



Oysters from several different Galveston Bay reefs



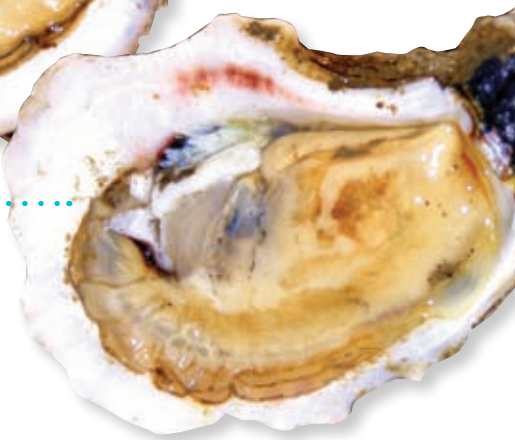
ELM GROVE (East Galveston Bay)



WHITE HEAD REEF (East Galveston Bay)



RED FISH REEF (Central Galveston Bay)



HODGES REEF (Trinity Bay Galveston)

Oysters

Ascending

Partnership stirs up a sea change in the local oyster market

By Jack Tyler

Clean, sweet, buttery, briny, metallic—practiced palates describe oysters this way just as oenophiles describe wine. As “terroir”—soil composition, climate, and slope of the land—infuse grapes with distinct taste and fragrance characteristics, the essence of its watery home fashions of the flavor of every oyster. In the industry it’s called “merroir,” the sense of place that defines these bivalves. Oysters drink whatever water comes their way—as much as three gallons per hour—extracting oxygen, nourishment, and flavor.

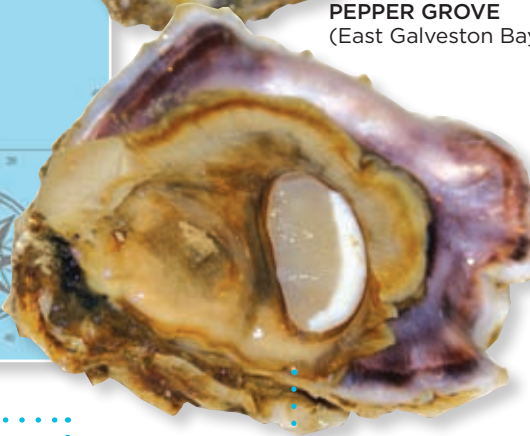
Oysters from the Northeast and Pacific Coast have earned a place in upscale dining establishments with recognizable names like “Chesapeake” and “bluepoint,” designations based on appellation—the name of the reef they are harvested from.

Here in the Houston-Galveston area, we typically just order “oysters.” However, Galveston Bay has many reefs, and each produces a unique tasting oyster. The differences come from the characteristics of each reef, including the salinity of the water surrounding the reefs. The shells even differ from reef to reef. There’s a marked difference between our oysters and those harvested along our nation’s east coast. Galveston Bay oysters are more plump and tasty. So, why don’t Galveston Bay appellations get any respect? I believe that it’s merely the half shell marketing by producers in those areas.

Thankfully, some local oyster cheerleaders are working to ensure that Galveston Bay appellations gain the reverence they deserve. Tom Tollett, owner of Tommy’s Restaurant and Oyster Bar in Clear Lake, Galveston Bay Foundation staff and volunteers, and the team →



PEPPER GROVE
(East Galveston Bay)



RESIGNATION REEF
(Central Galveston Bay)



HAWKINS CAMP REEF
(Central Galveston Bay)



DRUM VILLAGE
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Get Educated with these Local Oyster Resources:

Tommy’s Restaurant and Oyster Bar
www.tommys.com

Galveston Bay Foundation
www.galvbay.org

Jeri’s Seafood
www.jerisseafood.com



Photos from this year's annual Oyster Fest, held at Tommy's Restaurant and Oyster Bar, which benefits Galveston Bay Foundation and raises awareness about local oyster populations. Pictured clockwise from top left: Peter Bowman samples oysters displayed by reef designation; (l-r) Galveston County Commissioner Ken Clark, Kathy Trussell, and Rick Gornto support the cause—which includes eating oysters by the plateful; (l-r) Tom Tolett, owner of Tommy's Restaurant with Jeri's Seafood owners Betty and Ben Nelson; Trey Bartsch and Jessica Curran with Galveston Bay Foundation.

at Jeri's Seafood, have joined together to help increase awareness—about oysters and about keeping Galveston Bay healthy. Each year they sponsor an Oyster Fest celebration, comparing oysters from 12 different reefs in Galveston. Those who attend can attest to the fact that, when served side by side, the differences in taste, shape, texture, and appearance are quite surprising. This includes shell shape, salinity, minerality; as well as the flavor you taste when you first place the oyster in your mouth (usually reflecting the salinity of the water around the reef); the flavor of the oyster itself when you chew it; and the aftertaste.



