

CONSIDER THE SUSTAINABLE OYSTER True Chesapeake

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Midnight gunfights over the dark waters of the Chesapeake Bay are not likely images oyster lovers think of when they go to their favorite raw bar. However, "Oysters have always been a polemic political issue," says True Chesapeake Oyster Company co-founder and oyster farmer Patrick Hudson. "Some of the first laws written in Maryland are centered around oysters."

He's referring to the Oyster Wars of the Chesapeake Bay in the years that followed the Civil War and the bloody battles between Maryland watermen and out-of-state oyster pirates over the precious bivalve. In 1868, the Maryland General Assembly chartered The Oyster Navy, an armed flotilla whose sole purpose was to stop alleged pirates at any cost, in an effort to thwart illegal midnight dredging of oyster beds in the Bay.

The record year for oyster harvest was in 1884 with over 15 million bushels recorded. Just six years later in 1890, the harvest had decreased 33% to less than 10 million bushels. The period of boom and bust is marked with murders, rape, forced labor of immigrants from Ellis island, racial inequity of Black oystermen, and severe over dredging and over fishing of the wild oyster population. The salacious pathos could get Daniel Day Lewis out of retirement. At this point, the Chesapeake Bay wild oyster is no longer a sustainable food source. "I would say anybody harvesting any wild oysters whatsoever is overfishing," says Hudson.

Two hours down the Eastern Shore at St. Jerome Creek, you'll find a sustainable oyster farm set up to grow and cultivate three varieties of oysters. At any time, Hudson and his team of ten local employees in St. Mary's County has about five million oysters growing there, and have affectionately named their varieties Skinny Dippers, Huckleberries, and Chunky Dunkers. Diners can find and enjoy these varieties at True Chesapeake restaurant in Whitehall Mill.

The brackish waters of St. Jerome Creek, paired with the husbandry of the 2–3 year growing cycle, create a deep-cupped oyster with a silken buttery texture, vegetal and umami notes, with mild salinity. The farm also distributes to Whole Foods and Wegman's from Manhattan to Atlanta for home-shucking enthusiasts.

Some bay farmers will haul their market-ready oysters to saltier waters, submerging them for 24–48 hours to increase the salinity. Hudson is a purist when it comes to oysters in the Chesapeake and delights in the authentic flavors of the water where his oysters grow.

"Every farm-raised oyster in this country is the same oyster. The flavor profile depends on where and in what water they are sitting. We call it merroir versus terroir," says executive chef and co-founder of True Chesapeake Zack Mills. Terroir is a term used in wine to refer to the flavor imparted to the grape based on its environment, soil, topography, and climate. "Same grape, different terroir," he says.

Chef Zack first encountered Hudson's Huckleberry oyster as Executive Chef for the Four Seasons in Baltimore. "Patrick was delivering oysters out of his pickup," Chef Zack remembers fondly. Back then, the Four Seasons was Hudson's biggest client, after starting the oyster farm in 2010.

In 2019, Mills and Hudson partnered, along with oyster shucker Nick Shauman, to found and establish True Chesapeake Partnership which vertically integrated Hudson's farm with The Local Oyster and True Chesapeake restaurants. Shauman, now ranked 8th worldwide for male shuckers, led The Local Oyster for eight years in Mount Vernon Marketplace before it shuttered last fall. Local Oyster, while longer in a physical location, is still operational and provides raw-bar catering, and is available for private events.

True Chesapeake is committed to the bounty of the Chesapeake Bay along with their farm-to-table oysters. Chef Zack centers a rotating seasonal menu around local produce and what's coming out of the bay. "The menus are seafood heavy and invasive species heavy," he says. "Blue catfish always, and we have snakehead when available."

In the 19th century, when wild oysters were plentiful in the bay, they were the most consumed protein in the area. Their low cost fed entire families, and created Mid-Atlantic traditions, for generations—including oyster stuffing at Thanksgiving and oyster stew at Christmas. These days, the most plentiful species in the bay are often predatory blue catfish and snakehead. Chef Zack says, "You can make an argument for almost any protein—that you shouldn't eat it, but invasive species is never one of them."

While both invasive species have off-putting names, Chef Zack says, "Snakehead is great. It's not as firm as bass and not as flaky as halibut. There's an elegance to it once it's broken down."









