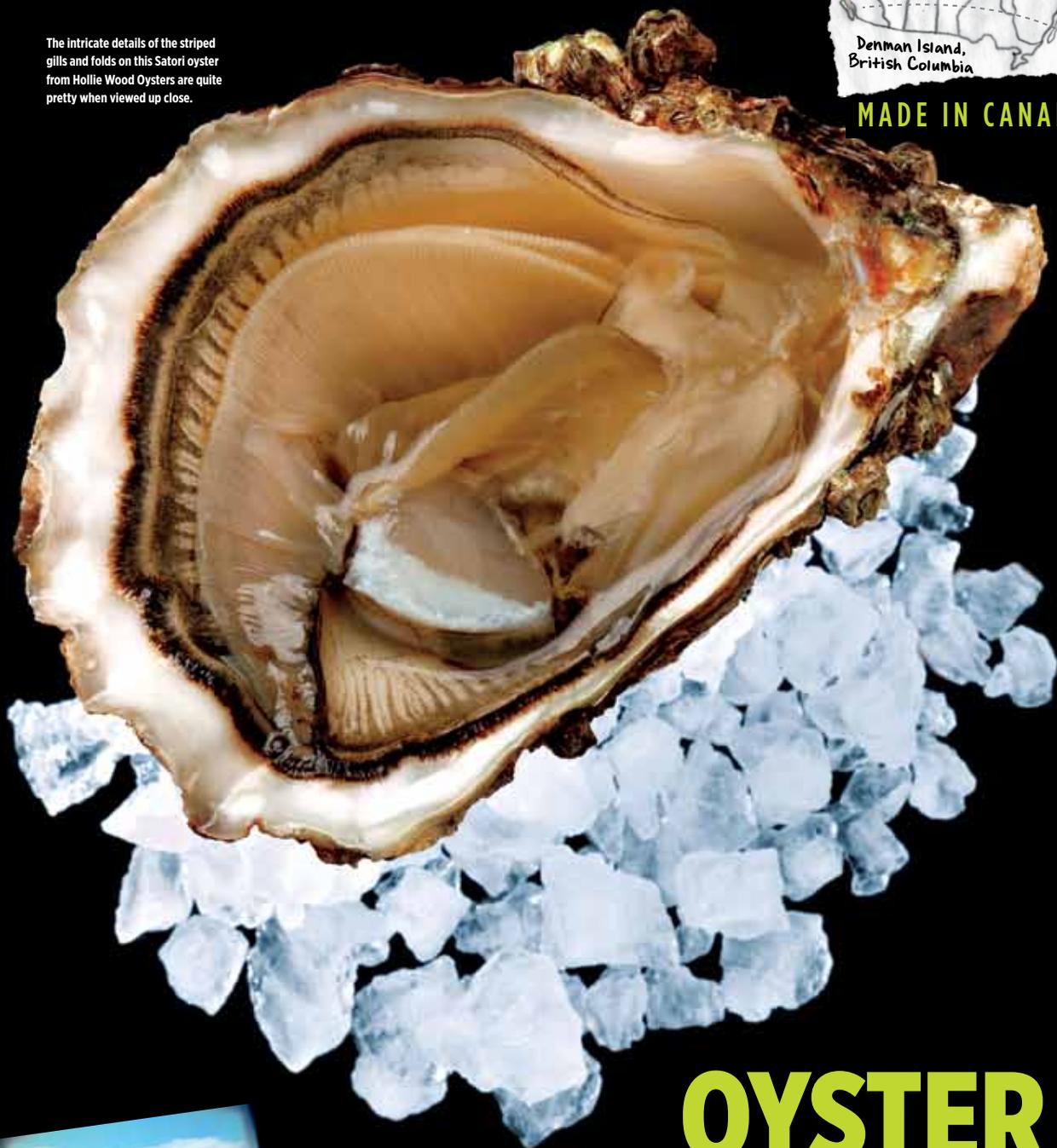


The intricate details of the striped gills and folds on this Satori oyster from HOLLIE WOOD OYSTERS are quite pretty when viewed up close.



Denman Island,
British Columbia

MADE IN CANADA



OYSTER LOVE

The humble B.C. oyster—historically, a poor man's food—has become a star on menus for its tastiness, local year-round availability and sustainability.

BY JANE MUNDY



Photography, Jesse Bone Photography (oyster); Jane Mundy (Hollie Wood on beach); iStockphoto.com (map, pushpin, boat on water).



Check out this view from Hollie's "office."



(From top) Hollie Wood gathering wayward oysters on the beach; shells vary in shape and colour; Greg Wood on an oyster raft.



