

A DOZEN OYSTERS YOU SHOULD KNOW

To be a full-fledged *ostreophile*—an oyster lover—you can't just pound Kumamotos or Wellfleets all the time. You need to explore the full range of styles and varieties. Different oysters, after all, work best as beer accompaniments, culinary stars, or exotic curiosities. This alphabetical list of twelve prominent varieties provides a good representation of the classic types.

CHOW
FOOD. DRINK. FUN.

Artwork for CHOW
by Bryan Christie Design
(not actual size)

Beausoleil

Néguac, New Brunswick



These small oysters are grown in floating trays in the harsh New Brunswick climate. Always petite and clean-flavored, in classy black-and-white shells, Beausoleils make ideal starter oysters, with the delightful yeasty aroma of Champagne or rising bread dough.

Belon or European Flat

Provenance Varies



No oyster comes close to the power of the European Flat (often called Belon, after the famous French oyster of the same species). It is brassy, in every sense of the word. Brassy because it tastes like metal, and because it is shamelessly bold, and because when it hits your tongue it slaps you awake like the opening blast of a bugler's reveille. Try one if you can—just don't make it your first oyster.

Colville Bay

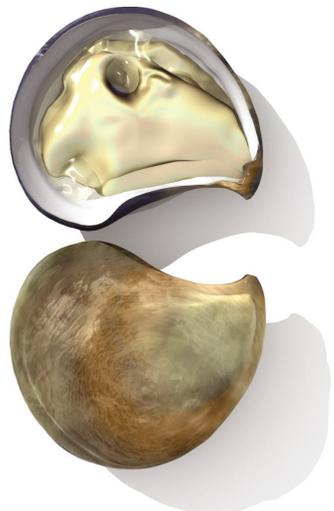
Souris River, Prince Edward Island



Light is a term often ascribed to PEI oysters. Sometimes it's a negative, indicating a lack of body and flavor. Sometimes, as with Colville Bays, it means transcendent. Colville Bays have plenty of body but also an addictive lemon-zest brightness. They are the oyster most likely to make you order another dozen. The dusky jade shells, when piled high, achieve the luminosity of moss on a rain-forest stump.

Glidden Point

Damariscotta River, Maine



Native Americans ate Damariscotta River oysters for a millennium, as the hill-sized middens along its upper banks confirm. The extremely cold, salty water produces slow-growing oysters with fantastic texture and brine at the upper end of the register. These are the soft pretzels of the oyster world, chewy and salty and heaven with a cold beer.

Kumamoto

California, Oregon, Washington, and Mexico



The oyster that put the fruit back in *fruits de mer*. Kumamotos are famously melon-scented, sweet, and firm, with none of the bitter or muddy aftertaste that makes some oysters challenging. Closely related to the Pacific oyster, which also was imported from Japan, Kumos stay small and deep-cupped, and are revered by beginners and pros alike.

Moonstone

Point Judith Pond, Rhode Island



Some of the most savory oysters in the world come from a geographical arc running from the eastern end of Long Island, along the ragged Rhode Island coast, to Block Island, Cuttyhunk, and Martha's Vineyard: the line marking the terminal moraine of the most recent glacier. Along that arc, mineral-rich waters produce salty oysters with unparalleled stone and iron flavors, of which Moonstone is the reigning king.

Nootka Sound

West Vancouver Island, British Columbia



An oyster from pristine waters. Ain't nothing on the Pacific side of Vancouver Island except orcas, sea lions, shellfish farmers, and the occasional kayaker. You know these oysters are clean, but clean waters do not necessarily make light-flavored oysters. Art-deco-patterned, lavender-flecked Nootkas, in fact, taste strong, with hints of muskmelon and a flavor of cold, slightly sweet raw milk—animal, but good.

Olympia

South Puget Sound, Washington



The only native West Coast oyster, once found from Baja to British Columbia, but now harvested commercially only in southern Puget Sound. These tiny celadon lockets hold delightful treasures: miniature oysters redolent of morels and butter and celery salt. Maddening to open, and maddeningly good.

Penn Cove Select

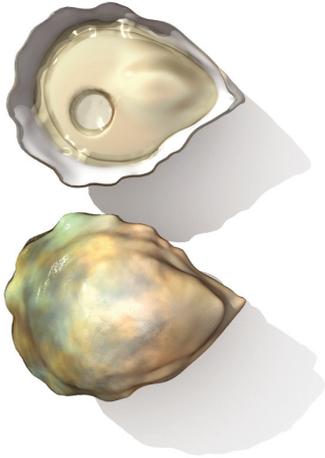
Samish Bay and Whidbey Island, Washington



Gorgeous, ruffled shells holding consistently plump, white oysters with black mantles. Penn Coves are multiyear winners of the West Coast's Most Beautiful Oyster contest. They are a prime example of the "clean finish" style of Pacific oyster—light, salty, fresh, like a cucumber sandwich rolled in parsley.

Rappahannock River

Topping, Virginia



Famous as a Chesapeake oyster river for centuries. Of the twelve oysters on this list, Rapps are the quietest. Extremely mild oysters, exhibiting a simple sweet-butter flavor, they are easily overshadowed by saltier or fruitier oysters, so they don't fare well in mixed tastings. But on their own, with the most evanescent of wines, they can be delicacy itself—a lesson in the pleasure of minimalism.

Skookum

Little Skookum Inlet, Washington



If Penn Coves exemplify the "light and lettucey" side of Pacific oysters, Skookums show Pacifics at the other extreme. These rich and musky oysters grow fat on the "algae farms"—mudflats—at the head of tiny Little Skookum Inlet, one of Washington's oldest oyster sites. The brown and green algae that thrive on the mudflats, different from deep-water algae species, give Skookums an aroma of trillium and river moss, more earth than sea.

Totten Virginica

Totten Inlet, Washington



The oyster that begs the question: Nature or nurture? By nature, it's a *virginica*, the East Coast oyster, celebrated for its superior texture. But it's nurtured in the gentle algae baths of Totten Inlet, famous for producing full-flavored Pacific and Olympia oysters. The result is an unlikely yet dazzling mutt—fat and round on the tongue, but cleaner and more mineral than a Pacific. If you prefer the Totten Virginica to Pacific oysters raised in Totten Inlet, then chalk one up for the Eastern oyster. If you prefer Totten Virginicas to East Coast *virginicas*, that confirms Totten Inlet's revered status.