's kitchen reads: "May the warm winds of heaven blow softly through this house!" The Andrews believe they do.

"There's something about 'tradition' that can sound old-fashioned somehow, but we wanted it to be fresh, new, fun," Callaghan says.

Preserving the state's food traditions — the community gatherings and parties that have long surrounded oysters and barbecue — is important to Callaghan, and so is sharing them with others. Callaghan doesn't know all of the faces around the fire, but that, in his opinion, is the whole point.

"I think that's what makes me so excited," Callaghan says. "Food is something that unites us. We wanted this to be something where people realize, 'We may be different, but boy, oh boy, we all loved that food.'"

.....
"We may be different, but boy, oh boy, we all loved that food."

FOR CAMILLE ANDREWS, OWNER OF ROCK QUARRY Farm, hosting Salt & Smoke at the homestead is a natural fit. The evening is all about a community connecting over food, just as North Carolinians have done for generations, just as Andrews's family has always done. "Eating whole-hog pork with cornbread and collard greens is just like the meals my ancestors cooked, as well as the folks in this house and the families still living on the land," Andrews says. "Growing up, my husband's family had the opportunity to slaughter pigs in the fall with men in the community. They would make a weekend of it, and then would pack freezers with that."

For Callaghan, hosting Salt & Smoke here feels like destiny. "Camille's family, the Andrews, they've been around here forever. And a few years ago, I found out that my family moved here in the 1600s and helped settle this area, White Cross, where Rock Quarry is. So our families probably knew each other and worked together back then," Callaghan says, laughing. "It feels a bit like fate."

After the death of her husband in 1995, Andrews





Strangers become fast friends over barbecue — and creamy mac 'n' cheese, collards, mashed sweet potatoes, hoppin' John, and cornbread.

Seven years in, Salt & Smoke is all about this place, Rock Quarry Farm.

needed a fresh start. A longtime resident of Orange County, she began searching for a new place to live, close to her home in Carrboro but a little farther out in the country, where she'd always felt a sense of peace. It was then that she found the 14-acre homestead. "It was run-down, had not been lived in for years, but as soon as I walked up the long drive and saw the house, the trees, the outbuildings, I knew I was in love," Andrews says. "Everyone told me to tear it down and start over. But, I thought, it was just like me: I may be starting over, but there's something so rich in my past, too. I just needed to restore it."

Soon, her children joined her, and the family spent countless days rebuilding, clearing the land, and painting the house. Later on, when night fell, they'd build a bonfire and cook a meal outside as they rested in the quiet. Slowly, the property became Rock Quarry Farm, named after the quarry that was once located on the land, which produced quartz that lined NC Highway 54 in the horse-and-buggy days.

Inspiration came to Andrews from years of Sunday drives out in rural Orange County with her husband. "Corncribs, sheds, small barns, gardens, fences," she says. "All along, the restoration grew out of my desire to keep the heritage of this North Carolina homestead."

Today, her son Miles, "jack-of-all-trades and

renaissance man," as Andrews calls him, helps her run the farm. A local musician in the bluegrass band Big Fat Gap, he has a passion for preserving the heritage of North Carolina's music, just as Andrews has a passion for preserving the heritage of the homestead. He often plays bass out on the farm during events like Salt & Smoke. Tonight, the celebratory sound of strings floats around the place.

Andrews's eyes light up as she leans back into a wooden chair and looks out at the people eating, laughing, dancing. "You feel the past here. You smell the food cooking, the forest trees turning over into fall, smoke from the cooking fires," she says. "It's hard to find that in any other setting."

Callaghan agrees. "Seven years in, it's all about this place. It's about the wonder of what grows here, the diversity of the food, the people who want to participate," he says. Later in the evening, he'll finally have a chance to set down the shucking knife, to watch the people who've come here come together, and to make a little magic around a fire on a chilly Carolina night. **os**

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SALT & SMOKE FESTIVAL
November 4
Rock Quarry Farm
1700 NC Highway 54 West
Chapel Hill, NC 27516
saltandsmokefest.com





Chef Matt Kelly's new Durham restaurant, Saint James, puts North Carolina oysters in the spotlight. By working directly with coastal fishermen, he keeps his catch-of-the-day seasonal and sustainable.



THE RESTAURANT

The TASTEMAKER *of* DURHAM

One of the South's top chefs, Matt Kelly, has helped transform downtown dining into a tour of the world. But with Saint James Seafood, his inspiration is closer to home: our coast.

written by LOUISE JARVIS FLYNN / *photography by* ANAGRAM PHOTO



THE BUTTERMILK SKY is just starting to roll in, and Chef Matt Kelly is on the phone. Again. Pacing the bar at Saint James Seafood, his newest restaurant, he checks in with his fishermen and his oyster growers: They're all expecting the worst and have locked down their boats. "What more can they do?" Kelly asks with a helpless wag of his head. Here in Durham, Hurricane Florence has triggered a full-blown bread-and-batteries panic, but Kelly's worry isn't theoretical. It's real, immediate. Closer to the heart. For him, the coastal community might as well be right down the street. "We had a clam guy who wanted to try to make it in today," he says, amazed. "We told him not

to; it was going to be 10 hours of traffic."

A restaurant doesn't stop, until it must. There are too many moving parts — human and mechanical and perishable — to pause the clockwork, even under threat of an epic storm. No one understands this better than Kelly, 42, whose five acclaimed eateries form a bright culinary constellation in Durham's dining scene. All occupy sturdy old brick buildings that have long withstood wild swings of fortune and plenty of weather. These storefronts, now perked up with tidy awnings and painted trim, are as much destinations as they are symbols of a city redefined by its ambitious chefs.