Oyster bars are cropping up in cities across the country. In fact, this little mollusk has become quite popular, and here's why: not only are they tasty but they're also homegrown, sustainable and abundant, mostly from oyster farms in the Georgia Strait (between Vancouver Island and the mainland coast of British Columbia), as well as some farms on the mainland and west coast of Vancouver Island. And it's not only Canadians who love them. B.C. oyster farmers are supplying about 20,000 dozen (yes, that's 240,000) oysters to global markets *each week*, according to the British Columbia Shellfish Grower's Association. "With clean, cold and productive waters, B.C. is becoming increasingly well known as a great area to sustainably farm oysters," says Mike McDermid, the partner relation manager of Ocean Wise, a Canadian conservation program created by the Vancouver Aquarium to educate consumers about the issues surrounding sustainable seafood.

Although trendy now, oysters weren't always considered posh. As a plentiful and cheap source of protein in the 18th century, they were put into almost everything—stuffed into turkeys and steaks, chucked into soups and stews and, of course, eaten raw—until overfishing caused prices to rise through the 1800s. By the 20th century, they were considered a food for the rich.

Nowadays, they can still be expensive (unless you're lucky enough to have a

"buck a shuck" at an oyster eatery near you). They've developed quite the culinary status, so much so that their flavours and textures are compared in as much detail as fine wines. Tasters refer to "merroir," a word that describes the ocean-site conditions that give each type and batch of oyster its flavour, just as "terroir" describes a wine grape's soil.

B.C. oysters come in dozens of varieties, each with a unique taste and appearance, but all of them are derived from the Pacific oyster (*Crassostrea gigas*). Their qualities depend on various factors, including the growing location and method. Farmers work hard to refine the look, shell texture and taste.

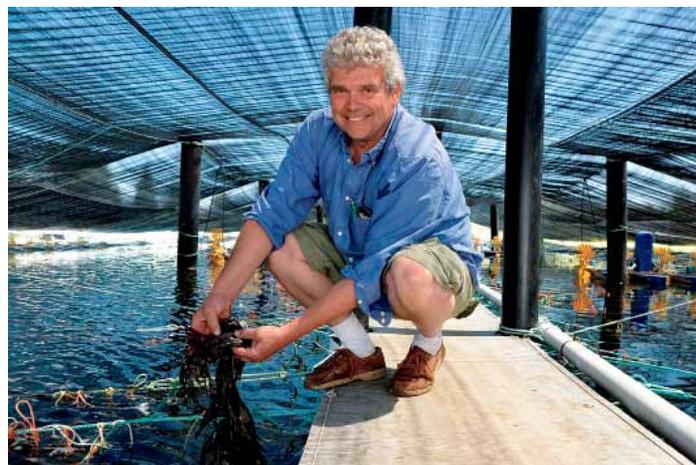
TIDES, TUMBLING AND TIMING

The next time you pop one of these unassuming-looking mollusks into your mouth, consider that it takes three years—and a lot of hard work—to grow an oyster. Greg and Hollie Wood (her real name) have been farming oysters on Denman Island since 1996. This little Northern Gulf Island is covered by dense forest and home to just 1,500 people, although it's a mere two-kilometre ferry ride from mid-Vancouver Island. Together with several other shellfish farmers, the Woods lease 11 acres of intertidal zone, the part of the beach where oysters tumble in the water and feed on plankton at high tide.

At low tide, Hollie gets to work. She carries two buckets of her oysters at a time—from a patch of about 800 dozen—about 50 feet down the beach to the low-tide line. "We move the oysters to make sure they're in the right feeding grounds and protected from predators," she says. "Sometimes, a storm will wash them into big piles high up on the beach, where they won't get enough food."

"He was a bold man that first ate an oyster."

—Jonathan Swift



Aw, Shucks: A Valentine's Day Feast

Known as "nature's Viagra," oysters have long been linked with romance. Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, rose from the sea on an oyster shell and Casanova was said to eat about 50 each day to boost his libido.

It turns out the oyster's aphrodisiac qualities may not be a myth; raw oysters are loaded with zinc, a nutrient investigated for playing a role in regulating libido-stimulating testosterone. They're also rich in amino acids, which help trigger raised levels of sex hormones.

Chef Wayne Sych's Top-Five B.C. Oysters

Kusshi

Kusshis (Japanese for "precious") are small with a salty-sweet flavour. They grow in floating trays that tumble with the tide or are tumbled in a machine to form deep thick shells with a slight pink hue.

