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10 great places to make the world your oyster

If Champagne is the drink of choice on New Year's Eve, oysters are the meal. "They're celebratory and light," says **Erin Byers Murray**, author of *Shucked: Life on a New England Oyster Farm* (St. Martin's, \$25.99). "There's no better way to bring in the new year." Murray says the bivalve is in the midst of a comeback, with new producers and restaurants featuring them raw and cooked. She shares some favorite places to sample the shellfish with **Larry Bleiberg** for USA TODAY.

Meritage

St. Paul

Its inland location doesn't keep this restaurant from serving a wide variety of fresh oysters. "In the age of FedEx, all oysters in the U.S. can be shipped everywhere overnight," Murray says. Other pluses: a striking art nouveau-style building and a staff that knows its oysters. 651-222-5670; meritage-stpaul.com

Island Creek Oyster Bar

Boston

Murray concedes a bias toward this eatery because it's owned by the oyster producer where she worked for a year while researching her book. "It's really a stunning example of a farm-to-table type restaurant," she says. The oyster selection varies but is chosen by the farmers. She recommends trying an oyster slider — a miniature fried oyster on a brioche bun — accompanied by the house pilsner. 617-532-5300; islandcreekoysterbar.com

Maison Premiere

Brooklyn, N.Y.

You'll find nearly two dozen oyster varieties on the menu at this new restaurant in the Williamsburg neighborhood. Simply furnished with wooden stools and chairs and a marble bar, it's a tribute to old-fashioned oyster houses, Murray says. "You could imagine seeing it in New York 100 years ago." She suggests trying several Empire State oyster varieties for an informal tasting. 347-335-0446; maisonpremiere.com



St. Paul: Meritage boasts oysters from across the USA, a striking building and a knowledgeable staff.

The Walrus and the Carpenter

Seattle

This small restaurant in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood focuses on Washington state food, including Pacific oysters, which Murray says are melony and sweeter than the more briny Atlantic species. "They almost have a cucumber sense to them, a vegetal flavor." She suggests trying the local Samish Sweets. "Just really a nice, beautiful oyster." 206-395-9227; thewalrusbar.com

Bowens Island Restaurant

Charleston, S.C.

This rough-hewn graffiti-covered shack is famous for its oyster roasts, served family-style on newspapers. The oysters, which have an earthy taste, are warmed through just enough to pop open. "I don't know if they even have a menu. It's down and dirty," Murray says. 843-795-2757; bowensislandrestaurant.com

Matunuck Oyster Bar

East Matunuck, R.I.

You can't get any closer to the source than this bare-bones oyster shack that's adjacent to the owner's farm, Murray says. "You can sit right next to the water." Along with the oysters, she suggests trying the Portuguese-style fried squid with cherry pepper and arugula. 401-783-4202; rhodyoysters.com

Hog Island Oyster Co.

Marshall, Calif.

Murray suggests coming on a weekday to avoid the crowds at this institution on Tomales Bay, north of San Francisco. And even then, call ahead for reservations. The oysters are sold by the bucket, and you shuck them yourself at picnic tables overlooking the bay. "It's really casual, but the setting is beautiful," she says. 415-663-9218; hogislandoysters.com



By Debora Small

Houston: Brasserie 19 features big, meaty Gulf Coast oysters served in a luxurious setting.

Brasserie 19

Houston

Texas oysters are bigger and meatier than those found on the East Coast, and this River Oaks restaurant, which opened in May, is a great place to sample them, Murray says. The atmosphere is luxurious with plenty of brass and leather. "You'll want to go in and get a glass of Champagne and watch the shuckers at work." She also recommends the Oyster Fricassee, made with Louisiana Gulf oysters stewed with leeks, garlic, tarragon, white wine and béchamel and topped with toasted breadcrumbs. 713-524-1919; brasserie19.com

Shaw's Crab House

Chicago

It may have crab in its name, but oysters get the royal treatment here, too. "It's a big tiled room that feels like something out of the '30s or '40s. The shuckers are raised up and on display," Murray says. Fifteen to 20 oyster varieties are usually on the menu. 312-527-2722; shawscrabhouse.com

Acme Oyster House

New Orleans

The patrons and shuckers are reason alone to visit this Crescent City classic. "If you're an oyster lover, you have to step in here and belly up to the bar. Every time I've sat there, I've met someone friendly," Murray says. Like all fresh oysters, these should be eaten raw with just a squeeze of lemon, she says. "Don't put any cocktail sauce on because that's offensive to the farmers. It's just covering up their hard work." 504-522-5973; acmeoyster.com



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