

A photograph of oyster shells on a rocky shore. The water is clear and blue, with sunlight filtering through, creating a shimmering effect. The oyster shells are dark and jagged, some with white interiors visible. The text is overlaid on the upper right portion of the image.

# *Gems* of the season

From the Half Shell to the Rockefeller,  
the simple oyster gets a dining makeover.

*Written by*  
**Holly Herrick**

*Photography by*  
**Peter Frank Edwards**





Jason Ulak, executive chef at The Boathouse on East Bay.

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Jason Ulak, executive chef at The Boathouse on East Bay, gets excited when he talks about oysters. He gets even more excited when he talks about pairing the subtle differences in oysters' flavor (which varies according to where they are harvested) with assorted sauces and flavors.

“It's amazing. You go down the road and it's essentially the same kind of oyster but it has a different taste. I want to bring out the distinct flavor of the oyster. Like today, I have these oysters from Virginia, but they have the same qualities as Canadian (in this case, Malpeque) oysters. So, I'm going to make a Champagne-vanilla mignonette, which I usually pair with the Malpeque oysters, to go with them. The oysters start out sweet and finish really salty, like ocean water. I love that! Then with the mignonette (a classic oyster sauce), it's just so sweet.”

Though Ulak would like to have local oysters on the menu at all times, it's not always possible due to lack of availability. “We get local oysters when they're available, but sometimes it's hard. I get my fishing reports every week, sometimes twice a week. When local oysters show up at my front door, I buy them.” Ulak predicts good availability for local oysters through February, citing that they sell “tremendously” at the restaurant, particularly at its popular raw bar.

Of local varieties, Ulak has a fondness for Local Clusters harvested on Breach Inlet and Carolina Cups from Beaufort. He describes the Local Clusters as “kind of briny” and calls the Carolina Cups “phenomenal.” “They have a little cup shape to their shell, and they have a lot of juice with a good balance and nice level of saltiness. They sell very well,” he says.

Less is absolutely more when it comes to oyster preparation in Ulak's kitchen. With the exception of fried oysters, he believes they should be exposed to as little heat as possible – either raw or flash fried. “It's kind of like tuna. It gets that smell and the texture gets weird.” Though oysters have a fairly long shelflife, Ulak recommends taking a good look at the harvest date tag on the oyster bag and using your nose to make sure they're still fresh. If they smell bad, toss them. They're best stored in a cool, but not frigid, space. “I store mine on a shelf in the fridge. Put them in a bucket in the fridge on top of ice (not in it) and be sure to wash them really well before cooking.”

Chef Ulak was kind enough to provide the following recipes for your oyster preparation-inspiration. All were included in the recently published (June, 2006) cookbook, “The Boathouse, Tales and Recipes from a Southern Kitchen.”





## Spinach-Oyster Salad with Country Ham-Port Wine Dressing and Blue Cheese

SERVES 6

### FOR THE DRESSING:

2 tablespoons olive oil  
½ pound country ham, diced  
1 medium-sized shallot, minced  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
½ cup port wine  
3 tablespoons red wine vinegar  
2 teaspoons Dijon mustard  
¾ cup olive oil

### FOR THE SALAD:

5 cups baby spinach, or any other kind  
1 red onion, sliced very thin  
2 dozen cherry or grape tomatoes, cut in half  
1 large carrot shredded or julienned on a mandolin  
1 cup crumbled blue cheese

### FOR THE OYSTERS:

3 cups peanut oil  
30 oysters, shucked or by the quart,  
packed in their own juice  
2 cups cornmeal  
Salt and fresh ground black pepper  
2 cups buttermilk

**To make the dressing:** heat the 2 tablespoons of oil in a large skillet just until smoking. Add the diced country ham and cook just until it begins to crisp, about 3–5 minutes. Add the shallots and the garlic and cook for about a minute.

Remove the skillet from the heat and pour in the port wine, scraping the bits that have collected on the bottom. Scrape the port wine mixture into a bowl and allow to cool to room temperature. Add the vinegar and the mustard and whisk to combine. While whisking slowly, add the ¾ cup olive

oil in a steady stream until the dressing is emulsified and slightly thick. Keep the dressing warm until ready to use.

**For the salad,** place the spinach on a large serving platter. Arrange the red onion, tomatoes and carrot on top and sprinkle with the blue cheese.

