

**SEA GRANT**

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By

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I have a confession to make; I love oysters on the half. I've grown my fair share of these bivalves on a small oyster farm in Massachusetts and consumed a disproportionately large share of the salty mollusks right out of their shells (which might explain the razor thin profit margin on that oyster farm!). As an oyster lover, I've always enjoyed trying different species of oysters (Pacific oysters, Olympia oysters, European flat oysters, and, of course, our own Eastern oyster, *Crassostrea virginica*), but there's a lot to be said for trying the *same species of oyster* from different places. Can they truly differ enough to make it worth plunking down your hard earned money for another dozen on the half?

I used to bartend and was taught that (good) vodka was the most humble of the hard liquors because it took on the flavor of that with which it was mixed. Similarly, many oysters, including the Eastern oyster (which ranges from here in the Gulf of Mexico up to the Canadian Maritimes), have a knack for taking on the flavor of the waters in which they are grown. With wines, coffees and other agricultural products, this effect is often called 'terroir' – a French word that literally means soil but is used to mean that the item takes on certain distinct characteristics from the region in which it's grown. Examples include Vidalia onions, French champagne, and Napa Valley wines.

With our own oyster, you can find an amazing list of varieties of the *same oyster species* grown in different bodies of water, each with its own corps of die-hard fans. Some oyster bars,

like New York City's famous Grand Central Oyster Bar, can have 15 or more Eastern oyster varieties (also called appellations) on their menu at any given time, including Wellfleets, Blue Points, Island Creeks and Malpeques. In fact, two recently published books, Rowan Jacobsen's Geography of Oysters and Robb Walsh's Sex, Death and Oysters, are entirely devoted to this diversity of oysters.

Interestingly, both those authors and many others that I've asked note that here in the Gulf of Mexico we tend to lump all our oysters under the name 'Gulf oysters' – with the notable exception of the oysters harvested from Apalachicola Bay. I had one friend who came down here and ordered oysters in a local restaurant and asked where the oysters were from, and was told with great assurance that they were from open waters! Generally when I've asked, I've been told the state from which they were harvested but not much more.

So now I'm curious, and I'm asking you, the reader, to let me know where you think the best Eastern oysters are harvested from and (importantly) why! They can be from here in Alabama, the Gulf or some other coast – but I'd like to hear about them. If I get enough responses, I'll follow up on this in a future column. Either way, I suspect that I'll need to do some 'field research' on the subject!

E-mail your oyster preferences and recommendations to me, Bill Walton, at [gulfoysters@gmail.com](mailto:gulfoysters@gmail.com).