Named one of the best chefs in the Southeast

(four times) by the James Beard Foundation, Kelly is known for putting North Carolina ingredients into foreign service: as Spanish tapas at his restaurant Mateo and as French classics at Vin Rouge; in New York deli spreads at Lucky's and in regional Italian dishes at Mothers & Sons Trattoria. He says that Saint James, named for both the patron saint of shellfish and the hospital where his grandfather once worked, is his first *American*

Diners at Saint James in Durham will notice that only a few details — the tile floor and the stairway — remain from the building's days as Fishmonger's. The dining room upstairs showcases the nautical paintings that Chef Kelly has been collecting for four years.



restaurant. To be more precise, though, most of the gilled and glorious critters on the menu come from North Carolina waters.

Whatever happens to Kelly's fishermen, to their boats and homes and families, will be felt here, 170 miles inland. Kelly wears this worry. Folding his arms over the design on his T-shirt, an outline of the state divided by our barbecue fighting words, "tomato" and "vinegar," he says, "I'm hoping it will be fine." It sounds more like a question. "I just keep thinking about how, when something bad happens in our community, people always come together."

For Kelly, the coastal community might as well be down the street.

IN 2005, WHEN KELLY BECAME CO-OWNER OF VIN Rouge, Durham's dining scene was expanding, but its reputation was concentrated in two radiant points: Ben and Karen Barker's Magnolia Grill and Scott Howell's Nana's. Back then, if you wanted a dozen oysters on any given day, your best bet was to slide onto a bench at the funky-smelling dive on Main Street, Fishmonger's Restaurant & Oyster Bar. That is, until Kelly opened an oyster bar at his French bistro. "What happens at an oyster bar?" he asks. "People are talking. To each other — and about the oysters! It's a communal experience."

An easy sell to customers, but getting his hands on enough North Carolina oysters was always a struggle. For years, he relied on one guy who



Calabash-style platters of fried oysters (above), shrimp, and fish bring coastal nostalgia to downtown Durham. Most of the oysters on the Saint James menu are from North Carolina waters, including bivalves baked with bone marrow, maître d'hôtel butter, and breadcrumbs (right).

brought in hunks of Lockwood Folly oysters. Now, more than a decade later, Kelly's got a local roster on the chalkboard. "There's so much going on, and it's happening so fast," he says. "I feel like there are people growing oysters out there that I never knew about, like a tribe in the middle of the Amazon that you've never heard of."

With the state's oyster economy growing, Saint James came along at the right time. And in the right place. In 2017, Kelly and his partners opened the restaurant in the former home of Fishmonger's, which had shuttered after 32 years. The Saint James menu draws from a lifetime of influences — from the lauded chefs to the church cookbooks — that taught Kelly how to cook and, more important, how to *eat*.

Growing up near Rochester, New York, dinner out was a rare treat, but Kelly's father, an Air Force and commercial pilot, would bring live lobsters back on flights from Maine. Kelly's mom would spread out newspaper, and the family hunkered down for some good old-fashioned boiled lobster carnage. "My mom would *roll* the legs to get the last

When someone gives you your first oyster, "one of two things happens."

of the meat," he says. "We figured, we took its life — we wanted to get the most out of it." At Saint James, the lobster stocks and lobster salt that flavor dishes bring that family dinner full circle. And the retro paper place mats on each table, illustrated with the steps for how to eat a lobster, might as well be pages torn from childhood memory.

When Kelly's family moved to Raleigh in 1987, he found a new world of tastes and traditions, many of which have made it on to the Saint James menu: steam pots, shrimp and grits, Calabash platters. All of it is elevated, however, by an extra, inspired flourish. Even saltines, the sidekick of every smoked-fish dip, arrive at the table seasoned and fried. There's plenty of New Durham sensibility, too: in the daily crudo, the oysters baked with bone marrow, the octopus with avocado.

People who never knew the old Fishmonger's may step inside Saint James and see only the gleaming brass tables (made by a Durham metalsmith),



the spiffy white-and-navy decor. But those whose memories of shrimp baskets and raw oysters are rooted in an older version of Durham will recognize the original metal stairway, the massive plate-glass windows that look out on Main Street, and the black-and-white tile floor, still as chipped and chewed in places as a wild oyster shell itself.

FLORENCE SPUTTERS INTO DURHAM DAYS LATE, swamps a few downtown streets, and retreats. Saint James stays dry. Kelly had a plan if he lost power, though, with pecks of oysters to polish off in a hurry: His friends would be well fed. Friendship and oysters have a lot in common, he says. Both require a certain level of trust. When someone gives you your first oyster, “one of two things happens.” His blue eyes crinkle; he likes what he’s about to say. “One: You find a new best friend, which is the oyster, and you have a wild love affair that lasts forever.”

And Two? Well, there is no Two. There’s only *not* One, because, really, nothing could be better than One. It was that way with Kelly’s first oyster. He was in second grade, in his uncle’s garage, sitting on an upside-down bucket, near an old fridge turned into a kegerator. His grandfather, who loved raw clams

and oysters, was there, too, knife at the ready. Then out came the mollusks and the towels, and everyone started chipping away. “I put one in my mouth, and I’d never tasted anything remotely like it,” Kelly says. “I wasn’t sure I liked it, but I knew I didn’t *not* like it. The texture and the taste — it reminded me of getting knocked down at the beach.”

All of that from one little oyster.

At Saint James, there will come a time — countless times, if Kelly’s lucky — when some brave someone will have their first oyster. Lightning will strike. The memory will be cast: the place and the faces and the flavors of it forever vivid. And who wouldn’t want to be a part of that? Oysters make immortals of us all. **Os**

Louise Jarvis Flynn is the features editor of Our State.

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