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DEMYSTIFYING THE ART OF OYSTER SHUCKING
Queen Street West's Oyster Boy dishes out advice on how to shuck a perfect oyster

Oyster chowder. Smoked oysters. Oysters on the half shell. One of the sea's most versatile offerings, oysters can be enjoyed in any number of ways, but each starts with the same first step. Oyster shucking, the act of removing the oyster from its shell, is one of the most important elements in delivering a perfect oyster. Oyster Boy, a restaurant and self-proclaimed "shellfish information centre," houses some of the top shuckers in the country. Shucking up to 1,000 oysters every day, the staff knows anything and everything about the art of shucking.

"There are only a few steps involved in shucking an oyster, but it takes a precise hand and a little knowledge to ensure the oyster isn't damaged in the process," says Adam Colquhoun, co-owner of Oyster Boy. He begins the process by setting up an oyster board on a surface at about "belly button height." An oyster board resembles a cutting board that is raised at one side, allowing the oyster to rest at an angle while shucking. In the absence of an oyster board, Colquhoun suggests using a cutting board with a folded towel to create elevation.

"Before beginning, it is important to ensure that the oyster is positioned cup side down and flat side up," explains Colquhoun. The cup is the deeper rounder part of the shell that contains the oyster. Then, stick an oyster knife into the hinge, which is the narrow end of the oyster, at a 45 degree angle. From there, swivel the knife until it makes a popping sound. Scrape the knife around the edge of the top shell. "It is crucial to keep the knife at the edge, so as not to puncture the oyster," says Colquhoun. At this point, the oyster is exposed and resting in its juices, referred to as the "liquor." The next step is to detach the oyster from its cup by cutting the bottom muscle that holds it to its shell. Finally, scrape off any shell fragments and debris from the oyster to complete the shucking process. "The more you do it, the better you get at it," says Colquhoun who can shuck an oyster in five seconds.

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Once shucked, oysters are ready to enjoy au natural; with a squeeze of lemon and tobasco; or with any vinegar-based sauce to complement the natural salts of the oyster. As well, Colquhoun offers some tips on how to tell a good oyster from a bad oyster. "An oyster's shell should be totally closed before shucking. There should be some resistance when trying to open it with the oyster knife," he says. Other good signs are that it feels heavy and doesn't sound hollow when tapped against a hard surface. Lastly, hungry oyster fans can use their common senses. "Oysters should smell like the sea. And, contrary to popular belief, the best way to taste and enjoy an oyster is to chew it."

Oyster Boy is located at 872 Queen St. West and is open seven days a week, from 9 a.m. – 6:30 p.m. Wholesale orders and shucking classes can be scheduled by calling Oyster Boy at 416.534.3432 anytime during regular hours Monday-Friday and after 2 p.m. on Sundays.