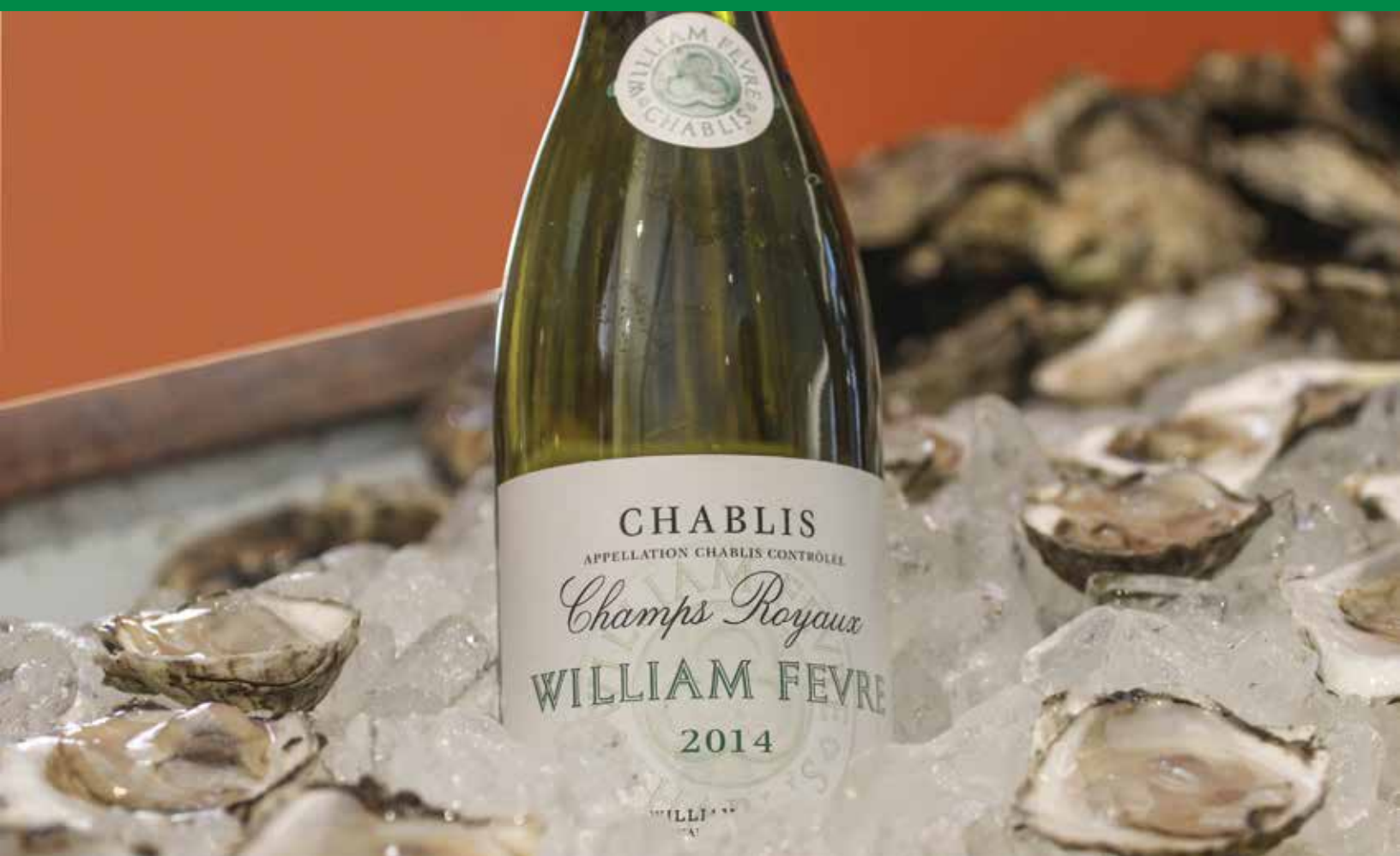


Oysters & Chablis

A PAIRING GUIDE

by Rowan Jacobsen



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Congratulations! If you've opened this guide, you are about to discover one of life's quintessential pleasures: Slurping fresh oysters on the half shell with a bottle of Chablis. Parisians have enjoyed this particular ritual for centuries. Americans are happily rediscovering it. This guide is here to help.

