

ISLAND OF PLENTY

P.E.I. is renowned for its fresh fish and seafood. But that's just an appetizer at the annual Fall Flavours Festival.

BY KATE BARKER WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN SYLVESTER

AN OYSTER HAS A HEART. And a mouth, a stomach, intestines — and an anus, if you really want to know. I didn't, particularly, standing in the sleeting rain on the deck of a moored scow as Sharon Burleigh of the PEI Shellfish Museum shucks a *Crassostrea virginica*, plucked straight from Prince Edward Island's Malpeque Bay. A top-notch shucker can rip an oyster open so quickly that you can actually see its heart beating. Thankfully, Burleigh isn't quite that fast. But moments after I swallow the bivalve's briny circulatory system, she shucks a quahog clam as a chaser. A clam? On the half-shell? My precious Torontonians sensibilities give me pause, yet I don't want

my knife-wielding host to figure me for a wimp. Down the hatch goes the big clam, which is slightly meatier than the oyster but just as delicious.

Every September, Canada's smallest province puffs itself up as plump as a fresh Fat Bastard (a much-prized local oyster) and proclaims itself a locavore's mecca. Fall Flavours is a month-long festival dedicated to all things foodie. And it's not just a fish fest. Visitors can indulge in, among other treats, a smorgasbord of the island's organic produce, an array of Avondale Meadows Farm cheeses made from local sheep's milk and, at stops such as the cooperatively run farmers' market in Charlottetown,



MAP: CHRIS BRACKLEY/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC



Start your culinary tour of P.E.I. with a taste of Robert Pendergast's traditional sourdough bread, baked in the outdoor clay oven at Doucette House, an Acadian historic site in South Rustico.



Despite her “precious Torontonians sensibilities,” author Kate Barker (ABOVE) doesn’t shy away from slurping down a raw oyster. Her trip to the island featured reflective moments as well, such as this vista of a fishing boat leaving the Rustico harbour at sunrise (RIGHT) on the opening day of halibut season.

On a blue-sky autumn afternoon, 16-year-old Luke Peters (BELOW, at left) serves up fresh oysters at Doucette House during the North Shore Culinary Tour, which is part of the annual Fall Flavours Festival.



baked goods made from local grains. Visitors can wash all that down with local booze: Gahan House Brewery’s beer, Rossignol Estate’s wine and vodka made from, what else, potatoes, by the Prince Edward Distillery.

“P.E.I. is basically a gigantic farm,” says local celebrity chef Michael Smith, who hosted the Fall Flavours Festival last year and took part in many of the events. “I think we all know someone who is producing food. It is woven into who we are.”

Sampling the ultimate al fresco raw bar from the shores of world’s most famous oyster grounds isn’t even the closest you can come to P.E.I.’s signature shellfish. For the true mollusc lover, there’s no substitute for hunting the bivalves down yourself. Which is how I ended up, a few days after gaining intimate knowledge of an oyster’s anatomy, slightly looped on Gravel with



skipper Perry Gotell and his Tranquility Cove Adventures crew. We put out from Georgetown, on the island’s eastern coast, on a quest to go clamming.

STRONG, SMILEY AND SUN-LINED. Gotell is a third-generation lobsterman. But fishing for a living is “a tough old go,” as he puts it. Now he takes tourists on day-long lobstering adventures in May and June and runs people out to the clam bars off Boughton Island and in the waters of Cardigan Bay until late-September. During lobster season, guests act as crew, coming aboard at 3:45 a.m. to bait and haul traps and then to clean the boat afterwards. Delicate greenhorns (we’re referred to as “corks” on the island) are liable to spend much of their time at sea with their heads overboard. For others, it’s an all-you-can-eat lobster

buffet, boiled on board in sea water. The record? One skinny guy put away 11 one-pounders.

Today, however, we’re after clams — by the bucketful, I hope. But the weather has turned, and clamming, which actually involves getting into the ocean, has lost much of its appeal for our group of a half-dozen tourists. Still, I’m game, even though the water temperature was 15°C this morning — biting, even through a wetsuit. The remnants of Hurricane Igor blew through here the week before, so we’re also in for some rough seas. I pop another prophylactic Gravel and concentrate on the horizon as the boat lurches into the blue.

