



**HARVEST TIME:** An oyster picker heaves a cluster (designated by white box) into his Carolina Skiff. **RIGHT:** Andy Kidd presents a fresh "single select."





# The Life of an Oyster Company

"THE PAPERWORK put the old folks out; the hard work put the new folks out," said Larry Toomer at the beginning of a 16-hour day, explaining why the Bluffton Oyster Company, which he runs with his wife, Tina, is still around when every other local operation has folded.

"I can deal with regulations, and I'm not afraid of working hard. I've also known the local oyster workers all my life, so they're like family. I know how to work with them."

Larry Toomer, 45, is a third-generation oysterman from a tenacious family. His granddad, Simpson Toomer, labored for oyster tycoon Ralph Maggioni on Daufuskie Island for five years in the early 1910s before squaring off against the giant with his own competing oyster operation. Although Maggioni's three corporations controlled most of the beds, Simpson succeeded, serving markets as far away as England with his canned product.

Three of Simpson's four sons carried on his oyster operation until rising labor costs drove them out of business. Young Larry spent his first 25 years immersed in all stages of oyster production: picking the riverbanks, working the shucking houses, wholesaling, retailing, catering and protecting the resource.

Larry would be the first to admit that his Bluffton Oyster Company owes much to the group of African-American oyster workers who rescued it from closing in 1969 and named it the Bluffton Oyster Co-Op. They did it to protect their jobs when the previous owner died and his children no longer wanted to run it.

BY **RIGEL CROCKETT**  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **KIRT WITTE**

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## h e a r t y   o y s t e r   s t e w

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2 pints small, fresh Bluffton oysters  
2 cups potatoes, peeled and 1/4-inch diced  
1/2 cup Vidalia or Spanish onion, peeled and 1/4-inch diced  
1/2 cup leek, cut in half, washed well and sliced  
1/4 cup white celery, tiny inner stalks minced  
1 teaspoon garlic, peeled and minced  
2 bay leaves  
2 tablespoons butter  
1 cup water  
1 cup chicken broth  
2 cups broth; the strained liquid from the oysters,  
plus chicken broth  
1/2 cup French vermouth or dry white drinking wine  
1 cup half-and-half cream  
1 teaspoon hot pepper sauce  
salt to taste  
2 tablespoons fresh chives, minced

In a large soup pot over medium heat, add the potato, onion, leek, celery, garlic, bay leaves, butter, water and 1 cup broth. Cover and gently simmer about 10 minutes to combine the flavors. Do not brown; lower the heat if necessary. Add the second broth and wine. Continue simmering another 15 minutes until the potatoes are very soft. Remove the bay leaves. Add the cream and hot pepper sauce.

In a separate medium saucepan, heat the oysters just until the edges curl. Stir the oysters and accumulated juices into the stew. Sprinkle with chives and stir.

– from *Elizabeth on 37th*

When their Co-Op went bankrupt in 1982, local businessman Jerry Reeves and his partners bought it to preserve the important local industry and hoped to make it profitable. Renamed the Bluffton Oyster Company, the organization didn't turn a profit until Reeves hired Larry Toomer in 1993. The following year was its first in the black after decades of debt. Reeves soon cashed out by selling the facility and its associated land to the state, which in turn leased it to Toomer.

Standing on the company dock, I watched former Co-Op member Andy Kidd pilot his Carolina Skiff alongside with a load of oysters. When he'd tied up, I asked him if I could try one.

Kidd pulled off one of the rubber gloves that protect his hands from the sharp clusters he picks. He felt around in his mud-stained pockets and produced a rugged pocket knife. Holding the knife by the blade, he smacked its cheeks against the thin, round bill of a big "single select" oyster that he held in his left hand. When he'd chipped the bill, Kidd slipped his blade inside

and ran it along the oyster's one flat shell until he slit the strong adductor muscle that holds it closed.

As he pried the top off, he held the cupped shell steady so as not to spill the briny liquor that helps give May River oysters their prized flavor. He cut free the meat, which was blue veined and as succulent as it could be, filled with a winter's worth of glycerin stored for the important work of reproduction, come May. Kidd handed the cupped shell to me, and I tipped it back. It was salty-sweet, clean and almost buttery, with a texture so delicate I felt I was biting a stack of flower petals.

The Bluffton oyster is of the same species as any of the celebrated East Coast brands, such as the Blue Point or the Gulf oyster. They're all American oysters, *crassostrea virginica*, and their particular qualities are determined by one thing only: environment.