Here's what you'll find inside:

The Essence of the Shore.

Why eating an oyster is like kissing the sea.

The Sea of Chablis.

Why I think Chablis is the ultimate oyster wine.

Making Sense of Oysters.

The factors that make them different.

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A Dozen Oysters to Look For.

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The Essence of the Shore

When you eat a raw oyster on the half-shell, you are instantly transported to the shore. You can smell the beach and the wind. You can almost hear the waves hissing over the rocks. It's an experience like no other food, and it's because of an oyster's lifestyle.

An oyster is a filter feeder. All day long, it pumps water across its gills, filtering out the microscopic plankton that it eats, so an oyster really is the sea in concentrated form. It's intense, and it calls out for balance.

That's why what's in your glass is so very important.



The Sea of Chablis

When people ask me to recommend a wine for oysters, I always tell them to repeat after me: Chablis, Chablis, Chablis. Lots of white wines go well with this oyster or that oyster, but in my experience, Chablis tastes great with all oysters. Why? Look no further than the soil beneath the vines.

Millions of years ago, the chalky white limestone of Chablis (think of the White Cliffs of Dover, which are part of the same geological feature) was the bottom of a shallow sea. That sea was rich in oysters and other shellfish, as well as microscopic shelled sea life. Over the eons, all this shell piled up on the bottom of the sea and compressed into the calcium-rich chalk we have today.



Dig through a Chablis vineyard and you'll find fossilized seashell everywhere. That unique rock gives Chablis its unmistakable wet-shell minerality. It's bracing freshness comes from the extremely cool climate, which preserves great acidity in the wines, but unlike some wines, good Chablis always balances its bite with a mineral-water softness. Minerality + freshness: You couldn't come up with a better formula for an oyster companion.

And no one ever has.



Making Sense of Oysters

Walk into a raw bar these days, and you may be overwhelmed by the variety of oysters. Many spots carry 10, 20, even 30 kinds, the selection shifting on a daily basis. And those oysters can be wildly different from each other in size, shape, and flavor. Here's why:

- There are five species of oysters in North America.
- Being filter feeders, oysters mirror the salinity of the water they grow in.
- Cold-water oysters taste different than warm-water oysters.
- Growing techniques affect the flavor.
- Every bay has a unique mix of plankton and minerals that oysters feed on.

Put that all together, and you can see why the hundreds of different oysters in America each have their own characteristics. Some are the size of your thumbnail, some the size of your hand. Some are as salty as caviar, some as fresh as mineral water. Some taste like cucumbers and melon rind, some like nori, and others like the beach.

