

8 February
High Tiders from Atlantic, North Carolina

Six oysters sit in the kitchen window dying beneath a heat lamp. Mike asks me if I have anyone waiting on the order. I tell him I don't. He inquires with the servers, none of whom either await the plate. These oysters seemingly exist for no one. They are accompanied by no ticket.

The phantom order vexes Mike as it vexes the rest of us, but I'm actually pretty busy, so I get back to work and try not to think about it.

Sokol, an Albanian man with a gold necklace and the top three buttons of his black dress shirt undone, calls me over a few minutes later. *We can't let them sit there forever*, he tells me.

No, we can't. But they have nowhere to go. It can't be helped.

All that heat is no good for them, he says.

No, it's no good for them at all, I affirm. But perhaps a ticket will appear, or maybe an order for oysters will come in and this one can wastelessly be sent in its stead. We both know how this all should end, but we need another five minutes to justify our appetites with plausible deniability. Sokol and I return to our duties, leaving the oysters to bask in the no good heat.

A little while later, Sokol finally boils over. *We can't let this happen*, he says as he grabs the bowl. Sokol walks like a signal flare and I'm a search and rescue helicopter. He places them in the middle of the kitchen, next to the oyster station. I decide that there's something funny about seeing six clean oysters on the half-shell in a handmade bowl filled with pebble ice right next to a big sloppy pile of unshucked rocks.

Enough for us each to have one, he tells me while fixing his with a hearty pour of mignonette. I'm tempted to break my rule about not dressing a first oyster, but these are High Tiders and I still find them delightful as they are. When I bring mine to my lips, I find that the bottom adductor is still attached. A whole sip of liquor cascades over my pallet and I drink it deep as I search for the means to free the body from the cupped shell. When I finally fumble into position, a light push cleanly separates it.

I immediately recognize the profile as both familiar and somehow different. There's the usual medium-high brine, but also a new nuttyness. Maybe even some wild mushroom notes. Were these always here? Have I just missed them? Maybe it has to do with the winter storms we've been getting recently; Chef has mentioned High Tiders's inconsistency regarding preparedness to inclement weather. I'd usually ask him about it, but today is his day off.

The earthiness subsides and a sort of creamy texture fills my mouth, followed immediately by the characteristic kiss of iron. It was a remarkably good oyster, but I'm stuck on that odd note. Sokol returns to the floor and I take the long way around, holding onto those final lingering notes like a secret from the world.

12 February
Blue Points from Westport, Connecticut

Wait, wait, says Hamza while plating a chocolate pudding cake. I halt by the oyster station. It's not my first time through the kitchen today, but it is the first time I have walked through with the intention of asking about oysters. Hamza must have expected this; we talked about it the night before at the next-door bar where everyone congregates after certain long shifts. I brought up wanting to try the new fare, and he told me that he'd hook it up if I reminded him tomorrow. Evidently my stride was reminder enough.

Yesterday's had been a gnarly bunch. Larvae clung to spats which clung to adult oysters, each so gargantuan that their bottom shell had grown from the familiar cupped shape into a vaguely threatening outward arch. "One" taken wholesale resembled a tumor on an MRI that you don't want your doctor showing you. Today's look a bit cleaner, but not by much.

Hamza plucks a big one and gets to work on it. I was hoping he'd pick something more approachable, but he's busy with pre-shift prep and I have no place begging and choosing. Fumbling around the hinge, he pulls back scores of grit on his short flat blade. Hamza's a shucking pro, but this bugger's giving him grief.

What the fuck, he says to me in a Moroccan accent. As if those words were a sort of "open sesame," he finally breaks the seal. Pushing his knife around the curved, allegedly "flat" top shell, he makes it about halfway through before the top shell breaks in half. Little shards crumble into the bottom, its contorted figure now struggling to hold the once-interior liquor. When he finally opens the oyster up proper, he pokes his latex-gloved index finger in and swishes around the body to confirm that the meat is floating freely before handing it over.

I thank him, and I mean it, but I also almost don't mean it. This oyster terrifies me.

Hamza rushes back to the dessert station, leaving me to face it alone. Smelling it, I find a bouquet of sea breeze and pumpkin pulp. Salinity's there, but in measured weight. Silently telling myself to man up, I knock it back.

Its unwieldy size makes it a challenge to chew. I don't take bites this big of anything. Crushing it between my tongue and the roof of my mouth, I realize just how challenging this entire endeavor will be. Those pieces of shell from before haunt me, sticking to my teeth when I'm lucky and floating in the mess of meat and juice and spit when I'm not. I don't blame Hamza. He was busy, and it probably wasn't the best time to strut through the kitchen in search of a snack. But now I'm a hazard frozen in everyone's way, singularly determined to get this fucking oyster down.

I push shell fragments to my lips to pick them off. I don't want these tiny razors in my mouth, and I really don't want them in my belly, and I really *really* don't want them out the other end. The challenge suddenly shifts from getting the oyster past my throat to getting the itty bits out, so I continue to work it all with my tongue in search of foreign entities. The meanwhile flavor itself isn't bad; nice salt and solid cream with some funky vegetal notes. I think I'd be into one of the more reasonably-sized ones. The giants would be perfect fried, or as Oysters

Rockefeller, or maybe in some kind of chowder. They've got a nice taste. But I'm not taking this giant fried or Rockefellered or chowdered, I'm taking it raw. And really, at this point, it's taking me.