Commercially harvested oysters are usually around 3-years-old. Note the three rings on this shell, indicating approximately three years of growth.

On my first limited comparison of Galveston Bay oysters, I sampled vast differences between Pepper Grove, Stephenson Reef, and the standard “Texas Gulf Coast generic oyster.” Stephenson Reef oysters benefit from their proximity to Smith Point in northeastern Galveston Bay where the runoff of fresh water from the marshes and Lake Surprise, create relatively low salinity (especially after a rainy season). They also have a pleasant minerality, and a sweet taste while chewing, as well as a sweet aftertaste. My favorite of the three. Pepper Grove oyster reef is in the southeast of Galveston Bay, very close to the Gulf of Mexico (thus they have slightly more salinity). In my tasting, I found the flavor profile of the Pepper Grove to be very similar to Stephenson Reef. The other oyster was not from Galveston Bay; it was from San Antonio Bay and makes up a large percentage of the oysters that are simply sold as “Texas Gulf Coast oysters.” The reef is situated between the mouths of the Guadalupe River and the San Antonio River. The reef is protected from the Gulf of Mexico by Matagorda Island and is 55 miles north of Corpus Christi. I found the oyster (in this tasting) to lack the plumpness and the pleasant minerality of the other two; high in salinity and slightly more flaccid.

Most Houston area restaurants that serve “flights” of oysters provide them with glowing talking points—mostly of northeastern, or Pacific coast origination. There will not be a single local oyster on the plate. Not so at Tommy’s Restaurant. Tollett proudly provides a local oyster experience and promotes the health of Galveston Bay.

The local oyster experience may be simplified into a four-pronged fork:

- 1 • The first prong is the health and preservation of the Bay itself. What’s good for oysters is also good and necessary for all life in the Bay. The Galveston Bay Foundation promotes a healthy Bay. In 2012, GBF recycled an estimated 54 tons of oyster shells from Tommy’s Restaurant alone. Much of the shell collected is used to make reefs that will enhance oyster habitats adjacent to GBF’s Sweetwater Preserve in West Bay. This year, GBF is working to expand its oyster shell recycling program to multiple restaurants. →

The “R Months” Myth

Great news for oyster lovers! Oysters are safe to eat all year around. Eating them in the summer months poses no danger. No one is sure where the “R months” myth came from. In pre-refrigeration days, shipping oysters great distances in the heat of summer was dangerous.

Summer is oyster-spawning season. As any oyster aficionado knows, a fertile oyster can turn thin, milky and flaccid—far from ideal, but not dangerous. They’re just very busy and not worrying much about their appearance.

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Tommy's Restaurant sells more than 10,000 oysters a week and recycles more than 110 tons of shells annually in Galveston Bay reefs, in cooperation with the Galveston Bay Foundation.

- The second prong is the responsible harvesting and distribution of our oysters. Jeri's Seafood on Smith Point (near Anahuac, Texas) harvests and distributes oysters from reefs throughout Galveston Bay, overseeing quality control to market oysters by reef name, or appellation, to restaurants. In partnership with the Galveston Bay Foundation, Jeri's returns their oyster shells to the reefs to promote new growth and reef preservation. Oysters require about three years to mature to commercial viability.
- The third prong is the seafood restaurateur. Whenever you order oysters in a restaurant, ask what reef they are from. They may tell you that they are simply "Galveston Bay oysters." Demand more information, and educate your waiter and the management. Ask if the restaurant has a partnership with Galveston Bay Foundation and whether they recycle their oyster shells to help improve the Bay and the oyster population. The more awareness their clientele brings to their oyster experience, the more restaurateurs will cater to demands.
- The fourth prong is you, the consumer. As the list of oyster bars that work with Galveston Bay Foundation grows, support these restaurants. Educate yourself and your oyster bar about your love for the unique taste and characteristics of our local oysters. 🍷

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