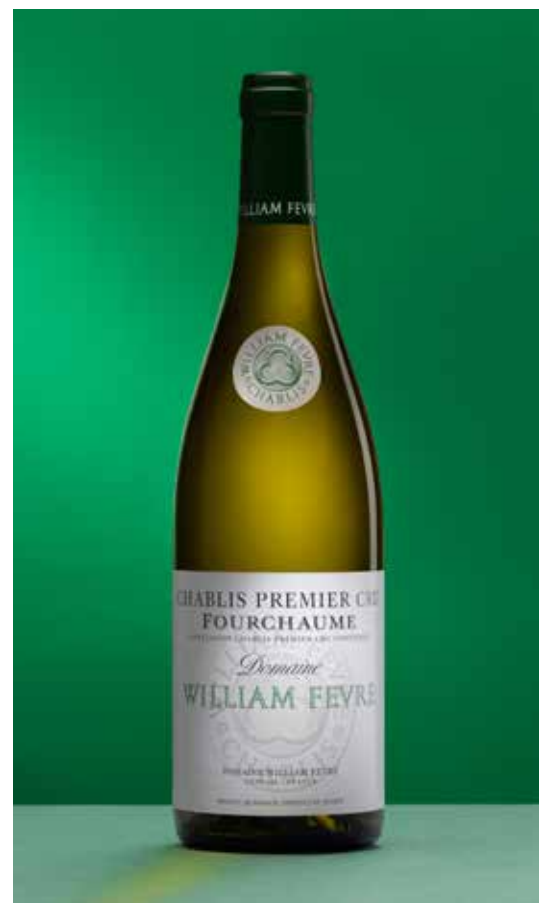
My Pet Peeve

If I only had a Euro for every time I've heard someone say, "Oysters and dry white wine are a match made in heaven." It's kind of like saying, "Fish and wine go well together." Are you talking tuna, bluefish, or cod? As you can imagine from the descriptions above, certain oysters work with certain wines and fail miserably with others.

Take Sauvignon Blanc. It tastes wonderfully fruity and tart with Pacific oysters (this is the classic combination in Bordeaux), but pair it with East Coast oysters and it can taste harsh and metallic. The same goes for Muscadet. Happy pairings are more specific than you'd think. Eastern oysters in particular, which are unique to the Eastern Seaboard of North America, are very challenging for wine—but when they're good, they're spectacular.

Of all the white wines I've explored, only Chablis seems to work with all oysters. (And Champagne, of course. Champagne goes with everything.) It's because of that distinctive seashell minerality. You sip the wine, slurp the oyster, go back to the wine, and spiritually, you've never left the coast of that ancient, Jurassic sea. The wine and the oysters keep you right on the shore, with breakers crashing against the rocks and bursting around you, salt spray in your nose.

That's the essence of Chablis and oysters.





A Dozen Oysters to Look For

The following twelve oysters cover the gamut of styles.
All are widely available and particularly good with Chablis.

Eastern

	LOCATION	PROFILE	NOTES	GOOD NEIGHBORS
Beausoleil	Miramichi Bay, New Brunswick	Petite, spiffy white shells and light-bodied meats with a yeasty dough flavor.	Beausoleils are typical of the petite oyster style of the Canadian Maritimes, where the ice-cold water keeps the oysters small and mild. A great starter oyster and a nice, light match for Chablis.	Caraquet Lameque Saint Simon
Bluepoint	Long Island Sound	Heavy, gnarly shells and a briny, metallic flavor.	The most famous of all oysters, harvested around Long Island for centuries. Always big, strong, wild, and a bit uncouth. Not for sissies.	Pine Island Mystic Naked Cowboy
Gulf Coast	Gulf of Mexico	Massive and mild, with irregular shapes and huge muscles.	Oysters grow wild throughout the Gulf Coast, especially in Louisiana. They tend to be much more robust than other oysters, with incredibly thick shells, and are less salty due to the huge flow of freshwater from the Mississippi River and the bayous. That allows their minerality to come through and gives them a great affinity for Chablis.	Point aux Pins Murder Point Pelican Reef
Island Creek	Duxbury Bay, Massachusetts	Midsized white-and- black shells and firm briny meat with a lobster-stock finish	Island Creek is the best known of the many excellent Cape Cod Bay oysters, which tend to have strong, white shells from being grown intertidally, and a rich flavor reminiscent of a New England clambake: sweet corn, shellfish, salt.	Moon Shoal Standish Shores Wellfleet
Pemaquid	Damariscotta River, Maine	Big, powerful white oysters with thick shells and pure, savory meats.	Maine's brackish Damariscotta River holds half a dozen of the finest oyster farms in America. In its icy waters, oyster grow slowly; by the time they reach market size, they have a density to them you rarely find elsewhere. Expensive, but worth every penny.	Glidden Point Johns River Dodge Cove
Sewansecott	Eastern Shore, Virginia	Profoundly briny blast of the Atlantic Ocean.	Sewansecotts have been grown since the 1800s by the Terry family of Virginia's Eastern Shore. Those are the same shallow, marshy waters that nurture the famous Chincoteague oyster. With no rivers in the area, the oysters are as salty as the ocean. This makes them a disaster with New World wines, but a sip of Chablis cuts through the salt like a knife.	Chincoteague Olde Salt Misty Point