**For the oysters,** heat the peanut oil in a large, heavy saucepot to 350 degrees. Drain the oysters in a colander. Combine the cornmeal with salt and fresh ground pepper in a shallow bowl. Place the buttermilk in another shallow bowl and add the oysters to the buttermilk. One by one,

dip the oysters from the buttermilk to the cornmeal, turning so that the oysters are thoroughly coated. Place on a baking sheet as a staging area for the frying.

Carefully drop the oysters into the hot oil one by one in batches, probably 5–6 at a time. Cook for 2–3 minutes turning once or twice. Remove them from the oil and drain on paper towels.

Arrange the oysters around the spinach salad and serve immediately. Allow your guests to pour on as much dressing as they desire!



Ulak serves his Oysters Rockefeller on a bed of rock salt studded with a variety of whole spices, including pepper, cardamom and star anise.



## ← Rockefeller

räkä'felər

In 1899, Jules Alciatore developed Oysters Rockefeller at Antoine's Restaurant in New Orleans. Alciatore named the dish after the super-wealthy John D. Rockefeller because the green was the color of money and the finished dish was very rich.

## Boathouse Oyster Rockefeller

SERVES 6

2 tablespoons olive oil  
2 pounds country ham, diced  
2 tablespoons garlic, minced  
½ cup white wine  
2 pounds of spinach, picked through with no stems  
2 cups chilled Green Tabasco Cream Sauce (see editor's note)  
½ cup Italian parsley, chopped fine  
2 tablespoons (about 1 bunch) tarragon, chopped fine  
1 cup parmesan  
Salt and fresh ground black pepper  
30 oysters such as Malpeque, Apalachicola or Blue Point

**Editor's note:** Green Tabasco Cream Sauce is a bottled product of The Boathouse. You can find it at The Boathouse restaurants, online at [boathouserestaurants.com](http://boathouserestaurants.com) or at Earth Fare, Whole Foods or Harris Teeter. Otherwise, substitute sour cream mixed with green tabasco sauce, suited to your taste.

**P**reheat the broiler to 500 degrees and position a rack to the top of the oven. In a large skillet, heat the oil just until it starts to smoke. Add the country ham and cook just until crisp, about 3–5 minutes. Add the minced garlic and cook for a minute, stirring so that the garlic doesn't burn, then add the white wine, scraping up the bits that have stuck to the bottom of the pan. Cook for 2–3 minutes or until the wine has reduced to about half.

Remove the pan from the heat and add the spinach. Stir the spinach around so that all of the country ham-garlic mixture is thoroughly mixed and the spinach

begins to wilt. Transfer the spinach to a strainer and allow it to drain as much moisture as it can before placing in a medium sized bowl; allow to chill.

Mix in the chilled green Tabasco cream, the chopped parsley, tarragon and the parmesan. Season the Rockefeller mix with salt and fresh ground black pepper.

Shuck the oysters. Spoon approximately one tablespoon of mixture on top of each oyster and place on a baking sheet. Place the baking sheet under the broiler and cook the oysters about 5–6 minutes or until the tops are golden brown and bubbly. Serve on rock salt with lemons.







# Mignonettes

|minyə'nets|

Wonderful alternatives to the traditional cocktail sauce and horseradish garnish. Acidic and delivering a flavor punch, mignonettes are served on the side for dipping in the United States, and often in Europe, poured on the half-shell itself.

## Three Mignonettes

MAKES 1 CUP EACH  
(ENOUGH FOR AT LEAST 1 DOZEN OYSTERS)

### JALAPENO-LIME MIGNONETTE:

2–3 large jalapenos, seeded and diced fine  
3 shallots, minced fine  
2 tablespoons chopped cilantro  
3 limes, juiced  
½ cup rice wine vinegar  
kosher salt to taste  
½ tablespoon olive oil



### KEY LIME MIGNONETTE:

¾ cup fresh key lime juice (such as Nellie and Joe's)  
3 tablespoons honey  
2 shallots, minced fine

### RED WINE MIGNONETTE:

¾ cup red wine vinegar  
¼ cup red wine  
2 shallots, minced fine  
1 teaspoon fresh ground black pepper  
salt to taste  
sugar to taste



For each one, simply combine all the ingredients and allow to sit for at least 30 minutes to concentrate flavors. If desired, garnish with red peppercorns before serving.