

OYSTERS: PERFECT PAIRINGS

Story by Sarah Ensor | Photos by Henley Moore

Consider the oyster buffet, a dining experience available on the Eastern Shore during months with the letter R.

According to M.F.K. Fisher, author of the quintessential book on oysters, "Consider the Oyster," "There are three kinds of oyster-eaters: those loose-minded sports who will eat anything, hot, cold, thin, thick, dead or alive, as long as it is oyster; those who will eat them raw and only raw; and those who with equal severity will eat them cooked and no way other."

The oyster buffet, almost always offering shucked oysters and some combination of fried, baked or grilled oysters, and oyster stew or chowder, best serves the first two kinds of oyster-eaters, with the first group being, of course, correct. If buffet is for the gourmand, oyster buffet is for the passionate.



At the Fish Whistle on the Chester River in Chestertown, owner Jeff Carroll said the restaurant's Thursday night all-you-can-eat oysters is scheduled to run through April.

"We get people who drive all the way down from Newark, Del., just for oyster night," Carroll said. The event, popular with locals, also is popular with hunters visiting from out of town, he said. Carroll said each Thursday, the restaurant goes through 12 to 16 bushels of oysters, most of which come from the southern Chesapeake Bay.

Shucked oysters on Thursday nights at the Fish Whistle are all-you-can-eat. The restaurant also serves oyster chowder and sends an oyster sampler to the table. Customers can order another oyster sampler or can customize another plate with their favorite offerings from the first plate.

Lisa's fried oysters are named for pastry chef and catering manager Lisa Powell, who lent her grandmother's recipe to the restaurant. First,



Fish Whistle owner Jeff Carroll, pictured, said Thursday night all-you-can-eat oysters is scheduled to run through April. You can get your oysters raw, or you can savor oyster chowder, fried oysters, and a number of baked oyster dishes if you prefer your oysters cooked.



the oysters are lightly floured. A few hours later, they are lightly dusted again before breading with seasoned panko and fried. They are buttery and crisp, the breading perfectly seasoned and just enough to compliment the main ingredient.

Other than the fried oysters, every oyster on the sampler is gluten-free. Along with the traditional offerings of baked oysters Rockefeller, casino, and imperial, the sampler offers a number of more inventive baked oysters, including mushroom-and-Gruyère, salsa, andouille gumbo, buffalo-and-blue, and pizza.

The salsa oyster is tomato salsa and

cheddar cheese, a taste of summer on a winter dish. The mushroom-Gruyère oysters have a deep, rich flavor and a meaty texture. The andouille gumbo oyster is Carroll's favorite.

"New Orleans cooking is probably some of my favorite food," he said, indicating this oyster offers similar flavors. The gumbo is thickened with okra instead of breading. It is a bright, warm, spicy bite.

Carroll offered three alcohol pairing suggestions for oyster night. For traditionalists, who appreciate wine with seafood, a buttery chardonnay, such as a 2015 Rutherford Ranch Chardonnay from Napa Valley, will pair nicely with the rich flavors of the oysters Rockefeller and oysters imperial.

A pint of 16 Mile Oyster Stout, a Delmarva beer, is a good pairing on several levels. This stout is smooth and medium-bodied. It also is sweet and mildly metallic, likely from the oysters used in its brewing. It is a drinkable stout, and won't fill you up, so it is well suited for a buffet. It stands up nicely to the fried oysters, while not overpowering the delicate flavors of the shucked oysters.

"There's something about bourbon and oysters," Carroll said, recommending the Filibuster Rye to accompany both baked oysters and oysters on the half-shell.

Of course, the most important pairing is the oyster and those who savor them, and almost any beverage is the perfect accompaniment.

As Fisher wrote, "Oysters, being almost universal, can be and have been eaten with perhaps a wider variety of beverages than almost any other dish I can think of ... and less disastrously. They lend themselves to the whims of every cool and temperate climate, so that one man can drink wine with them, another beer, and another fermented buttermilk, and no man will be wrong." 