A Dozen Oysters to Look For (cont'd)

Pacific

	LOCATION	PROFILE	NOTES	GOOD NEIGHBORS
Hama Hama	Hood Canal, Washington	Lichen-green shells, scuffed up by life on the beach, with delicately sweet flesh inside.	Grown on the edge of the Olympic Peninsula, where the Hama Hama River pours out of the snowcapped mountains, Hama Hamas are the classic example of the green watermelon-rind style of Pacific oysters. The herbaceousness calls for vibrant, high-acid Chablis.	Baywater Sweet Discovery Bay Penn Cove Select
Hog Island Sweetwater	Tomales Bay, California	Stunning black and purple shells with briny, cucumbery flesh.	The definitive California oyster, grown in bags raised off the bottom of Tomales Bay, just north of San Francisco. Great with local wines, but beautiful with Chablis.	Tomales Bay Point Reyes Scotty's Cove
Kusshi	Deep Bay, British Columbia	Very small and smooth, with a fruity, green-apple scent.	Kusshi was the original tumbled oyster. It's tossed into a high-tech mechanical drum every week or two so it gets as smooth and curved as a golf ball. This also makes the meat full, firm, and mild.	Stellar Bay Gold Black Pearl
Shigoku	Willapa Bay, Washington	Small, smooth, and dark-shelled, with a buttery nori finish.	Very popular oyster tumbled in "flip bags" that toss in the tides, polishing the shells and strengthening the scallop-like muscle inside.	Goose Point Blue Pool Chelsea Gem
Totten Inlet	Puget Sound, Washington	Barnacle-encrusted shells open to reveal ridiculously plump oysters with an intense flavor reminiscent of bacon fat and foie gras.	For more than a century, Totten Inlet has been recognized as the richest oyster fattening grounds in the world. Down at the very end of Puget Sound, its waters get thick with the exact right mix of plankton to grow super-pampered oysters. The rich oysters contrasts beautifully with the zing of Chablis and bring out its stony quality.	Skookum Steamboat Eld Inlet

Kumamoto

	LOCATION	PROFILE	NOTES	GOOD NEIGHBORS
Kumamoto	Chapman Cove, Washington	Small, deep-cupped, with a ridged shell and plump flesh that is sweet and melon-scented.	This tiny cousin of the Pacific oyster is the most wine-friendly oyster in the world. It loves Chablis, and Chablis loves it. The wine brings out the pickled melon in the oyster.	Kumamotos from California have a similar profile



Dressed or Naked?

Long ago, American culture seized on cocktail sauce as the go-to topping for raw oysters, an idea that sends shivers down the spine of any true oyster lover. (James Beard called it “the red menace.”) Cocktail sauce tastes fine, and if it’s your thing, then by all means use it; you just aren’t going to taste the oyster beneath. (And you’re going to destroy whatever wine you’re drinking it with; better stick to beer.)

In France, Mignonette sauce—red-wine vinegar, pepper, and minced shallots—is the classic accompaniment. A few drops of mignonette gives oysters a deliciously tart, fruity finish, but the raw shallots can also be a little harsh on your wine.

In recent years, American raw bars have been creating amazingly imaginative riffs on mignonette. Substitute citrus juice or champagne vinegar for the red-wine vinegar, chopped herbs for the shallots, and all sorts of extra spices, and you have some fantastic toppings. The best I’ve encountered are frozen like slushies. Use in moderation, so you don’t overwhelm the oyster.