While aboard, we’re served smoked herring (don’t be put off by the pronunciation — it sounds like “heron” in the aye-lund accent). Crew member Art Bouchard has a buddy with a smoke-

house. But it’s the clams I’m after, steamed on the beach once I have hunted them. Because, wading chest-deep through icy water, armed with a rake, mask and snorkel, seems a lot more like hunting than fishing to me. Mother Nature, sadly, has other plans. The hurricane has churned up the waters and

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there is zero visibility. Clamming is a no-go, and everyone seems a little relieved not to be squeezing into wetsuits. A solitary bald eagle watches from its vantage point halfway up a scraggly pine tree on Boughton Island as we rejig our fishing plans.

You won't find mackerel on many menus anywhere in the world. Put it this way — Shakespeare probably wasn't the first to refer to them as “stinking.” It is a fish best eaten fresh — as in the day it is caught. This time of year, mackerel are in the shallows feeding on small shrimp. We cast our lines, using silver-sides as bait, a tiny fish caught locally in September and sold primarily as zoo food. I only have about five metres of line out before it crinkles on the bottom. I give the reel a few winds and wait. Mackerel hit hard, like bass. My first catch is a thin, green-and-black-backed 25-centimetre fish that I would have sworn was a monster until I haul it broadside. Soon everyone is jerking their rods and in no time there are enough for a fry-up. Gotell calmly filets the mackerel like the fisherman he is (without whacking them over the head first), while Bouchard fires up a propane-powered Hibachi. Fried lightly with a little lemon pepper, they are an oily and succulent fish. Everyone goes for seconds.

EVEN IF YOU DON'T HAVE THE SEA LEGS to experience Gotell's catch-your-own lobster feast, don't leave the island without a taste. The best way is also the simplest — steamed with drawn butter and lemon. The classic island lobster supper comes with a roll and a side of mussels. The Water-Prince Corner Shop in Charlottetown serves up a great version. When sizing up a lobster, incidentally, feisty is its best quality. You want one that throws its arms back and holds its claws up, ready to rumble. At the Water-Prince, a quick glance into the tank showed they were all prize-fighters. I didn't bother to choose one, but took a seat in the small, former corner store, enjoying the kitschy appeal of the eat-in and take-out diner festooned with license plates from around the world. The wait wasn't long; the lobster, sublime.

For a more upscale Charlottetown dining experience, there are restaurants that serve meals you'll long remember. Such as Sims Corner Steakhouse and Oyster Bar, where chef Ross Munro offers delicacies such as grass-fed island beef tenderloin that has been marinated for days wrapped in a cigar leaf and tastes, well, smoky. Or Lot 30, where chef Gordon Bailey's tasting menu blew my mind. It began with a delicate salmon ciopini, followed by pan-seared haddock served on diced cucumber with local cremini mushrooms in an orange reduction sauce. Pork belly came next (not my favourite, but this was crisped to perfection, braised in maple syrup and served over mashed potatoes). After that was rib eye, aged 55 days, perfectly pink and served with poached pear, blue cheese and local heirloom cherry tomatoes,



Ashley MacIntyre (ABOVE) proffers a classic lobster supper, with a side of steamed mussels, at Charlottetown's Water-Prince Corner Shop. The downtown restaurant, and others throughout the island, serves dishes made using fresh produce grown by people such as Paul Offer, who runs the Doctor's Inn and Organic Gardens in Tyne Valley (BELOW) and sells his wares at the Charlottetown Farmers' Market (BOTTOM).





roasted zucchini and potatoes. Dessert was a mini quintet of perfection: a dark chocolate mousse atop a smear of Amaretto caramel sauce; a flourless chocolate cake crowned with plump local blackberries; vanilla cheesecake with coffee sauce; five-hour-old vanilla ice cream made on-site and sprinkled with ground espresso beans and sugar; and, finally, a silky vanilla crême brûlée. The raw ingredients for much of the gastronomic art crafted by chefs like Munro and Bailey can be found, literally, just outside their back doors.

The island's meat and produce comes from the hands of people such as Paul Offer, who dons his kilt every Saturday and flogs his wares at the Charlottetown farmers' market. Offer also runs The Doctor's Inn B&B in Tyne Valley with his wife Jean. He gives

me a tour of his organic gardens amid the constant background gurgle of some 130 chickens. "They are the heart of the operation," he says. "The flavour in them is unbelievable, but you have to treat them right." By right, he means slow cooked as stewing chicken for recipes like *coq au vin* or they will be as tough as fragrant flip-flops. The standard supermarket chicken is only 12 weeks old for precisely that reason. Just then, a presumably tasty escapee flaps on by. Offer says he'll catch her. Later.

