



THE OYSTERS OF LONG ISLAND

Snuggled within the forked fishtail 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, brittle-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.

Pipes Cove

A mainstay at the Grand Central Oyster Bar, at Nick & Toni's in East Hampton, and other toney places, Pipes Cove oysters are Greenport neighbors to Widow's Hole, the two coves separated by Fanning Point. Pipes Coves 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.

Widow's Hole

With some of the most prestigious New York oyster accounts, including Le Bernardin, the Grand Central Oyster Bar and Della Famina, 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.



Bluepoint

Coasting on their name for nearly two centuries, you will see Bluepoints on every oyster menu in Manhattan. The oysters themselves are seeded on the bottom of Long Island Sound, both the Oyster Bay area of Long Island and the Norwalk area of Connecticut, dredged up a few years later, and have an extremely mild taste.

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.

Robin's Island (East End)

Oysters harvested from the waters near this unblemished 435-acre paradise in Peconic Bay are also known as East Ends. They have that recognizably Peconic medium brine and body and iron richness, though not quite the liveliness of a Widow's Hole or Oysterponds, which come from closer to the open sea.

Mecox Bay

Mecox Bay is home to weekend mansions and to a surprisingly robust population of wild oysters, perhaps the last in the region. As a wild oyster, a Mecox Bay can only be harvested in season, which runs from mid-November to the end of April. Its flavor is mild, not salty, and oddly alkaline. Brewster's Seafood in Hampton Bays, has a saltwater well in Shinnecock where it relays Mecox oysters to get them salted up before selling them.

Shelter Island

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 not to shatter them, but once inside you will find a savory three-inch oyster.

Oysterponds

Oysterponds are the epitome of East End oysters. They have the classic umber-and-black shells, which in my experience always yield a particularly savory oyster with a refreshingly tannic, cast-iron 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. Shuck with care.