

These Rich, Buttery Oysters Are Unlike Any You've Tried — Here's Why Chefs Love Them

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Beloved for their plumpness and pristine flavor, Alaskan oysters are starting to show up on menus in the Lower 48 — but getting them there isn't easy.

By

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Credit:
Courtesy of Serani Agency

On his floating oyster farm in Southeast Alaska's Jinhi Bay, [Blue Starr](#) founder Eric Wyatt lifted a stack of wire trays from the water using a pulley system, then shucked an oyster and handed it to me.

I slurped it down without lemon or cocktail sauce — just the umami rush of the oyster's own liquor. The meat was plump and rich, almost like foie gras. It was easily the best oyster I've ever tasted.

"Does anyone want another?" Wyatt asked. How could I refuse?



Eric Wyatt, the founder of Blue Starr Oyster Co.
Courtesy of Alaska Mariculture

For now, you have to book a trip to Alaska to try Wyatt's oysters — you might find them at [Alaskan Oyster Shack](#), a popular spot with cruisegoers in the nearest port city of Ketchikan, or further afield in cities like Homer. But — at least for now — you won't find them in the Lower 48.

That could change soon. Wyatt wants to expand, and other Alaskan oyster farms like [Seagrove Oysters](#) and [Canoe Lagoon Oysters](#) have already started tapping the contiguous United States market, distributing their wares as far as Florida.

It's part of a broader push by Alaskan oyster farmers to create a sustainable mariculture industry, which includes shellfish and seaweed. In 2022, the [Alaska Mariculture Cluster](#) (AMC), which hosted my trip to Alaska, was awarded \$49 million

through the federal Build Back Better Regional Challenge. This past June, the AMC projected that a record 2 million oysters might be harvested by the end of 2026.



Alaskan oysters are known for a plump texture that comes from their slow growing process.
Courtesy of Alaska Mariculture

Most of these oysters are enjoyed in-state, but some farmers are hoping to reach customers beyond Alaska's borders, saying a profitable industry can't exist without expansion. Still, shipping a live product from the country's most remote state is not without its challenges, and raises the question: Can you transport a taste of Alaska?

[I Tracked a Wild Salmon From Sea to Plate — What I Learned Surprised Me](#)

An oyster that 'sells itself'

Much like wine lovers point to a bottle's terroir (how the soil and location where grapes are grown shapes a wine's character), oyster aficionados often talk about merroir, or the sense of place that permeates each mollusc.

I had arrived at Wyatt's farm via seaplane, flying over an expanse of blue sea ringed by mountains and pine trees: Tongass National Forest, part of the largest temperate rainforest in the world. At [Tommaso Shellfish](#), our previous stop, Jimmy Greeley, who co-owns the farm with his partner Katie Bode, had welcomed my group to "the edge of the world."



Tommaso Shellfish is surrounded by the Tongass National Forest.
Courtesy of Tommaso Shellfish

Alaska's pristine water might produce an exceptional oyster, but these bivalves aren't actually native to the state. They struggle to reproduce in the frigid Alaskan water, so all oyster seed is imported from warmer states like California and Hawaii.

"There has been oyster farming in Alaska for over 100 years, on and off," says Markos Scheer, a former maritime lawyer and the CEO of Seagrove Oysters in Doyle Bay who planted his first crop in 2019.

[Shuck It, We're Going Oyster Farming, With Tours From California to Florida](#)

The Pacific oyster was first introduced to Alaskan shores in 1910, but the industry didn't take off until 1988, when a Senate bill launched the modern framework for shellfish farming. Today, about 16 active oyster farms operate in the state, in regions that include Kachemak Bay in southcentral Alaska and Prince of Wales Island in the Southeast.



Tommaso co-owner Jimmy Greeley.
Courtesy of Alaska Mariculture

Most Alaskan oysters are surface-cultured, which means they're grown in suspended cages, floats, or racks in open water rather than on the ocean floor. Because of the consistently cold water, they grow at a slower pace, taking about two to five years to reach harvest size, compared to 18–24 months for most Pacific oysters. But many say that their slow growth and inability to reproduce is an advantage when it comes to flavor.