Bluffton oysters grow on the May River, which has a soft mud bottom. To gain distance from the suffocating mud and silt, May River oysters form their characteristic oblong shells, and further elevate themselves by growing in clusters. The May River's 8- to 10-foot tides, which are among the largest in the world, move vast amounts of clean ocean water over its banks. This dramatic water exchange prevents heavy rains from diminishing the river's salinity, as happens in the Chesapeake and Apalachicola bays, and perhaps more importantly, it prevents pollutants from accumulating near the delicate filter feeders.

This is not to say pollution is a problem for the May River. It has only one commercial facility: the Bluffton Oyster Company.

This company offers one more thing to locals, apart from the distinctive wild and briny flavor of its product: unparalleled freshness. In the time it takes to ship an oyster from the Pacific Coast, Nova Scotia, Long Island, the Chesapeake, the Gulf or even Florida, the oyster has started to consume its own sugars in a fight to stay alive.

"Best oyster in the world," Kidd said as I threw the empty shell in the water. "You never get tired of eating that oyster. I could eat them 24/7."

"How long have you been picking oysters?" I asked.

"Thirty-eight years. I've been picking oysters since I was twelve."

I did the math and figured he was 50, but he looked 10 years younger. The oyster-picking

lifestyle enticed me. It was a crisp, sunny morning and the oystermen were done for the day, their skiffs each filled with about \$200 worth.

Independent contractors rather than employees, the pickers are free to come and go with the tide. But I'd been told what it was like for them in the high-demand months of October, November and December, when it feels good to stand around an oyster roast's bonfire or to carve a turkey stuffed with corn bread and oysters. That time of year, the pickers face biting wind that funnels down the banks. Bent over for hours at a time, they slog through mud that wants to haul them under, swinging heavy culling hammers to break single selects, doubles or compact clusters from the dead shells that support them.

Out there, alone on the cold water, the oystermen face danger like all commercial fishermen do.

Flipping through a scrapbook of news clippings on the Oyster Company, I learned about the tragic drowning of Tyrone Smith, who fell from his boat while bringing in a load of oysters. His cumbersome hip waders, necessary for negotiating the muddy banks, filled with water and held him under. Smith was the last oysterman on the river to use one of the traditional wooden bateaux, known for their practical, cross-planked flat bottoms, their high-capacity wide beams, and their long, slender, water-slicing bows.

While these bateaux were immortalized in Jack Leigh's, "Oystering: A Way of Life," they're gone

from our rivers. Since the mid-'80s, oystermen have preferred the stable, unsinkable, barge-shaped Carolina Skiffs. But Tyrone Smith was nostalgic about his bateau, just as he was about his way of life.

In an interview for the *Carolina Morning News*, Smith had said, "When I first started working with my grandfather, it was kind of scary. You feel like you're abandoned out there. That's what it feels like to a person on his first time. I rather like it now."



**BOUNTY:** Empty oyster shells litter the banks of the Bluffton Oyster Company wharf. **LOOKING FOR MORSELS:** Vultures scavenge on a pile of shell that will later be dispersed on the riverbank to serve as a foundation, or cultch, for the next generation of oysters.





**LEASING THE LAND:** Larry and Tina Toomer operate the Bluffton Oyster Company.

The Toomers constructed a memorial entrance to the Oyster Company and called it Tyrone's Porch. Other clues, letters to the editor and statements to the press, showed how Smith's death had devastated Bluffton's oystering community. It was all the harder because he was young, because he relished the spiritual aspects of his work, and because there aren't a lot of young men interested in picking oysters these days.

But it's the shucking, rather than the picking, that is most threatened. One of Savannah's fish merchants, Charlie Russo, calls raw oyster shucking a dying art. A good shucker can fill an astounding eight or nine gallons a day in April, at the end of the season when the oysters are fat, and three gallons in September, at the beginning when the oysters are thin and spent from their summer's reproduction.

Government regulations have made the work harder still, requiring shucking rooms to be kept cold. Standing all day on a sloping cement floor, the workers use small space

heaters to warm their feet as they open the cold, sharp shells.

It's a service that Bluffton's loyal market appreciates as they keep demand as high as the May River can sustain. Indeed, the most likely complaint about the Bluffton oyster from restaurants and retailers is not about its higher price, but that it can be difficult to get during the busy periods of Thanksgiving and New Year's.

Acclaimed restaurant Elizabeth on 37th is so loyal to the Bluffton oyster that they've offered it prepared in no less than 12 different styles.

It's a loyalty that Larry Toomer intends to keep. He holds his prices steady when demand goes up, and he doesn't sell to northern restaurateurs in search of culinary novelty, which would stress the oyster population and drive the price up for locals. It shows a respect for a unique and fragile resource that's as important for the survival of our estuary as it is for a small, family-run oyster company that stands on a hundred years' worth of shells, nine miles up the pristine May River. **n**