

VIRGINIA IS FOR OYSTERS

Along the new Virginia Oyster Trail, our writer explores watermen heritage, maritime museums and great places to slurp raw oysters.

By Kathleen M. Mangan

“Can you hear the oysters talking?” asks Captain David Rowe as he works the long-handled oyster tongs over the side of the boat on a Chesapeake Bay tributary. Listening closely, I can hear the click-clacking of oysters underwater as he piles them up to get a good “lick,” or productive pull up from the reef below. The oyster-speak makes Rowe smile; it’s the way he knows he’s hit a good oystering spot.

COURTESY OF ARTISANAL APERTURE



The restored *Claud W. Somers*, a Chesapeake Bay skipjack

AN OYSTER RENAISSANCE

As part of my Watermen's Heritage Tour, Rowe also takes me by boat to the shucking house that buys his oysters and to a hatchery that is fueling the boom in oyster farming. Other watermen running tours might visit an oyster farm; go crabbing, fishing, bird watching or cruising; or stop for lunch on the water, depending on the group's interests. But all the tours cover the story of the native oyster here on America's largest estuary, including how it was decimated and how it is making a comeback.

Rowe explains that when Captain John Smith explored the Chesapeake in 1608, he described oyster reefs so bountiful that they broke the surface of the water. But a combination of over-harvesting, water-quality degradation and two diseases (that don't affect humans) nearly wiped out the oyster industry. Many watermen gave up oyster harvesting; shucking operations closed down; and traditional oystering workboats—wooden skipjacks and deadrise boats—were put to other uses. The harvest in Virginia hit rock bottom in 2001 at just 23,000 bushels.

In response, the state enacted a fishery management program, and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science at the College of William & Mary launched a bioengineering and aquaculture research program, says Rowe. The tactics have worked mollusk magic; last year, the state's oyster harvest exceeded 500,000 bushels, helping to make Virginia the third-largest seafood-producing state in America.

That success led the Governor last fall to proclaim November as Virginia Oyster Month and to launch the Virginia Oyster Trail.

Rowe, based in Lottsburg, Virginia, has been tonging for wild oysters for 40 years during the fall-winter season in the Chesapeake Bay. He's one of seven veteran watermen involved in the new Virginia Watermen's Heritage Tours designed to illustrate this disappearing way of life. As a bonus, tour participants get to taste the native oyster mere seconds out of the water, the ultimate in freshness and flavor.

The hands-on tours are keystone experiences featured on the new Virginia Oyster Trail, which is divided into seven oyster regions on both sides of the bay plus the ocean side of the Eastern Shore. The oysters from each region taste different thanks to varying salt levels in the water and other environmental factors.

I've come to the area of Virginia surrounding the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers—the Northern Neck and the northern portion of the Middle Peninsula. It's the epicenter of the state's oyster stewardship, resurgence and new farming techniques, as well as boatbuilding heritage and oyster gastronomy.

With the two handles together, the teeth grasping the talking-oyster heap, Rowe pulls up the 16-foot tongs hand-over-hand and swings them over the wooden culling board across the middle of the skiff. The catch rattles loudly onto the board. Then wearing rubber gloves, he picks through the heap to cull the oysters from empty shells, measuring them with the culling tool. Keepers must be three inches; the rest go back into the water.

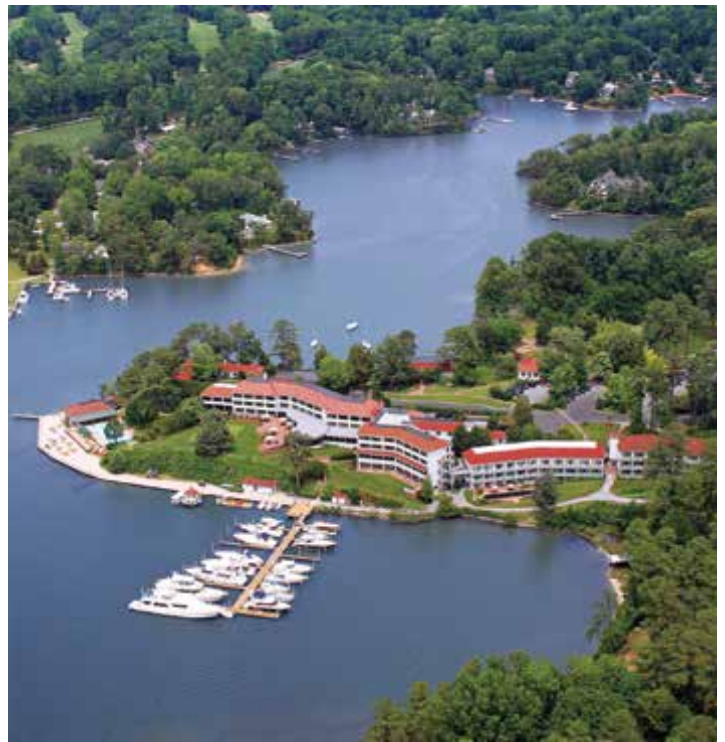
"Your turn," says Rowe. I sink the tongs into the briny depth, listen for the oysters talking, make a heap and start pulling up my lick. The tongs with the precious load are heavy, and I see some of my cargo falling out since I have the tongs at an incorrect angle. When I finally make my swing over the culling board, most of my treasure has fallen back into the water, but there's still a rumble as the remains hit the board.