RIGHT: Patrick Hudson and Zack Mills



Menus also feature Maryland blue crab, and the restaurant is one of only a few in our area with the True Blue logo in the window, certifying the crab served is from the Chesapeake Bay. When the abundance of fresh summer crabs diminishes, they will use pasteurized, but it must be from Maryland, Virginia, or in a stretch, North Carolina. If they can't source from these areas then the crab comes off the menu.

Chef Zack says their most popular menu items are the crab and bone marrow dip and the spaghetti. "It's basically if carbonara and spaghetti and clams had a baby," he says. Clams, bacon, parmesan cheese, and cured egg yolk grated on top. "It's got an umami element," he says. He adds a secret ingredient: fresh butternut squash juice for depth and sweetness to balance the salt of the bacon, cheese, and cured egg.

"I'm a huge curing nerd and huge cookbook nerd," he says. I ask how many cookbooks he has. "Oh god…" he pauses, "probably 500–600 cookbooks. All the shelves are bowing." He shows me the book he's currently reading, *The Cooking Gene, A Journey Through African American History in the Old South* by fellow Marylander Michael Twitty.

Chef Zack's menus are full of thoughtful nods to people, places, and his personal evolution as a chef. "Menu writing is a weird thing. Trying to one-up yourself every time is fun and challenging," he shares. "There's been times when you just don't have anything and the creativity part of the brain is shut off and I'm forcing it and it's tough. That's when I go back to old recipes and rework them."

I asked if he had all his old recipes written down. "Yeah, I have databases and tubs at home for documents and recipes." He shows me his Evernote going back almost fifteen years. He opens the app and slides his phone over to me on the table. "I've got Spring '25 started, and it goes all the way back to 2012," he says, scrolling through words, measurements, screenshots, and photos. "Twelve years of notes and notes and notes." His hoarse voice fills with pride.

Though the menus change seasonally, there are items not to be missed when available, including the mushroom tart with local mushrooms, horseradish, and créme fraiche. The rich buttery tart is well-balanced with a bright and surprising lemon-infused créme. Each bite offers equal parts of plump, savory mushrooms and crisp puff pastry. The oyster stew is a must-try: a soothing rich and creamy chowder that is buttery, lush, and familiar. The flavors are balanced and explode on the palate with celery, shallot, salt, and floral notes.











True Chesapeake Oyster Company restaurant and farm serve as a restorative powerhouse for the Chesapeake Bay and its wild oyster replenishment project, the Oyster Recovery Partnership, or ORP. The mission of ORP, founded in 2014, is to restore oyster populations in five Chesapeake Bay tributaries by 2025. The ORP is the most extensive oyster recovery and replenishment program in the world. Shells consumed from restaurants in Maryland are collected, cleaned, and seeded with oyster larvae before being planted in strategic locations along tributaries by Maryland watermen. Wild oyster reefs provide habitats for small fish and crabs, as well as filter the water in the Bay.

Since 2014, five oyster reefs located in vital tributaries of Harris Creek, Little Choptank, Tred Avon, St. Mary's, and Manokin rivers of the Chesapeake have been started and monitored. As of March of 2024, Harris Creek has been fully restored, according to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Four of the five have been deemed by law as oyster sanctuaries, making them permanently closed to oyster harvest, according to the ORP website.

"The goal for educating people is to make the distinction between wild oysters and farmed oysters as sustainable and not sustainable," Hudson says. "It's a black-and-white issue."

Between 1985–1989 Maryland issued a moratorium on harvesting rockfish. The ban was lifted once the population increased enough to ensure the species' survival in Maryland waters.

Hudson supports a similar moratorium on wild oyster harvesting, allowing the population time to become multigenerational and self-propagating, a process that would take over a decade. Wild fisheries and The Maryland Watermen's Association would disagree and have opposed leases for oyster farming and aquaculture in the Bay for various reasons since 2010, when aquaculture leases first became available in Maryland.

The fact remains that despite billions of oysters being planted over the last decade, success rates for young spat (baby oysters) survival are only one percent and the wild oyster population in the Chesapeake is only one to two percent of its historic population. "The wild oyster population is next to nothing. It's not sustainable. It's overfished," Hudson says.

Chef Zack agrees, "Wild oysters should not be getting eaten. Leave them in the water."