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A Lowcountry Oyster Roast, Way Up North

By MATT LEE and TED LEE

A LONG the South Carolina coast, cooking outdoors is so much a part of life that even the camellia-curling frosts of deep winter don't drive people inside. Back in late September, when the folks in Maine and Massachusetts were packing up their lobster grills and clambake rocks, we were rooting around in the toolshed for oyster knives and gloves, preparing for the first oyster roast of a fall and winter that typically brings a dozen invitations.

Despite the year-round nature of the oyster supply these days, the onset of March still sparks a panicked last call for prime oyster season. This year, grounded in Manhattan for the whole first quarter, we thought, why not roast oysters here? By the numbers New York might be one of the most oyster-positive cities in the world, even if the majority are consumed raw, on the half shell, indoors.

Cooking oysters Lowcountry-style couldn't be simpler: build a roaring fire on level ground, and set a trestle made of four cinder blocks and a sturdy sheet of scrap steel over it, to serve as an extra-large griddle. When the metal is searing hot, you literally shovel on a layer of oysters and blanket them with water-soaked burlap bags or old towels. The oysters roast and steam in their shells and acquire hints of the wood smoke that swirls in thick gusts around the enterprise. Five to 10 minutes later, you remove the towels and shovel the oysters onto a rustic table scattered with gloves and knives, so the guests can gather around to shuck and slurp down the briny treats.

In New York, as in most North American cities these days, oysters are relatively plentiful, whether they're harvested locally or flown in from afar. Open space for lighting bonfires, however, is in decidedly short supply, so we set about adapting the oyster roast's winning combination of extreme informality and indulgence to a city setting.

Another challenge for the Manhattan roast, we quickly discovered, would be finding a source for oysters at a price we could stomach. In Charleston the delectable local variety fetches about \$20 dollars for a bushel bag, enough to feed more than 10 people; at the Manhattan market Citarella we found exquisite, unshucked Wellfleets (from the Massachusetts Cape) for a dollar each. We were expecting 20 guests and figured we'd need 250 oysters, so we began searching for a bulk rate. We didn't have to search very far: all roads pointed to the Fulton Fish Market, which, while awaiting its move to the Bronx, still clings tightly to its 170-year-old location in Lower Manhattan.

At 4:30 the Friday morning before the day of the roast, we headed downtown to the market and soon found a wholesaler, Montauk Seafood Company Inc., ready to deal. At that relatively late hour, there were only three varieties of oysters left (all *Crassostrea virginica*, the native Atlantic oyster species): compact cardboard boxes of 100 bluepoints, cultivated and harvested by Frank M. Flower & Sons Inc. in Oyster Bay, on Long Island, for \$45; blue plastic bushel bags of oysters from the Chesapeake Bay for \$45; and boxes of 120 Malpeques from Prince Edward Island, slightly smaller and narrower than the bluepoints, but with pretty, orange-flecked shells, for \$55. The tags on each box indicated that they had

been harvested just two or three days before. We took a box of each, for variety's sake.

We marveled at how quick and easy it was to get the oysters, and agreed that we should have visited the Fulton market much sooner in our lives. But as we set about planning the other particulars of the meal, that was about the only principle we could agree upon.

Ted's idea He wanted to reproduce as faithful a facsimile of the Lowcountry creek-bank roast as possible, using the East River park grills. (In early March there would be none of summer's fierce jockeying for available grills.) There would be the aroma of wood smoke, the waterside spot, hot chili dogs (which are traditional at oyster roasts, for the shellfish-shy), squash casserole and whiskey to warm people up. Extra layers of long underwear and socks, chattering teeth, and numb toes would only make it a truer homage to Lowcountry oyster roasts.

MATT's IDEA The Manhattan setting was a license to flip the script on a Southern oyster roast. The event Matt envisioned was indoors, the oysters oven roasted, and we would pull some tricks he had acquired on a recent weekend spent gastropub-hopping with our grandmother in Toronto, namely: serving "black velvets" - a blend of equal parts Guinness stout and Champagne - as well as a proper mignonette (Champagne vinegar and minced shallot) for the oysters and colorful, rib-sticking Irish grub like broiled winter tomatoes and wedges of the fried, parsleyed mashed-potato bread called fadge. Served on paper plates, of course.

THE COMPROMISE Neither of us was willing to give ground, so we decided to blend both impulses in the same party indoors, the icy wind off the East River at Fulton Street being a powerful deterrent to the outdoors notion. Within minutes of returning from the market, we began washing the oysters in the apartment sink and testing oven roasting techniques (with a midmorning break for a raw oyster breakfast).