Although Charlottetown is packed with visitors during Fall Flavours (ABOVE LEFT), Arizona tourist Phil Greif (ABOVE RIGHT) gets away from the crowds for some corn husking with costumed staffer Donna at Yeo House, the restored home of a successful shipbuilder.

MORE THAN GREEN GABLES

Getting there Air Canada and WestJet (www.flypei.com) have regular service to Prince Edward Island, or you can take one of the scenic routes: drive over the Northumberland Strait on the 13-kilometre Confederation Bridge from New Brunswick or enjoy a 75-minute ferry cruise from Caribou, N.S., to Wood Islands, P.E.I. (www.peiferry.com).

Staying there The centrally located Great George Hotel (www.thegreatgeorge.com) bills itself as Charlottetown's historic

boutique hotel. Built in 1846, this upscale hotel has more than 60 suites, each with its own character and story. For more casual accommodations, try The Doctor's Inn Bed & Breakfast in the village of Tyne Valley. An 1860s home surrounded by a large garden, the B&B features garden-fresh produce and entrées cooked in a woodstove in the old-fashioned kitchen (www.peisland.com/doctorsinn). Go to www.tourismpei.com for more options.

Eating there This year's Fall Flavours Festival runs for most of September, with events ranging from culinary demonstrations by celebrity chefs to a lobster beach party. See the full list of events at www.peiflavours.ca. Beyond the fest, visit the PEI Shellfish Museum, where you get a free oyster with the price of admission (902-831-3225), or join the Tranquility Cove Adventures crew for a day of fishing, lobstering or clamming (www.tranquilitycoveadventures.com). For a more

relaxed afternoon, Right Off The Batt Pottery offers a "Play in Clay" workshop for creating your own pottery and island memories (www.rightoffthebatt.com). And for a memorable meal, try Sim's Corner Steakhouse & Oyster Bar (www.simscorner.ca), Lot 30 Restaurant (www.lot30restaurant.ca) or the Prince Edward Island Preserve Company (www.preservecompany.com), where casual meals feature homemade sides such as sour cherry and peach salsa.



Local celebrity chef and television host Michael Smith (BELOW) was the official host of last year's festival, but there were many cooks at the kitchen party, including Lora and Corey Thomas (ABOVE LEFT) of Lethbridge, Alta., who participated in the Culinary Institute of Canada's boot camp in Charlottetown, as well as Janet Hardy-Callaghan (ABOVE RIGHT), who put on her game face for the oyster shucking competition.

Offer, who has been farming organically for 31 years, likes to experiment with his garden. He has a peach tree in a place where no peach tree should survive, as well as artichokes, a crop more likely to be seen in California. Then there is the more standard fare: an herb garden complete with sorrel and lavender; winter squash; soup pumpkins; carrots; Brussels sprouts; onions; two

dozen varieties of lettuce; peas; beets; Swiss chard; zucchini; and cucumbers. Offer's small farm is a microcosm of the island in September — full to bursting.

MOTORING ALONG THE COAST in P.E.I. is lovely and often dramatic — the Points East and North Cape drives specifically — but people also say that every red-dirt road in P.E.I. leads to a great view. I can't prove the theory wrong, driving practically the length of the island over the course of my four-day stay and nosing into a few off-the-beaten-track paths myself, and getting temporarily and most un-alarmingly lost somewhere near Victoria as I search for a potato festival.

Halfway through my stay, I make the obligatory pilgrimage to Green Gables, a nod to my mother who, in the 1950s, faced a life-altering decision: would she leave England for Australia or Canada? She chose Canada, for one reason — she had loved reading *Anne of Green Gables* stories as a child. I do a fly-by tour of Green Gables, thinking it strange that were it not for P.E.I.'s most famous literary character, I may well speak with an Aussie accent. Sadly, my mother didn't visit the island of her childhood dreams until she had been in Canada for 25 years. I don't suggest you wait that long.

Kate Barker remembers events primarily by the food. First campout at age four: shell pasta in tomato sauce; high-school graduation: frozen strawberry-shaped ice cream on toothpicks. You get the idea. She writes for explore, Cottage Life and other magazines (www.katebarker.com). Photographer John Sylvester is regular contributor to Canadian Geographic and lives in Charlottetown (www.johnsylvester.com).



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