“A lot of West Coast folks will say they’re turned off by a milky Pacific oyster in the summertime, which is when they spawn,” explains Julie Qiu, an oyster sommelier behind the educational website [In A Half Shell](#), and cofounder of the [Oyster Master Guild](#). While reproducing, oysters release the contents of their gonads, their largest reproductive organ, which leaves them watery.

That usually doesn’t happen with Alaskan oysters.



Alaskan oysters like Seagrove’s often have deep cups.

Courtesy of Alaska Mariculture

“They retain their fat,” says Brian Herman, owner of Canoe Lagoon Oysters in Wrangell. “They don’t get mushy, and they’re nice and crisp and clean.” They also grow — and can be eaten — year-round.

Wyatt adds that Alaskan oysters’ diet might be richer, pointing to [recent research](#) that shows they eat more zooplankton, tiny animal organisms that are larger than phytoplankton, the typical food source for Pacific oysters.

Of course, no two oysters taste the same — varying production methods and environments affect their flavor. Tommaso’s oysters taste, in Bode’s words, like “salted butter.” On my trip, I also tasted sweet, creamy oysters that nearly spilled out of their shells, and others that were smaller and brinier, with a distinct cucumber note.



Tommaso's buttery oysters don't need much more than a squeeze of lemon.
Courtesy of Alaska Mariculture

"They're taking on the unique environmental qualities from bay to bay," explains Bode. "Each farm has their own story to tell, their own oyster to share."

But the throughline of Alaskan oysters, most say, is Alaska itself.

"I think the name 'Alaska' has its own mystique," says Herman. "It kind of sells itself."

[In This Alaskan City, the Food Outshines the Northern Lights](#)

From farm to raw bar

Both Herman and Scheer chose to base their oyster farms in the southeast region of the state for its relative proximity to airport hubs like Seattle. Still, Scheer estimates that the expense of shipping to get to the Lower 48 can represent up to 20% of his overhead costs, depending on the volume of oysters and how far they're going. Airlines charge the same minimum shipping fee for one box as they do for 100 boxes, making it prohibitively expensive to ship small quantities of oysters. That means farmers need to find distributors or restaurants who can buy up their supply.

"It's not something you can put in an Amazon cart," says Wyatt, who has had to turn down requests to provide distributors with just one or two dozen oysters.



Canoe Lagoon founder Brian Herman uses a “beach hardening” technique to make his oysters durable for shipping.

Courtesy of Canoe Lagoon Oysters

To get Alaskan oysters in front of possible customers who can buy in quantity, Scheer sometimes flies them down personally. About a year ago, he and his wife flew to San Francisco to deliver chef [Tyler Florence](#) a case of Seagrove’s Alaska Gems. Florence was immediately hooked. He started serving them at his steakhouse [Miller & Lux](#), often topping them with a seasonal gelee, though he notes they don’t need much to shine.

[19 Oyster Recipes to Enjoy Raw, Roasted, Grilled, and Fried](#)

“They’re just so full,” says Florence. They have “almost like the fat content of Alaskan halibut ... or king salmon.” A Miller & Lux team member goes to the San Francisco airport every week to pick up a shipment from Alaska Air Cargo.

While he works directly with Miller & Lux, Scheer mostly sells to restaurants through distributors, and says his oysters are currently on the menu at restaurants in about 15 states.



A tray of Alaska Gems at Miller & Lux.
Courtesy of Serani Agency

An Arizona transplant who found his oyster farm, Canoe Lagoon, through a Craigslist posting in 2019, Herman says he always intended to ship to the Lower 48. “The Alaskan market is super-saturated with Alaskan oysters,” he explains, which makes it more competitive. Like Scheer, he directly reached out to tap the stateside market: He cold-called [Buck & Rider](#), a restaurant with three locations in Arizona, and now provides them with about 240 dozen oysters a week, he says — most of his supply. “They were willing to kind of grow with us,” he says.

