



Champagne, Armand de
Brignac Blanc de Blancs, \$675,
armanddebrignac.com.

Triangle plate, Driade, \$344.
Tulip champagne goblet, Paola
C, \$50. Both available through
TableArt, tableartonline.com.

Consider the
Oyster

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN TO SHELL OUT FOR THE FINEST BRINE?

Somewhere on a spray of islands, as Washington's summer shadows grow long, a meal at the Willows Inn begins with a flute of local hard cider and Pacific oysters grilled over hot rocks. As a medicinal tonic for libidos, the Chinese have cultivated oysters since at least 320 B.C.E. Cicero consumed 100 daily to feed his brain. No matter where you go around the world or back in history, there's a magic to this brave bivalve standing still in saline waters. Vegan ethicists have been known to cross the aisles and argue for their gustation. They're heavily farmed, yet their environmental impact is minimal; their contribution to water quality is actually very positive because of the gallons of water they filter daily. (Sadly, but a scarce few yield Mikimoto material, so don't expect to slurp your way to riches off a nacre-layered parasite.)

QUALITY ASSURANCE

"An oyster draws its flavor from the water it lives in, and from the season. So it will be saltier in more oceanic water, and sweeter closer to fall and winter," says Rowan Jacobsen, oyster expert and author of James Beard Award-winning *A Geography of Oysters*. He tracks them globally via two projects, *oysterguide.com* and *oysterater.com* (basically Yelp for mollusks). Moreover, terroir isn't limited to season and salinity; different farming methods (e.g., traps, lines, tumbling) also produce different flavor profiles. When surveying a menu, note the major species. In addition to the petite Sydney Rock, there's Pacific, light and refreshing; Atlantic, briny and intense; and Kumamoto, generally sweet and small. Of the European Flat/Belon, New Zealand, and Olympia, Jacobsen speaks of "very strong flavors of iodine and metal that many people find extremely intimidating."

PURISTS WILL AGREE: NAKED IS THE WAY TO GO—OR IF YOU MUST, A LITTLE LEMON AND A NICE MIGNONETTE.

EXPERIENCING GREATNESS

Your best chance of tasting rare unicorns is by frequenting a raw bar with a pro shucker, like The Walrus and The Carpenter in Seattle (*thewalrusbar.com*). Alternately, go to the source: "A true Belon from France is a huge treat," says Jacobsen. "Colville Bays from PEI, which are available only in Canada, are even better. Irish oysters also can't be found in the States, but are favorites in Canada and Europe." Concierge company *IfOnly* (*ifonly.com*) provides entrée to Tomales Bay, California, where aquatic farm owner and the man behind the Saltwater Oyster Depot, Luc Chamberland, offers San Franciscans a wine-paired traveling oyster bar for parties, and an educational daytrip to Inverness for lots of slurping—local wine and oysters, that is. Not to be outdone in freshness, in Tasmania, Australia, the Saffire Freycinet lodge (*saffire-freycinet.com.au*) wades guests straight into waters of a nearby oyster farm, pulls out the sparkling wine, plops down a white tablecloth spread right there, and begins to pull from the water.

PERFECT SERVE

Purists will agree: Naked is the way to go—or if you must, a little lemon and a nice mignonette. Regionally you'll find throwbacks like luscious Oysters Rockefeller, broiled and baked with a breadcrumb blanket of shallot, spinach, Herbsaint, and thyme.

Seasoned shuckers at Pêche in New Orleans sharpen their oyster knives old-school—against the curb. We don't suggest this. We do recommend home shuckers purchase a dedicated knife such as the New Haven (\$12, *myoysterknife.com*). Always refrigerate with the cup side down and cover with a damp towel, never plastic wrap. 1. First, clean and scrub under cold running water. 2. Holding the oyster firmly on the counter with an oyster glove/towel and the hinge toward you, slip the knife in through the hinge. While applying pressure, twist the knife to pop the hinge open. 3. Before removing the top shell, run the blade over the meat to sever the body from the top shell. 4. Along the bottom shell, cut under the oyster, staying mindful to retain any liquid. 5. Serve half-shells on shaved ice to slow melting time. Avoiding a bad oyster is common sense—nothing shrunken, no funny smells—but mostly, it's luck of the shuck. ▸

—Alison Steingold