Flavors from the sea

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Turning the Tide with Global Flavors

Service shellfish with a sumptuous sauce, grilled, smoked or simple and unadorned, and dive into an ocean of delicious possibilities.

As subtle and secretive as their lives on the seabed, the flavors of shellfish often have to be pried open by the chef’s skill. Yet, whether complemented by barbecued smoke, butter and wine, or curries and rich sauces, the shellfish’s oceanic undercurrents stands out all on its own.

And then there’s the oyster. Eaten raw on the half shell, it evokes the eater’s primal connection with the sea.

The World is Your Oyster

Asking anyone—but especially a chef—to describe his oyster experiences can feel a little personal. The answers often include terms such as “baked” and metaphors like “a kiss from the ocean.”

“Oysters are so good fried, but they’re also so good raw,” says Rhonda Fearn, executive chef with Morrison Community Living at Lambrook senior community in Atlanta, before revealing her ultimate oyster fantasy made reality: “I said, ‘Let’s put a little caviar on an oyster.’ Oh, my God. It’s an incredibly intense taste of the ocean.”

Regional styles and flavors create a personal connection to chefs and diners alike, and often serve as a jumping-off point for Fearn when thinking about ways to offer oysters.

“If you go up north to Boston, they’re eating oysters on the half shell with a little mignonette. In the Far East they’re eating them raw too, but also stir-frying and putting them in noodles,” she says. “And in New Orleans, they’re frying oysters and putting them in po’boys.”

Old-school dishes like oysters.

Rockefeller, baked with copious amounts of chopped greens and butter (very old school indeed—this dish was created in 1899 New Orleans) also happen to appeal to the older generations.

“That was the really fancy stuff when (residents) were growing up,” Fearn says. “But we can also try some funky takes on that dish. The chefs can riff on something like that, or something like clams casino, and we can serve it in the fine-dining restaurant.”

SLURP AND LEARN: (right) Chef and seafood expert Andy Wilkinson, left, helps Boston College’s dining team wow guests at the recent Seafood Extravaganza, which introduced students to the delights of raw oysters and also cooking methods for mussels on pasta, crab cakes, shrimp sliders and more.

But before you think oysters only appeal to a mature clientele, know that millennials also love the bivalve baubles.

At the recent Seafood Extravaganza at Boston College, the students were completely poached that there was a raw bar and patiently waited in long lines to get their own kiss from the ocean, served raw on the half shell.

The Seafood Extravaganza highlighted Boston College-Dining’s partnership with the Gulf of Maine Research Institute (GMRI), an organization with a scientific eye toward ecology and economies and sustainability in the seafood industry.

On hand for the event to cook, serve and educate about seafood was Andy Wilkinson, chef and seafood expert with North Coast Seafoods, a large seafood processor and distributor that partners with Boston College and several other New England schools.

The students devoured the raw oysters with just a little mignonette, the classic accompaniment, which consists of minced shallots, red wine vinegar and a touch of cracked black pepper.

Also served action station-style at the event were crab cake or shrimp sliders with chipotle mayo and Cajun fries and calamari patties over angel hair pasta.