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Chef Nathan sits down at the bar after the shift and I pour him a beer and the last of our Four Roses Single Barrel bourbon. Jenney and I are almost done cleaning, so she lets me off early since I worked a double. I swoop around to the other side of the bar and don my Boston Red Sox cap to signify that I'm off the clock. Jenney hands me a mispoured Pinot Gris from earlier in the night, which we forgot to use up.

Mind if I join you, Chef? I ask, setting my stuff two seats down from him.

Not at all. he says. *Please.* He's watching the Winter Olympics on the restaurant's only TV, where some guy in a skintight suit shoots foreign targets in a frozen landscape. *What the fuck sport is this?* he asks. I tell him it's the one where people ski cross-country routes between rounds of target shooting. *Holy shit, they're on skis!?* he laughs.

I sip my wine and change the subject. *Do you know what farm today's oysters were from? I missed lineup, and Chase told me that "Blue Point" is a heritage breed from Long Island.*

I don't, he tells me. *I had to get them at a restaurant wholesale vendor because it's basically impossible to get High Tiders right now.* I remember the last High Tider I had, distinguished by a weird fungal note. I asked him about that note a few days ago, and he told me that there are a lot of possible reasons for it, ranging from changes in the phytoplankton oysters consume to the uncharacteristically snowy past few weeks. Regardless, the restaurant can't get them at all now. Ergo today's Blue Points.

High Tiders are totally out? Is it weather stuff? I ask.

Probably, he replies. *They don't know how to deal with the cold down here.* The guy on TV finishes a round of targets and treks onward. *Wow, imagine how much these people care about this sport, and how they've dedicated their lives to it, and how obscure and niche it ends up being,* Chef says. I can't imagine; how it must feel to be so good at something that no one cares about. Maybe it's affirming, or maybe it's lonely. *I'm gonna be pissed if it isn't called "ski-shooting,"* he says.

It's not.

The guy on TV digs into uphill slopes with a rifle strapped to his back. *Fuck that,* says Chef. *I'm glad you're so into the oysters, though.*

I'm not really an oyster guy, I explain, swirling the wine in my glass. *I pretty much never touched seafood for the first twenty years of my life, and only started eating oysters a few years back at the insistence of a friend. To be honest, I didn't care for them at first. But now I'm just more curious than anything.*

What did you think of this batch? he asks.

I admire their profile, but I think their body proved too much for me to handle.

Yeah, he answers, I get bored of the High Tiders, and was blown away by some Blue Points a few months ago. So I come back to them now and again. This instance of return was one of necessity rather than intrigue, but I understand the appeal. The guy on TV crosses the finish line and everyone cheers.

11 March

Signature Katama Bays from Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts

In his last few days before leaving for a new job in Nantucket, Chef Nathan has begun giving his lineup oyster spiels directly to me. His attention bounces around the room when describing the *soup du jour* and daily catch, but when it comes to the oyster, it's fixed on mine. Everyone else takes notes as an audience.

I don't really mind, especially given that today's cuts come from Massachusetts waters, and Chef and I share deep New England ties. It therefore comes as no surprise when I approach him at the dessert station to ask—right before the dinner rush—if I can try one of the new pulls. *Of course, he tells me, but we're still running out High Tiders stock right now. Here, follow me.* I trail him into the walk-in where he plunges his gloved hand into an opaque ocean of ice and snags an oyster. *If the oyster smells like cinnamon, he says, it's not because it actually smells like cinnamon. Cinnamon's just the last thing I touched.* He leads me to Angel, starting work on an oyster order for actual guests. *Angel, he says, can you do this one for Ben?*

Angel obliges, *yes Chef.* Chef returns to his work and Angel leans over to me. *Is five dollar, bro, he whispers.*

Shit, man, I joke, I left my wallet up front.

Woah, bro, woah—too much English.

Angel makes quick work of the oyster. Before I have time to take notes, it's separated and cleaned. I thank him and take it back.

That northeastern brine hits and immediately reminds me of a Rocky Rhode oyster from Point Judith, Rhode Island that I had last year. Despite having spent significantly more of my youth in Martha's Vineyard than southern Rhode Island, that Rocky Rhode took me back to the waters I swam as a child. I'd hazard a guess that ecosystems just differ more radically from coast to mainland than they do from bay to bay, but I'm not positive. Regardless, there's something in that cold New England water that's familiar to me—even if a bit more mild in this Katama Bay than those Rocky Rhodes.

The word for it all is *merroir*, which is quasi-made-up. It combines the French *mer*, which means *sea*, and *terroir*, which is a sommelier term that refers to the qualities of a land (*terre*) embodied in a wine. The soil, climate, and altitude all come together to produce the wine's *terroir*, or sense of place. *Merroir* is the same thing, but with oysters. It's what's bringing me back to the water that flooded my nose during childhood dives off Martha's Vineyard bridges.

What really stands out beyond my almost Pavlovian response is this oyster's sweetness. The creaminess is nearly as arresting as the saline, which is characteristically intense. I think of

the confectioner I used to visit on the Vineyard as a boy, which specialized in fudges and peanut brittles. The ocean's salty breeze mingled with their airborne sugar particles and other myriad aromas, and together permanently burned themselves into my noggin. The oyster finishes clean, but I'm still there. Almost.

Wait, is that cinnamon?