

TOBY ISLAND BAY OYSTERS

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Chincoteague Island, on Virginia's Eastern Shore, is famous for its oysters.



History

Chincoteague oysters are storied. Once a major oyster producer, Chincoteague exported large numbers by ship, wagon and rail. Chincoteague oysters were so popular that overly eager New Yorkers, anticipating their arrival at Fulton Fish Market's docks, often resorted to fistfights to get to them first.

Taste

Most East Coast oysters are the same species (*Crassostrea virginica*). What makes an oyster's flavor distinct is the algal food, salinity and mineral content of the water it filters through its gills, which is why different areas produce very different tastes — like terroir with wines. Chincoteague oysters, distinctive, sweet and salty, are considered one of the world's finest oysters. Many fine New York, Dallas and DC-area restaurants have featured our oysters.

Environmentally Responsible

Farming oysters and other filter-feeding bivalve shellfish benefits the environment. Oysters improve water quality by filtering phytoplankton (algae), which reduces excess nutrients, making the water more transparent. This helps bottom plants, on which many other organisms depend, to thrive. Farmed oysters also reduce fishing pressure on and (if they spawn) help to restock local wild populations, and provide habitat for many other organisms. Few other farmed products can make such a claim. The leading independent guides and certification programs for responsible seafood, including the Monterey Bay Aquarium's *Seafood Watch* and the Aquarium of the Pacific's *Sustainable Seafood Forum*, and environmental nonprofits such as the Nature Conservancy and the Environmental Defense Fund, give culturing oysters in floating bags or on bottom racks — our practice — their top ranking.

Socioeconomically Sustainable

Wild shellfish stocks have declined in many areas. Some commercial fishermen, no longer able to obtain a livable income from shellfish harvesting, have had to find income elsewhere. Small-scale shellfish aquaculture can provide marine-based livelihoods for these watermen, preserving a lifestyle and trade crucial to maintaining the integrity of Chincoteague and other seaside towns. Our operation has involved local Chincoteague watermen from the start.

About Us

We are six partners. Four are native Chincoteaguers whose extended family goes back many generations. The fifth is a retired engineer-turned-charter boat operator. The sixth is a DC-based marine biologist. Two of our Chincoteaguers are 20-somethings who now, through this project, work on the water full-time.



