

you in whatever's going on. Our mission is fresh, local produce—conscious food—served with awareness and love. Our food is eclectic and cross-generational. We can feed a vegan teenager as easily as we can feed her grandmother.”

“I took my son to the IHOP, and they brought out pancakes with canned fruit on top. It broke his heart.”



The logo on the menu—a banjo and a frying pan forming an X with the Orthodox cross centered between them—speaks volumes. The Worshams' focus is on food, bluegrass music (which Father Jonas likes because it is “ninety-nine percent positive and uplifting”), and faith.

The Worshams bake all their own bread, including gigantic wheat-blend biscuits and a five-grain Scottish Struan bread. You can even get a blintz with sour cream, a nod to Joan Marie's Jewish upbringing. Because of their emphasis on fresh produce and homemade fare, Father Jonas says it's easy to be disappointed by other restaurants. “I took my son to the IHOP, and they brought out pancakes with canned fruit on top. It broke his heart.”

Life for the Worshams, inside and outside the restaurant business, is busy and fulfilling. In addition to doing the payroll and bookkeeping for Bluegrass Grill, Joan Marie works as a renal nurse at a local hospital. When asked how she has time for her twelve-year-old son and sixteen-year-old daughter still at home, the restaurant, her RN job, and her two other grown sons, whom she sees regularly, Joan Marie says simply, “Time opens up.”

And if that isn't a bluegrass lyric, it probably should be. 🍷

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A GOOD MEAL AND A STORY TO TELL

Cultural sustainability on Virginia's Eastern Shore



Oystermen on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, ca. 1975. Photograph courtesy of Bernie Herman.

Bernie Herman recently spoke with Gravy editor Sara Camp Arnold about his work with the Eastern Shore of Virginia Foodways Project.

THE EASTERN SHORE is a long, narrow peninsula composed of two counties, Northampton and Accomack, connected to Maryland by land and to the rest of Virginia only by the fourteen-mile-long Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. It has gone over time from being one of the wealthiest rural counties in the United States to being one of the two in the state of Virginia with the longest history of sustained poverty.

The Eastern Shore of Virginia Foodways Project began in 2008 as a way to address a kind of economic development that spoke to the strengths and the history of this area known not just for the quality of its seafood—its fishery, oysters, clams—but also for the tilled crops, in particular sweet potatoes, tomatoes, all the produce associated with truck farming, much of which had really become diminished over time, particularly in the very late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

The project is based on the notion of heritage-based economic development and the recognition that, at the end of the day, folks really want only a few things, among which are a good meal and a story to tell.

One of the key things when it comes to the cultivation of clams and oysters is that Virginia's Eastern Shore is one of the very few areas that controls its own watershed. The other thing is the diversity of habitat—it's really remarkable. There's open Atlantic water, there are Atlantic marshes that run seven and eight miles deep to the shore proper, then on the Chesapeake Bay side there are all of those creeks that cut way in; there are places where the distance from tide to tide—from Atlantic side to Bay side—is less than a mile and a half, two miles maybe. So in some ways it's almost an island down that far.

With all of those different kinds of marine environments, you get a real diversity of seafood. You also get a real diversity in foods that are dependent on location for taste.

A LOT OF THE FARMING of shellfish is geared toward larger-scale sales. But what I'm thinking is that there is a real possibility for small, name-specific oysters, like Nassawadox Salts or Westerhouse Specials, that come out of this community. The oysters are also one of those things where you just go, "there really is a terroir here—and you can taste

it!" And an oyster tastes exactly like where it comes from. I mean, if it comes from clean water, you can taste the clean water. If it comes from a high-salinity environment, you can taste that. If it comes from an area where all the seawater is filtered through marsh grasses, you can taste that. So you can taste oysters from this area, and you will get five distinct tastes from a seven- to ten-mile radius. There are not many places in the United States where that occurs.

My neighbor and I can tell the difference between each other's oysters, and he grows his about a mile north of mine. Last winter, four folks came over to my house on the Eastern Shore, each with his own oysters, and we had a five-oyster tasting. All of those oysters had grown up in much the same area, but they tasted very different. Again, it's about a kind of balance that reflects that terroir. Now, having said that, everybody's favorite oyster is the oyster that grows where he comes from.

WHEN PEOPLE TALK about sustainability, it usually proceeds from a consideration of economics: How do you make something actually work in a way that does not degrade the environment but creates a continuous and renewable enterprise? The missing part of most of those conversations is culture. And you can introduce almost anything you want into this area. But unless there's a kind of cultural buy-in, unless there's a way in which things make sense, the success of those enterprises is going to be severely limited. It makes a lot more sense to me to really work with a community and for a community as opposed to work on it.

What I'm interested in is working with the farmers and fishermen and with other folks to find value-added opportunities that might increase their market, increase awareness, increase demand. I think that by creating a kind of heritage awareness, particularly through the stories associated with the foodways, it might result in an increase in production, which would result in hopefully one job that might keep one more family from having to leave. 🍷