A simple broiling pan with a third of an inch of water in the bottom proved the perfect method for steaming them open, and six minutes at 475 degrees produced the best results, with most of the oysters nicely half-cooked, their shells opened slightly and easy to shuck. None of the oysters had been overcooked (reduced to tough little protein nubbins), and a few remained uncooked but hot, the fishy and mineral flavors of the oyster pleasantly intensified, compared with its chilled, raw state.

The afternoon of the roast Matt added an aromatherapy element: a tray of a quarter-cup of wet apple-wood smoking chips on the bottom shelf of the oven that produced a more or less authentic, outdoorsy scent. Ted skewed the mignonette Harlem-style by adding sour orange juice, from the homely fruit that's plentiful in the Dominican markets of upper Manhattan this time of year.

For verisimilitude we covered the table with a protective layer of newspaper - the salmon-tinted Charleston Mercury - and set out around the table pairs of oyster knives and thick, blue dishwashing gloves. The gloves would provide a measure of protection from the sharp oyster shells and along with the knives would serve as party favors.

On a sideboard we provided the makings for Jack and gingers (a shot of Tennessee whiskey on the rocks, topped up with spicy ginger ale) and black velvets, a slow cooker of homemade chili and fixings for chili dogs, a green salad, the winter squash casserole and vine-ripened Israeli tomatoes we'd halved and broiled to near-blackness with a pat of butter, a dusting of grated parmesan and plenty of crushed black pepper on top. (A recipe for chili dogs is available [here](#).) The fadge batter, tinted a shamrock green with all the minced parsley, chives and chervil packed in it, we would fry in a skillet only after the first batch of oysters hit the table.

When a quorum of guests had arrived, Matt took drink orders, while Ted loaded the first pan of oysters in the oven. (Twenty-four bluepoints fit perfectly in a 12-by-16-inch roasting pan.) When they were done six minutes later, a space was cleared in the center of the table, and the oysters were piled, using tongs and water-repellent oven mitts, in a heap.

The guests moved in and devoured them in short order. The pan returned to the oven with 24 more raw oysters, and so on, until they were done.

To us much of the oyster roast rang true: the thud of the shells against the shucking table, the slurps, the scrum of friends sharing gloves and knives.

For many of the guests, though, the experience of a roasted oyster was a first and (for the most part) a pleasant revelation.

Eric Demby, a speechwriter and Brooklyn resident, said: "The bounty of all those oysters hitting the table made me nervous - 'check please!'- because we're so accustomed to ordering three expensive oysters at a time in a restaurant. But I liked the warmth in my hand, the shape and feel of the shell, and the messiness."

Our friend Carey Monserrate, a Rhode Island native, added, "I probably would have eaten more if I had to work less, but I liked the collective effort and the meatier flavor."

Perhaps the most significant appraisal came from two of our South Carolina friends, Allen and Jessie Hutcheson, who believe a proper roast begins with a 4 a.m. boat ride into the creeks to collect the oysters.

"I wasn't expecting the oysters to be this good, but they were great, and a whole lot cleaner," Jessie said, before adding:

"It was strange not being shivering cold and wet, but I could get used to it."

Recipe: Sour Orange Mignonette

- ¾ cups Seville orange juice (about 8 oranges)
- ¼ cup Champagne vinegar
- 2 large shallots, finely chopped
- ½ teaspoon granulated sugar.

Whisk ingredients together in a small bowl until sugar dissolves. Cover with plastic wrap and chill in refrigerator for half an hour.

Yield: 2 cups, enough for 120 oysters.

Recipe: Oven-Roasted Oysters

Time: 45 minutes

100 to 120 unshucked oysters, scrubbed clean

6 small lemons, cut into wedges

Tabasco, or other pepper sauce

Sour orange mignonette (see recipe, linked at right).

1. Heat oven to 475 degrees. Working in batches, arrange oysters in a single layer in a 12-by-16-inch roasting pan fitted with a flat rack. Pour 1/3 inch of hot tap water into pan, and bake for 7 minutes, or until oyster shells have begun to open.
2. Using gloves or tongs, transfer oysters to a table covered in newspaper for guests to shuck, garnish and eat while next batch cooks. Add water to pan as necessary, and repeat roasting until all oysters have been served, about 45 minutes. Serve with lemon wedges hot sauce, and sour orange mignonette.

Yield: 8 servings.