My take: three black rocks, five old shells and one enticing noble oyster.

I measure the oyster with the culling tool—yes, a keeper. "Want to eat it?" asks Rowe. "Absolutely," I reply. He sticks his oyster knife into the front edge and, with a sleight-of-hand movement, pops off the top. I slurp it down. It's a minute out of the water, and it is possibly the best thing I have ever eaten—buttery mild with a hint of brine. Mud from the shell drips down my chin, but who cares?

Watermen working for Rappahannock Oyster in Topping, Virginia, pull up cages of maturing oysters from watery farm plots.





Chef TV Flynn roasting oysters at the Tides Inn in Irvington, Virginia (pictured above, right).

OYSTERS NOW YEAR-ROUND

The new style of oyster farming is the focus of my next Watermen's Heritage Tour, this one with Captain Danny Crabbe of Heathsville. He's been working on the water for more than 50 years, primarily as a charter fisherman. In 2009, he decided to try oyster farming on his oyster plots, which date back to his great-grandfather. He and his partner Bonnie Miller bought quarter-inch seed oysters along with mesh bags and cages for grow-out and protection from cownose rays. Crabbe and Miller's Fat 'n Happy Oyster Company now fills orders year-round for private customers.

"It's hard work, but it's fun," says Crabbe as he uses a winch to pull up a cage filled with deep, round oysters. And the best part is, you can eat them any time, not just in months with an "R," he adds.

Crabbe explains that the oysters they're raising are sterile, so all their energy goes to growth rather than spawning. They stay plump year-round, making for good eating through the warmer months when wild oysters are thin and spent from reproduction.

UNIQUE REGIONAL FLAVORS

Commercial oyster farming and its yummy results are both featured at Rappahannock Oyster Company and Merroir Restaurant, located side-by-side on the water in Topping to educate consumers and tantalize tastebuds.

When co-owners Travis and Ryan Croxton, cousins, inherited family oyster leases dating to 1899, they didn't have any first-hand knowledge, so they started investigating ways to work the plots in a more productive and cost-effective way. "We had no land, no boats and no know-how—only the oyster grounds," says Travis Croxton. With modified systems from other regions, they launched their aqua-ecology business in 2001 and now have oyster plots in three diverse locations for different flavor profiles. They are among the first new-age oyster farmers in Virginia.

To offer a just-out-of-the-water oyster tasting experience, in 2011 the duo opened Merroir adjacent to production facilities. The

restaurant name is a play on the winemaking term "terroir," which refers to the special characteristics of soil and environment that give wine grapes distinctive flavors. "We think the Chesapeake should be the Napa Valley of oysters," says Ryan Croxton.

I test their theory with the half-shell tasting plate. The Rappahannock River oysters are sweet and buttery; Mobjack Bay oysters have a bite of salt; and Chincoteague oysters burst with ocean brine. The BBQ Bourbon Chipotle Grilled Oysters are hot, so I wash them down with a perfectly paired Pearl Necklace Oyster Stout made by Flying Dog Brewery with the Croxtons' oysters included in the brewing process.

Merroir customers wander from the outdoor dining area over to the commercial operation on the pier, curious to see how the oysters are processed. The dock is custom-fitted with containers holding baby oysters, a winch and a paddlewheel to ensure water and nutrient flow. There's a pile of cages that will hold the larger oysters while they mature in the bay. This past summer, the Croxtons launched sunset deadrise cruises for diners to further bridge the gap between the restaurant and the watery farm.

