

Shellfish Heritage

A Heritage of Harvest

Ancient Affections

The Romans adored them . . . the French loved them . . . the Japanese cultivated them . . . and Native Americans revered them. This beloved and renowned resource is the oyster—queen of the bivalves. Suffice it to say, people and cultures around the world have long shared a romantic and culinary obsession with oysters and other shellfish.

Early efforts to collect and transplant oysters go back more than 2000 years to Roman society where the delicacy was worth its actual weight in gold. Harvest of wild oysters from tidal banks and reefs remained popular through the Middle Ages, but stocks were often considered inexhaust-

ible and were subject to dramatic over-harvesting. Conservation measures emerged in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. In France's Basin of Arcachon, for instance, harvest bans helped restore severely depleted oyster reefs only to be followed by repeated cycles of ruin and recovery. The Japanese pioneered oyster aquaculture techniques several centuries ago after observing oyster larvae settling on the leaves of bamboo stalks used in Manila clam fisheries.



Photo courtesy Manuscripts, Special Collections, University Archives, University of Washington Libraries, CUR801

J.J. Brenner Oyster Company harvesting Olympia oysters, 1910

as Shoal-Water Bay), and later Puget Sound, to gold prospectors and entrepreneurs in northern California who had exhausted local oyster stocks and paid as much as a dollar a piece for the gems. The venture proved enormously lucrative, but also devastating to Olympia oyster populations in many Northwest areas by the late 1800s. The results prompted growers to explore different cultivation techniques, such as grading and diking oyster beds, and to import and cultivate oyster species from other parts of the world. The imports also created unexpected problems with the introduction of such non-native plants and animals as spartina and oyster-drill snails.

The most successful import was the Japanese or Pacific oyster, first introduced in Puget Sound in the early 1920s and a mainstay of the West Coast shellfish industry ever since. A side benefit was the unintentional introduction of the Manila clam, which has emerged as the state's top commercially farmed clam. Aquaculture practices evolved dramatically in the ensuing decades to include hatchery and nursery systems and numerous other advances.

A Northwest Tradition

Few natural resources provide a more fitting symbol of a region's heritage and environment than Washington's rich shellfish resources. Pacific Northwest tribes have lived in the region for more than 10,000 years, and archeologists have uncovered shell middens (piles of accumulated shells) dating back more than 4,000 years. Shellfish provided sustenance and figured prominently in tribal spiritual beliefs. So ingrained are shellfish in tribal customs that the native Quinault language includes a phrase, *ta'aWshi xa'iits'os*, meaning "clam hungry."

Captain George Vancouver and other early explorers of the Pacific Northwest observed tidelands strewn with oysters and other shellfish. The influx of settlers that soon followed, however, placed unprecedented demands on these rich resources.

In the 1850s, tribal governments in Washington Territory signed treaties with the U.S. government relinquishing land, but reserving rights to fish and harvest shellfish in usual and accustomed areas except for staked or cultivated shellfish beds. U.S. district court decisions in 1974 and 1994 reaffirmed these treaty rights. Washington state sold many of its tidelands to private landowners under the 1895 Bush and Callow acts to bolster and promote oyster production.

Commercial shellfish harvesting took off in the early 1850s. Oyster-laden schooners transported native oysters from Willapa Bay (known then

Fascinating Facts

- Indian Tribes have harvested shellfish in the Pacific Northwest for more than 4,000 years.
- The Japanese are credited with pioneering shellfish aquaculture techniques.
- The Olympia oyster, the only native Northwest oyster, is named after and helped bring the state capital to Olympia.
- The California Gold Rush triggered unprecedented demand for Olympia oysters starting in the 1850s.
- Tribal governments in Washington Territory signed treaties in the 1850s relinquishing land and reserving rights to fish and harvest shellfish.
- The Bush and Callow acts of 1895 put many of Washington's tidelands into private ownership for oyster production.
- OysterFest is the state's top community shellfish festival, featuring the West Coast Oyster Shucking Championship and attracting more than 25,000 people each year.

Quality of Life

Commercial production is only part of the state's shellfish story. Shellfish serve as cultural and environmental icons in the Pacific Northwest, shaping modern social customs in much the same way they have influenced tribal traditions. Here's a glimpse into this rich and thriving heritage:

- The first weekend each October more than 25,000 people gather in Shelton in Mason County for the many activities of OysterFest, including the opportunity to sample wares at the Washington State Seafood Festival and to cheer on competitors in the West Coast Oyster Shucking Championship.
- Every November a group known as the *clamdiggers*, descendants of pioneers who settled in Washington Territory prior to statehood in 1889, gather in Lynden in Whatcom County to share a bowl of clam chowder and to honor their ancestors and the state. The tradition started in 1891 when four Lynden men spent two days traveling to Birch Bay in Whatcom County to gather clams for a community feast.
- Every day scores of residents and tourists gather at waterfront restaurants and oyster bars from Seattle to Ilwaco to enjoy the bounty of fresh, home-grown shellfish.
- Citizens and organizations are working together to set up community shellfish farms to involve people in the experience of shellfish farming and to instill a finer appreciation of the resource. The first two farms are located in Drayton Harbor in Whatcom County and Henderson Inlet in Thurston County.



Photo courtesy Taylor Shellfish Farms

Harvesting longline oysters in Samish Bay, Skagit County

- More than 30,000 people a day participate in the state's biggest recreational shellfish adventure—razor clam digging on the coast. Diggers pursue the clams by daylight or lantern based on “shows” in the sand as the clams attempt to burrow their way to safety. The popular fishery has been described as one of those wonderfully peculiar expressions of the Northwest's natural heritage.

A closer look reveals a Northwest love affair that isn't fading away, but instead is being renewed with great opportunities to enjoy and celebrate the ancient resource—a resource that continues to anchor and define the Northwest lifestyle.

Sources

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