More and more, I’ve fallen in love with simplicity. A mini squeeze of lemon on a Pacific oyster, or a quick grind of pepper on an Eastern oyster, is perfection. And you couldn’t make a glass of Chablis happier.

When I’m eating the world’s finest oysters, however, I go more simple still. Naked, in fact. A great oyster is an extraordinary summation of all the influences in its bay: The ocean, the watershed, the phytoplankton, the marsh vegetation, the minerals in the mud, and who knows what else. It has a lot to say. So I try not to muffle its voice. All it needs is an equally great wine as an accompanist.

Tips and Rituals

Here are some of the questions I get asked all the time (along with the answers):

How do I eat a raw oyster?

Lift it up in its shell, bring the curved end to your lips, then quickly dump the whole contents into your mouth, as if you were slurping Champagne from a slipper.

Do I chew?

Yes. Chew a few times, to mix the salty belly with the sweet muscle, then swallow it all at once.

What about forks?

That's a French thing, because in France they don't cut the oyster off the bottom shell for you, so you have to do it yourself with a fork. (It's supposed to be a sign of authenticity, proving that the oyster was freshly shucked.) In America, forks are too fussy.

How should I serve them?

Cold, cold, cold. On a bed of ice, if possible, which also helps keep the shells upright.

Do I swallow the liquid?

Yes, it's part of the oyster essence. If there's too much and it's too salty, then you can tip it out of the shell before eating the oyster.

What do I do with the shells?

After you eat the oyster, you can return the shell to the bed of ice, face down, and admire its beauty.

How do I choose oysters in a store?

Choose ones that are heavy for their size (indicating they haven't lost their liquid), just like you would fruit. Their shells should be clamped tight. Don't buy any that are gapping.

How do I store them?

Covered in the fridge. They'll last a week or more.

What about the R rule?

The R rule, which held that oysters should be eaten only in months with Rs in them (September–April) only applied in the pre-refrigeration days when all oyster were wild. The season was closed in summer so that oysters could reproduce, and so they wouldn't rot in the sun on hot docks. Today, oysters are farmed and are kept refrigerated from the moment they are pulled out of the water. You can eat them year-round.

Choosing a Good Chablis

Chablis is a wine appellation in Northwest France, technically part of the larger Burgundy appellation known for its benchmark Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs. Chablis is located in the most northern part of the Burgundy region, and is actually quite close to the Champagne region. The 2 regions share a cool, almost marginal climate as well as limestone soils and penchant for making some of the most beautiful and long-lived Chardonnay based wines in the world. The Chablis region is synonymous with Chardonnay, their Kimmeridgian soil is pock marked with fossilized seashells, long ago sealing the fate of the perfect marriage of Chablis and oysters.

So - what does that mean when choosing a Chablis with your oysters? The classic, pure, mineral-driven Chablis style makes for a perfect partner but there are some nuances. A young, recent vintage (2013, 2014 vintages are the most current) will have fresh, citrus aromatics, austere styling and a tightly wound structure, especially for the Premier Crus and Grand Crus. Older vintages (4+ years on them) will be richer, with the profile shifting towards hazelnuts, golden pear and have a denser, more widely knit palate. A good entry-level Chablis like William Fèvre's Champs Royaux, is sourced from all over the Chablis region and will be the most friendly to all types of oysters, refreshing, crisp and mineral-driven - meant to be enjoyed in its youth and perfect for warm weather drinking.



Where to Learn More

A Geography of Oysters

"The Connoisseur's Guide to Oyster Eating in North America"

My original book. A complete guide to oyster culture.

The Essential Oyster

"A Salty Appreciation of Taste and Temptation" My new book.

Includes full-page photographs and tasting notes for the great oysters.

Oysterguide.com

My website devoted to oyster news and information.

Oysterater.com

Like Yelp for oysters. Information on hundreds of oysters, with reviews from other aficionados.

William Fevre Links

website: williamfevre.fr



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