

A close-up photograph of a person wearing a bright red apron and blue and white work gloves. They are sorting through a large pile of oysters on a metal tray. The oysters are dark and glistening, with some shells open. The person's hands are visible, carefully examining the oysters. The background is slightly blurred, showing a white wall with a grid pattern.

After harvesting the oysters, employees at Hog Island sort through the oysters, throwing away any dead oysters and filling up bags with the various types of oysters to be shipped and sold at Hog Island Oyster Bars and restaurants nationwide, including Zuni Cafe, Chez Panisse, Carneros Inn, and Mustards Grill.



Pearls of Wisdom

After Almost Thirty Years Of Business, Hog Island Oyster Company Continues To Farm Oysters With Passion and Expertise

BY VANESSA BRUNNER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID DUNCAN LIVINGSTON

ABOVE LEFT While shucking an oyster can be a serious struggle for us land lubbers, it's nothing short of an art form for the employees of Hog Island Oyster Company. Basic shucking guides instruct to insert the shucking knife at the hinge between the two valves of the oyster. Twist the blade until there is a slight popping noise, and slide upwards to cut the muscle that holds the shell closed. Gloves are key at this stage—it's easy for the knife to slip and injure the shucker.

RIGHT Visitors to Hog Island Oyster Company will find themselves at the "Hog Shack" once they arrive, where skilled employees will dish out mussels, Manila clams, and Atlantic, Kumamoto, and Pacific "Sweetwater" oysters. "For us, it's about producing really quality food," says co-owner John Finger. "But it's also all about having fun."

Mark Twain once said "The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco."

Driving up to Hog Island Oyster Company's Point Reyes farm on a frigid June morning, those words bear a certain degree of truth. Often, Northern California's summer is reminiscent of classic New England weather—cloudy, misty, and cold.

"I've never found another place in California that reminds me so much of the East Coast," says John Finger, one of the founders of Hog Island Oyster Company. "It's the perfect location for us."

Hog Island Oyster Company was founded in 1983 by Finger and co-founder Terry Sawyer. Naming their company after a nearby island in Tomales Bay, the twosome started Hog Island Oyster Company with only five acres of oyster beds and \$500 in funds. In twenty-seven years,



Fresh Atlantic Oysters, only minutes out of the water, sit next to an antique Oyster Fork from Culinaire, atop an Astier de Villatte plate from Sue Fisher King. A tiny Astier de Villatte salad bowl, also from Sue Fisher King, is filled with Hog Island Oyster's signature "Hog Wash," the recipe for which can be found on the Hog Island website. 1969 napkins, Simon Pearce Hartland Wine glasses and Berlin silverware—all from Sue Fisher King—accompany this refreshing meal. Visitors to Hog Island Oyster Company can view the process of harvesting and cleaning oysters first-hand. As beds of oysters are brought up onto shore, employees empty them into a machine for cleaning and sorting.



Hog Island Oysters has expanded into 160 acres of oyster beds, two Hog Island Oyster Bars, and a business that ships to restaurants as far away as New York.

“The company is bigger than I ever would’ve dreamed it could be,” says Finger.

Initially, the founders looked for a location on the East Coast, but Tomales Bay ended up being the perfect location. Located forty-nine miles north of San Francisco, Tomales Bay was created by the San Andreas faultline. The cold temperatures and extreme tides create a perfect storm for oyster farming. Currently, Hog Island Oyster Company raises over three million Pacific, Atlantic, and Kumamoto oysters per year, as well as Manila Clams and mussels.

Like many fine foods, each type of oyster comes with its own texture, taste, and smell. Pacific Oysters are considered the most widely cultured oyster in the world. Called “Sweetwaters” at Hog Island, Pacific Oysters tend to be a creamier oyster, with a more mineral taste. Atlantic Oysters tend to have a saltier, and more ocean-like taste, with a buttery finish. Atlantics are often called “beginner’s oysters,” because they are smaller in size and mellower in taste. Kumamoto Oysters are originally from Japan, but are grown widely on the West Coast. With a sweet and subtle mineral taste, Kumamoto Oysters take at least three years to grow, making them the most expensive oysters at Hog Island.

However, every oyster eater experiences oysters differently—which explains the wide range of opinions on condiment combinations (or a lack thereof). Some people swear by lemon and hot sauce, others enjoy a good splash of crushed garlic or horseradish, while the purists argue that the oyster should be savored as is. Hog Island Oyster Company provides their oyster eaters with their signature “Hog Wash,” a delicious blend of rice vinegar, cilantro, lime, onion, and jalapeño peppers.

Besides producing superb oysters, a vital part of Hog Island Oyster Company is sustainability. As marine biologists, growing oysters appealed to both Finger and Sawyer because of their positive environmental significance. “Oysters, more than any other food, are about place,” says Finger. “Oysters are about a bay that is functioning and healthy, and algae that’s blooming naturally. It’s extremely low impact.”

From start to finish, the oysters are carefully monitored for optimal growth. Most oyster farms purchase oyster larvae from a commercial hatchery, and then grow the larvae in a shellfish nursery onshore until they are ready to be



planted. These “seed oysters” are then planted in netting or pouches, so they are protected from the potentially deadly sun and mud. Feeding off the natural source of algae in the water, these oysters will grow from eighteen months to four years—depending on the type of oyster—before they are ready to be harvested.

From planting, to harvesting, to selling, to eating, the team at Hog Island Oyster Company is passionate and excited about every step of the work that they do. The Point Reyes location is alive with a tangible energy—humming with excitement as beds of oysters come in to the farm, barbeques sizzle with wet shells, and customer slurp Sweetwaters and Hog Wash at picnic tables. But it’s also clear that savoring every moment is a way of life at Hog Island, and the perpetual smiles are hard evidence that everyone has learned to simply slow down.

“You really feel like you’re part of a special place,” says Finger. “I still truly enjoy doing this, even after twenty-seven years.” ☐

Hog Island Oysters are available directly on site in Tomales Bay. The company’s perfect picnic area is complete with barbeques, large tables, and a bar with bottled beer and wine—chosen to complement the fresh out of the water oysters that customers can enjoy.