A ‘paradigm shift’ in the Alaskan seafood industry

A former naval officer, Wyatt opened Blue Starr in 2004, mostly as a “side gig.” For most of the time that he’s been in business, he’s primarily worked as a commercial fisherman. The money he made from fishing allowed him to invest in technologies like the FlipFarm, a specialized floating oyster growing system that improves efficiency and contributes to the flavor and fullness of his oysters by continuously feeding them nutrient-rich water. He also operates an oyster hatchery, cultivating imported oyster seeds for his own farm and for sale.



The FlipFarm system at Blue Starr Oyster Co.
Courtesy of Blue Starr Oyster Co.

While oyster farming is far from an easy endeavor, Wyatt notes that it is more reliable than commercial fishing, especially as the climate warms.

“I have more control, or at least knowledge about what’s going on in the process,” he says. “It still has all these hurdles, but I’m not just wondering, am I gonna catch any fish? And are they gonna pay us anything?”

A steadier income isn't the only benefit of oyster farming. Oysters are known for their sustainability — one oyster can filter up to 50 gallons of water a day, removing pollutants and excess nutrients from its environment — and some also say they represent a new way forward for the Alaskan seafood industry.



The Alaskan Oyster Shack in Ketchikan serves all the oysters in this story.
Courtesy of Alaska Mariculture

“So much of Alaska’s economic activity since colonization has been focused on extraction-based economics,” Scheer says, “whether it’s gold or oil or fish. This represents a real paradigm shift where we can produce that economic value in these local communities, because mariculture has to be done locally. Like any agrarian activity, it has to be done in the community that produces it.”

The industry is drawing younger people, too, thanks to the oyster farming curriculum at the University of Alaska Southeast’s Maritime Training Center, according to Greeley.

“The young folks are interested in this as a positive industry and economic driver,” says Wyatt.



Hump Island Oyster Company in Ketchikan, owned by Seagrove.
Courtesy of Alaska Mariculture

Putting Alaskan oysters on the map

As the Alaskan oyster industry grows, industry experts have mixed feelings on expansion. “I feel like the most important market hopefully will be Alaskans themselves,” says Qiu. “I always go back and forth because I’m like, this is an incredibly sustainable product ... until you ship it.”

The demands of running a small business simply preclude some farms from expanding at the rate of others. Take Tommaso, located in Sea Otter Sound near Prince of Wales Island. Built “from the water up” in 2006 by Greeley and his father, it’s still a two-person operation, with Bode and Greeley now handling everything from harvesting to packing and taking orders. Although they have a license to ship to the Lower 48, their everyday efforts are focused on the southeast Alaskan market. The logistical challenges of their remote location is a factor, but as Bode says with a laugh, “Our local people keep us pretty busy.”



Jimmy Greeley built most of Tommaso's floathouse with locally milled timber.
Courtesy of Alaska Mariculture

Still, they share the same core ambition as many farmers: "I've always wanted to see Alaskan oysters on the map of where oysters come from," says Greeley, who is also the president of the [Alaska Shellfish Growers Association](#) (ASGA). "You have your Chesapeake Bay oysters, your Maine oysters, your Gulf oysters, your Willapa Bay oysters from the West Coast, [oysters from] Oregon and Washington. Alaskan oysters have always been just a little shadow in the background, so to speak. Well, I've always liked the stories that we all have as farmers."

And for many, reaching more customers is what will make oyster farming viable in Alaskan communities. Two years ago, Wyatt began oyster farming fulltime. Now he says he is working with the nonprofit OceansAlaska to acquire a bigger shipping facility, which would help with expansion. "We're going to do it at a scale that's appropriate," he says. Scheer plans to expand to 20 to 30 states by the end of the year.



Bonfire Bay Tour Company in Ketchikan offers boat tours to Hump Island's oyster farm.
Courtesy of Seagrove

For now, Alaskan oysters remain rare on menus outside of the state, and the easiest way to support the industry might be a trip to eat them where they're harvested. That's the idea behind the recently launched [Alaska Oyster Voyage](#) from the ASGA, which encourages tourists to log their tastings at restaurants and farms throughout Alaska.

One stop is Scheer's own [Hump Island Oyster Company](#). After arriving at the farm via a boat cruise, my group slurped dozens of raw and grilled oysters at the floating raw bar, just feet from where they had been grown. It's an experience that's open to anyone traveling to Alaska — and it's one you can't ship.