Royal Miyagi

With its ruffled white-and-purple brittle shell, the Royal Miyagi can be a challenge to shuck without splintering, but it's well worth the effort for its delicate melon-like flavour and slight creaminess.

Satori

These have a deep easily shuckable cup with plenty of meat, which is why chefs love them. Satori (a Buddhist term for "enlightenment") oysters have a mild briny flavour with a dash of melon.

Sawmill Bay

Grown in pristine glacier-fed waters off Read Island, this beach-raised oyster feeds with the ebb and flow of the tide, which gives it a strong sweet and salty taste. For those who like oysters raw and unadorned,

Fanny Bay

This easily shucked oyster has firm meat because it's beach-raised—a "tough life" that requires it to fight the tides and clamp tightly shut at low tide for protection. The flavour is briny with a cucumber finish.

Itty-bitty oysters!



Photography: Jane Mundy (all locations); iStockphoto.com (map, pushpin).

Moving the oysters is backbreaking work and time is limited because of tides. However, since Hollie Wood Oysters purchased a tumbling machine to shape the oyster, farming has become more efficient. A tumbling machine knocks oysters around to chip off the thin growing edge and shapes them into a deep cup, creating a plumper oyster. It's attached to their rafts: 10 structures joined together and anchored in deep water about 10 minutes north by boat. "The rafts are our nursery, where millions of small oysters are growing," says Hollie. That may seem like a lot, but they start out at three millimetres—50 oysters can fit on your thumb.

"As the oysters get bigger, we move them from buckets to seed trays—oyster condos," explains Hollie, laughing. "Next, up they go through the tumbler and grading machine, which determines their size and whether they move into a bigger condo."

Finally, most of the oysters are moved to the beach; the delicate varieties stay on the raft longer. The ever-popular Satori is one that tumbles on the beach in the last few months of cultivation, becoming more briny with a harder shell that's easy to shuck.

ABUNDANT AND SUSTAINABLE

Ninety-nine percent of the time, farmed oysters are the more sustainable choice, says McDermid. Taking these mollusks from the wild is often damaging to ocean habitats. And shellfish farmers must have a safe harvest area that's subject to monitoring and testing by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

Farmed B.C. oysters are abundant and available for purchase year-round, and these briny bivalves—bless their little hearts—help clean up the environment by filtering algae that can bloom in waters high in nitrogen because of fertilizer runoff from the land. "To a minor extent, they help reduce greenhouse gases by absorbing carbon dioxide from the ocean to form their shells," says McDermid. So oyster lovers can enjoy them with a conscience as clear as the water they're grown in.

Joe Fortes' executive chef, Wayne Sych, thinks the best way to eat oysters is au naturel. You must never tip the oyster juice out—that's the best part! But if you prefer, he suggests serving them with a mignonette. Each mignonette should be enough for about four dozen oysters.

Classic Mignonette

½ shallot, finely chopped
1½ cups / 375 mL red wine vinegar
Freshly ground pepper

1. **Combine** ingredients and transfer sauce to small bowl; place on a tray with oysters. Or let sit for a day or two; the shallots will start to soften and impart a sweetness along with the spice of the pepper.

Secret Mignonette

1 shallot, finely diced
1½ cups / 375 mL champagne or prosecco

1. **Combine** the two and use immediately.



Shucking 101

If you're new to shucking, go slowly. Use a proper oyster knife—sharpened screwdrivers won't cut it. It's OK to wear a thick leather glove for protection. On your first attempt, the oyster shell might seem like an impenetrable fortress, but don't give up!

1. **Scrub** the whole oyster clean with a brush under cold running water.
2. **Place** the oyster partially inside a kitchen towel with the point or hinge side facing you.
3. **Holding** the oyster with the cupped side facing down, insert the knife through the hinge, pointing down.
4. **Twist** the knife to pop the hinge loose.
5. **Gently** scrape the blade along the inside of the top shell to separate the muscle from the shell.
6. **Remove** the top shell and discard.
7. **Run** the knife under the flesh of the oyster meat to detach it from the bottom shell.
8. **Repeat.**

Place the oysters on a bed of rock salt or sea salt, which will keep the shells upright.

If you don't want to shuck and don't plan to eat them raw, chuck 'em on a medium-high barbecue, close the lid and, after about five minutes, the oysters' lids will pop open.

Jane Mundy, a freelance food and travel writer and photographer, edited *The Ocean Wise Cookbook: Seafood Recipes That Are Good for the Planet*, a collection of popular recipes from chefs and restaurants across Canada. For more information, visit oceanwisecanada.org/book.