

CHAMPAGNE & OYSTERS:

A PARTY FOR YOUR MOUTH

By Annette Gallagher Weisman

On a sunny, fall day in the Napa Valley, I drove by Domaine Carneros, known for its premium sparkling and still wines. As I watched visitors, flutes in hand, mingle on the chateau's expansive terrace, it brought to mind a Gatsby-like scene of men and women in elegant attire sipping Champagne and slurping oysters on Long Island's North Shore. For me, the words Champagne and oysters convey a sense of occasion.

Sparkling wine cannot be called Champagne unless it comes from the exalted Champagne AOC (appellation of controlled origin) in the Champagne province in northeast France.

But whether it's called Champagne or sparkling wine, a taste for bubbly is more easily acquired than for oysters. As Coco Chanel once said, "I only drink Champagne on two occasions, when I am in love, and when I am not." On the other hand, Woody Allen said of oysters, "...I want my food dead. Not sick. Not wounded. Dead."

If the thought of eating raw oysters is off-putting, they can be cooked and enjoyed in tasty dishes such as the famous Oysters Rockefeller or Oyster Stew. These recipes and others can be found in the *Hog Island Oyster Lover's Cookbook: A Guide to Choosing & Savoring Oysters, with 40 Recipes*. Aside from its oyster bars on the San Francisco waterfront and in Napa, Hog Island's Oyster Farm in Marshall is well worth visiting. Seated at picnic tables,



Photo by Remy Hale.

visitors can admire the view overlooking Tomales Bay and be served an unlimited number of oysters, or they can reserve a table, bring a picnic, and buy and shuck oysters themselves.

For everything you wanted to know about Champagne, I recommend a beautiful book by Peter Liem called *Champagne: The Essential Guide To The Wines, Producers, And Terroirs Of The Iconic Region*. The other drawer of this boxed set contains seven maps of Champagne's vineyards suitable for framing – a perfect gift for your favorite wine lover.

Just like a wine's terroir, an oyster's taste derives from its environment, and the flavor of each variety depends on where it grows. My mother likened eating oysters to inhaling a sea breeze, but a true ostreophile won't let an oyster slip down the throat without chewing it slowly to fully appreciate the different flavors such as sweet, briny, creamy, smoky, minerally, melon, and cucumber.

This holiday season, have yourself a merry little Champagne and oyster party. Here are a few suggestions:

- Go to your favorite wine store and fishmonger for recommendations. Expensive Champagnes are not necessary. You'll find many good buys in the \$30 to \$50 range as well as sparkling wines such as Cava or Prosecco for less.
- Choose oysters from both the East and West Coast. If available, include Kumamotos, which are universally popular and small, and therefore less intimidating. Oysters come shucked or unshucked and will remain fresh in the refrigerator for a few days if you follow directions.
- Set the mood. Whether you dress up in diamonds and pearls or prefer a festive sweater and jeans, that's up to you. It's your party so choose the music you prefer too, though Diana Krall, Michael Feinstein and Pink Martini are usually a hit with Champagne-sipping and oyster-slurping sophisticates.
- Supply guests with cards that offer descriptions of the oysters and Champagnes selected. Keep it simple: write on the back a) which oyster you prefer, b) which Champagne, or sparkling wine (if you go that route) you prefer, and c) which combination stole your heart.
- Drink slowly giving the bubbles time to dissipate in your mouth. 🍷

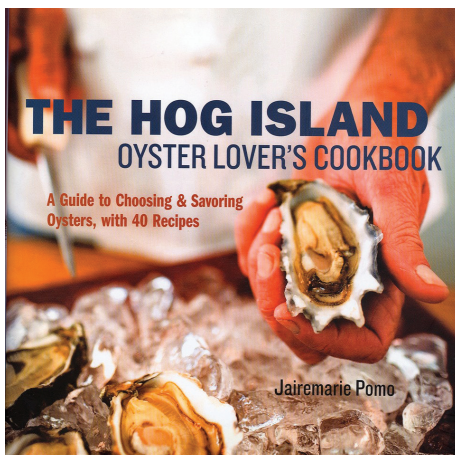


Photo by Laura Schneider.