




A ROCK & A HARD PLACE

With the festive season upon us, there's no better time to serve up a celebratory platter of plump, fresh oysters, writes **ALECIA WOOD**.

From postponed weddings to the pause on air travel and innumerable personal losses, "Then, Covid-19 happened," is a statement that's become shorthand for all manner of consequences brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. For oyster farmers on the South Coast of New South Wales – a major centre for oyster production – it's meant yet another blow after an already trying start to the year.

"We were recovering from the impact of the bushfires, looking forward to Easter trading and hopefully a little bit of tourism, but in March we ended up with Covid-19 coming through and restaurants shutting down," says Sue McIntyre, co-owner of Broadwater Oysters, who farms Sydney Rock oysters an hour's drive north of the Victorian border. NSW produces just over half of all Australian oysters (including Sydney Rock and Pacific oysters) followed by Tasmania and South Australia, which produce mostly Pacific oysters and small volumes of Angasi oysters.

During the last bushfire season, NSW South Coast oyster farmers were left with no tourists to sell to onsite, closed local restaurants unable to place orders, damage to infrastructure, and suspended harvests after ash debris polluted coastal waters. "It meant a total reduction in



summer trade,” McIntyre says of Broadwater Oysters’ usual peak season. Come March, the domino effect of Covid-19 on the hospitality, tourism and food production sectors took hold. “We went from sending out 500 dozen oysters a week down to nothing. For six weeks, we had absolutely no restaurant trade.”

Broadwater Oysters dedicates up to a third of its harvest to hospitality businesses, including renowned restaurants like Sydney’s Quay and Bennelong. According to industry peak body Oysters Australia, 70 per cent of Australian oysters are sold through the domestic hospitality market, while research shows that Aussie consumers view oysters as a luxury ingredient that’s best eaten fresh when dining out. “Other local oyster farmers have said they had a 70 to 80 per cent drop in overall sales. Tasmania and South Australia would also have been impacted through the shutdown and border closures, and a lot of Pacific oysters [grown in those states] are traditionally sold into the Melbourne market,” McIntyre adds. Suddenly, oyster farmers were tasked with finding an entirely new path to reach diners. “It’s been a really interesting transition. There’s been a real change in the delivery of oysters into direct retail to the public, where people are going to a fishmonger and buying fresh oysters.”

If there’s any produce that sings of celebration, it’s those slippery little molluscs. “Oysters are just amazing to eat in the festive season because they really bring to mind that fresh, dunked-in-the-ocean feeling,” says McIntyre. “Even if you can’t get to the beach, if you’ve got some oysters, you get that total immersion of beautiful ocean goodness.” Which must be our cue to get shucking. ►

A GUIDE TO POPULAR OYSTER VARIETIES

SYDNEY ROCK OYSTER

Saccostrea glomerata

With delicate flesh and a saline punch, the smooth-shelled Sydney Rocks are native to Australia. Farmed along the NSW coast, their peak season runs from September to March. Smaller than other farmed varieties, these oysters are delicious served natural or with a squeeze of lemon.

PACIFIC OYSTER

Crassostrea gigas

Introduced to Australia in the 1940s, this species originates from Japan. Large and with a salty-sweet, creamy taste, Pacific oysters are considered at their best from April to September. Their meaty quality also makes them well-suited to cooking.

ANGASI OYSTER

Ostrea angasi

Once verging on extinction – due to colonial invaders’ overfishing during the 1800s – this native variety is now farmed in small quantities. Sometimes called the “flat oyster” or “native oyster”, the Angasi oyster has a large, shallow shell and a strong, slightly gamey flavour.



Lemon-aspen vinegar
with anise-myrtle oil
and finger lime

OYSTERS À LA RAES

Lemon-aspen vinegar with anise-myrtle oil and finger lime

MAKES ENOUGH FOR A FEW DOZEN OYSTERS

“This recipe showcases native Australian ingredients,” says head chef Jason Saxby. “It has personality but does not overpower the natural oyster flavour.” Start recipe a day ahead to make the lemon-aspen vinegar.

Freshly shucked Sydney rock oysters, to serve
Pearls from 200gm red finger limes, to serve
LEMON-ASPEN VINEGAR

100 gm lemon aspen fruit (see note)

200 ml aged white wine vinegar

ANISE-MYRTLE OIL

1 bunch anise myrtle, leaves picked (see note)

200 ml light-flavoured olive oil

1 To make lemon-aspen vinegar, place vinegar in a small saucepan and warm gently over low heat without boiling. Crush lemon aspen into a pulp using a mortar and pestle and place in a sterilised jar or container. Pour warm vinegar over lemon aspen and set aside to infuse (6 hours or overnight). Strain and refrigerate until required.

2 To make anise-myrtle oil, place leaves and oil in a blender and blend until combined (30 seconds). Strain through muslin cloth into a small bowl.

3 Serve oysters with ½ tsp each lemon-aspen vinegar and anise-myrtle oil, then top with finger lime pearls.

Note Lemon aspen and anise myrtle are available from native ingredient suppliers. If fresh anise myrtle is unavailable, substitute freeze-dried powder.



Lemon-pepper granita

OYSTERS À LA LEIGH STREET WINE ROOM

Pepperberry mignonette

MAKES ENOUGH FOR A FEW DOZEN OYSTERS

“Mignonette is a classic, but like all simple dishes, its beauty lies in using the best ingredients you can find,” says chef-owner Nathan Sasi.

- 2 medium shallots, very finely diced
- 125 ml sparkling chardonnay
- 75 ml chardonnay vinegar
- 25 ml Champagne vinegar
- Freshly cracked pepperberry, to taste
- Freshly shucked Pacific oysters, to serve

- 1 Combine shallots, sparkling chardonnay and vinegars in a bowl. Season with pepperberry to taste and stir to combine.
- 2 Serve oysters topped with 1 tsp mignonette.

OYSTERS À LA BENNELONG

Lemon-pepper granita

MAKES ENOUGH FOR A FEW DOZEN OYSTERS

“The citrus flavours offset the natural saltiness of the oysters,” says head chef Rob Cockerill.

- 100 gm caster sugar
- 300 ml strained freshly squeezed lemon juice (about 6 medium lemons)
- 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- Freshly shucked Sydney rock oysters, to serve

- 1 Bring 300ml water to the boil in a small saucepan. Add sugar and stir until dissolved. Remove from heat and set aside to cool completely. Once cooled, add lemon juice and pepper, then stir to combine. Pour into a shallow tray and freeze (6 hours or overnight).
- 2 Scrape frozen surface with a fork to make granita, then top oysters with 1 tsp granita and serve. ●



Pepperberry mignonette