THE OYSTERS OF LONG ISLAND

Snuggled within the forked foreshore of Long Island’s East End are Peconic Bay, Noyac Bay and Gardiner’s Bay. A hundred years ago, after the prodigious oyster beds of the Great South Bay were destroyed, the East End waters took up the slack, harvesting mountains of oysters from the clean waters of Greenport and Shelter Island. The oysters were as sweet as could be, and grew justly famous. Then the oyster beds disappeared, done in by pollution and a brown tide in 1984–85 that scorched the life out of Peconic Bay, starting with the phytoplankton and working its way up the food chain. Fortunately, there has been a revival. Here’s a selection of those boutique mollusks you might find at your nearest raw bar.

Great White
Another of those white, salty, full-bodied, tannic, bristle-shelled Long Island oysters. Great Whites, as you’d expect from the name, are pretty big, and usually good value.

Saddle Rock
One of New York’s famous old oyster names, the original Saddle Rock was a formation in the East River near Norwalk Harbor. If you liked large oysters, you looked for Saddle Rocks. By 1832 Saddle Rocks were kaput. But the name has cleverly been revived—and trademarked. Today, they are from the Connecticut side of Long Island Sound, and of medium size, with medium brine. Think of them as a larger, saltier Bluepoint.

Widow’s Hole
With some of the most prestigious New York oyster accounts, including Le Bernardin, the Grand Central Oyster Bar and Della Faminia, the rich, lively Widow’s Hole flavor derives from the Peconic itself, and from the hundred-foot-deep channel running between Greenport and Shelter Island, through which most of the bay funnels.

Great South Bay
When last we left the Great South Bay, it was a 1940s cesspool of duck sauce, not fit for oysters or even people. The Bluepoints Company, which staggered through the second half of the 20th century importing frozen lobster, actually tried its hand at oysters again in 1998. The business was never profitable and the facility, in West Sayville, may soon be transformed into condos. But somebody out there is selling Great South Bay oysters. Keep your eyes, and your taste buds, peeled.

Peconic Bay
The Shelter Island Oyster Company was one of the big players in Long Island oysters right up to the 1950s. Now some clever islanders have revived the name and grow oysters on an 86-acre farm in the clean and salty waters of Gardiner’s Bay on the east side of Shelter Island. Like other Peconic Bay oysters, Shelter Islands have the distinctive black-and-rust shells and the black stripe on the top valve. The shells are wafer-thin, so you must be very careful to characterize East End oysters. Shuck with care.

Pipes Cove
A mainstay at the Grand Central Oyster Bar, at Nick & Toni’s in East Hampton, and other tonier places, Pipes Cove oysters are Greenport neighbors to Widow’s Hole, the two coves separated by Fanning Point. Pipes Covés live in the back 40 of the Silver Sands Motel, growing just beyond the roped-off swimming area. Both Pipes Cove and Widow’s Hole have a salted iron flavor note that is the essence of Greenport oysters.

Oysterponds
Oysterponds are the epitome of East End oysters. They have the classicumber-and-black shells, which in my experience always yield a particularly savory oyster with a refreshingly tannic, east-bay bite. Oysterponds grow so fast—note the soft lip on the bill—that they have the thin shells that also seem to characterize East End oysters.