TIDE-TO-TABLE DINING

That gap is small at the Tides Inn in Irvington: diners in the inn's Chesapeake Club restaurant are treated to expansive views of Carter's Creek where the oysters they're eating were harvested. Chef TV Flynn heads to neighboring oyster houses on a moped late morning to pick out his oysters, much as other chefs go to farmers markets to select produce. "When guests ask where the oysters are from, I point out the window," says Chef Flynn, who created the tide-to-table ethos here.

For the clientele of this upscale, 106-room waterfront resort, Chef Flynn presents oysters roasted, raw, fried or angry. His signature dish, Angry Oysters, are crispy Buffalo-style oysters (think hot wings) with hot and sour cabbage, watermelon rind salsa and pickled radish. "We sexy it up; there's a lot of good flavors there," he says.

Oyster aficionados can further indulge their oyster cravings with the Tides Inn Oyster Experience package, which includes oystering with a waterman, watching the catch get cleaned and shucked at a local company, and visiting an oyster farming operation. Since I'm oystered-out, I take the Tides' Cove Cruise and note a flotilla of blue bobbers marking farmed oyster cages in Carter's Creek.

SIPPING WINE, SLURPING OYSTERS

Across town at a refined-but-relaxed vineyard named The Dog and Oyster, there is yet a different taste sensation not to be missed. Here under a tent, a rustic oyster operation called Byrd's Seafood serves oyster dishes to accompany the formal wine tastings offered by the winery. The unique appeal is that the wines were created specifically to accompany oysters prepared in different ways, and the oyster dishes served were created specifically to go with the wines.

"They are two of life's most sought-after treasures," says winery co-owner Dudley Patteson, adding that the terroir and merroir influences are similar.

Sitting under a market umbrella overlooking the grapevines, I order raw oysters from Bryan Byrd, food operation owner, and watch his quick shucking style. He serves the oysters on the half shell on paper plates lined with rock salt, and they pair perfectly with the winery's Oyster White, made of Chardonnay grapes with citrus notes. Byrd's fried oyster tacos with Sriracha chili/key lime slaw pair well with The Dog and Oyster's Pearl wine, made of Vidal Blanc grapes with pineapple notes.

In addition to the vineyard, Patteson and his wife, Peggy, own The Hope and Glory Inn in Irvington, an 1890 schoolhouse offering 12 artsy-comfy, folk art-themed rooms and garden cottages as well as renowned cuisine. There's a four-course prix fixe dinner menu on weekends that includes their signature dish Glorified Oysters, baked in the half shell with pesto, Tabasco sauce and Asiago cheese, accompanied, of course, by The Dog and Oyster wines.

The Pattesons also offer wine-tasting cruises aboard *Faded Glory*, their 42-foot deadrise workboat that was once used for oyster dredging.

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Byrd's Seafood serves oyster dishes to accompany the formal wine tastings offered by The Dog and Oyster winery.



COURTESY OF KATHLEEN M. MANGAN

At The Dog and Oyster winery, the unique appeal is that the wines were created specifically to accompany oysters.

TRADITIONAL BOATS

The deadrise is one of many wooden boat designs used in the Chesapeake oyster industry that are highlighted in two local museums: the Deltaville Maritime Museum and the Reedville Fishermen's Museum.

The Deltaville Maritime Museum is situated in a small town that served as the boatbuilding capital of the bay in the early 1900s. I watch local volunteers at the museum's workshop using their handed-down skills to restore the *Francis C*, a 1948 round stern Deltaville deadrise.

In the water is a gleaming earlier restoration project: the *F.D. Crockett*, which took more than five years to complete. It's a 63-foot log-bottom buyboat built in 1924 that went out to the oyster beds to purchase oysters from the watermen to take to Baltimore markets.

At the Reedville Fishermen's Museum, I take a cruise on the restored 1922 round-stern buyboat the *Elva C*. We chug past big

homes in Reedville built by boat captains, seafood restaurants on the water and a massive fish-oil processing plant on the far point. Also docked at the Reedville museum is a restored 1911 skipjack, the *Claud W. Somers*. Both of these sailing workboats once used for oyster dredging are now rare on the bay.

All of the oyster-related museums, restaurants, watermen tours and area historical sites will be part of the Virginia Oyster Trail, announced last fall but still under development. It is the brainchild of Dudley Patteson, who sees thousands of visitors at his vineyard because of the Chesapeake Bay Wine Trail. Why not do the same for oysters? "The oyster is part of Virginia's cultural and culinary heritage," he says.

The new oyster trail is creating a buzz for tourism here in this little-known Virginia tidewater area. Perhaps the oysters are talking about it, too.