

DESTINATION UNKNOWN

Written by Eric Francis
Photography by Scott Erb and Donna Dufault



East Boston Oysters is making a name for itself among shellfish fanciers with its secret suppers featuring locally-sourced food and drink.

Alexis Cervasio wants you to know that there's some incredible dining to be had in East Boston. But she's not going to tell you where to find it, or what's on the menu, until just 24 hours in advance.

Cervasio founded East Boston Oysters two years ago to help raise the profile of her own neighborhood, which she felt was too often overlooked in the city's food scene.

"I live in East Boston, and I would walk around and there were things happening, but they were off the beaten path," says Alexis. "People didn't want to cross the harbor, [they would say] it was too far away. But it's not – it takes me 13 minutes to get to the city."

Her initial East Boston Oysters events drew upon the network of "great chefs, farmers, and wine nerds" she knew on the east side, and it offered fine dining on a small scale to bring people to the east side of the harbor and show them what was happening there. Cervasio had success, but then last May she offered up one at a secret location – not telling ticket-holders where to go until the day before – and the experience hooked her.

"The high I got off that feeling," she says, "I never wanted to return."

Cervasio recognizes that at \$125 per ticket, she's asking her diners to put a great deal of trust into her hands, and she is intent upon not betraying it.

"I guess you kind of have to be adventurous," she says. "You don't know where you're going and you don't know what you're eating, so you literally don't have any idea what you're doing."

Once the gusts have arrived, the veil remains drawn even across their social media posts. Want to know if one of your friends has been? Look for a check-in at Curly's Auto Repair – an East Boston Oysters tradition that dates back to the first meal.

For November's event, held on an overcast Sunday afternoon in a condo at The Eddy high rise, she called upon a couple of transplanted Texans to ensure she had enough good local oysters to make everyone happy.



"We're ranching oysters, is the way we look at it," says Dan Martino, the proprietor along with his brother Greg of Cottage City Oysters on Martha's Vineyard.

It was actually television production that brought Martino from Houston to Martha's Vineyard about a decade ago. He fell in love

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with the island and an island girl – and became curious about oyster farming after producing a TV program about it.

“I went to work with one of the farmers one Saturday,” he recalls. “One Saturday turned into two, and two Saturdays turned into ‘I can come do this on Wednesday, too.’”

Now the brothers have their own oyster farm, seeding the waters with 500,000 baby oysters every year. It’s an entirely organic operation – the Martinos mostly let the oysters do their thing, each filtering 50 gallons of water a day and picking up the terroir generated by the environment around them. But they aren’t entirely left to their own devices.

“We don’t ever eat one or two at a time – it’s more like, ‘Let’s bring a few hundred home and gorge on them.’”

“On our farm we’ve handled that oyster a hundred – if not a thousand – times before it’s on the plate,” Martino explains. “You handle them because you want to sculpt the shell, make sure they’re clean [of barnacles].”

One step they take is to tumble the oysters, which chips the leading edge of the shell. That causes the oyster to stop growing wider and start growing deeper – which means a bigger meat and more liquor when it’s harvested.

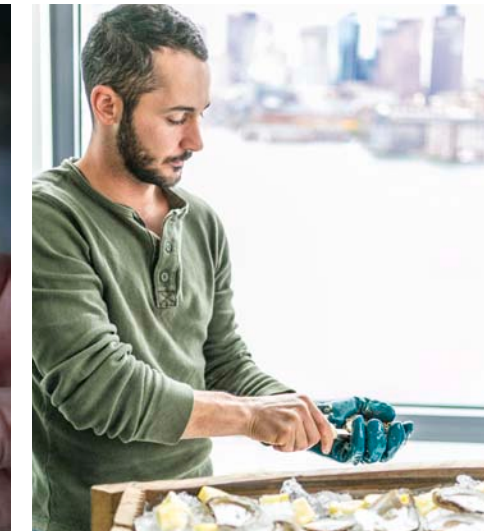
“We try to raise the most beautiful, big oyster we can,” he says.

That certainly describes the oysters that the Martino brothers were shucking and serving in November, where three dozen people wandered from room to room, glasses of Artifact Cider in hand, constantly circling back to the big trough of Cottage City Oysters as though they would never tire of eating them.

So, what about Martino – as a guy who handles oysters day in and day out, does he ever lose the taste for his own shellfish, even briefly?

“No, no, no!” he says, laughing. In fact, the brothers don’t bother to go small when it comes to their own oyster appetites.

“We’ll do a big raw bar and oyster cook-out. Thrown them on the grill with seaweed on top, bake ‘em, a little Rockefeller,” Dan says. “We don’t ever eat one or two at a time – it’s more like, ‘Let’s bring a few hundred home and gorge on them.’” **F**



Dan and Greg Martino of Cottage City Oysters on Martha's Vineyard



Alexis Cervasio