



WATERFRONT

THE BAYFORD OYSTER HOUSE

FOOD, PLACE, AND A PARTY

by Bernie Herman

THE BAYFORD OYSTER HOUSE extends over the shallows of Nassawadox Creek, abutting the channel where the tides of the Chesapeake Bay ebb and flow. The heart of the two-story wood building, erected around 1902, serves seasonally for shedding soft-shell crabs. During the rest of the year it functions as a storage area, stacked with soft-shell crab floats, blue plastic drums crammed with gill nets, and the flotsam of fish and eel traps, blue-crab and peeler pots, floats, line, and salt water-worn hand tools. The creek side of the oyster house fronts a working dock where watermen land their catch. The landward side abuts the one-story shucking hall and office, added when the business was in full swing through the mid 1960s, before disease struck the oyster beds and shucking operations closed. The old post office and store stands next door, remembered by Bayford denizens for its bear-paw sandwich of hard cheddar and rag bologna on a sugar-glazed bun.

There is always a comforting dampness to the oyster house, the scent of salt water and dried fish caught between the dock planks, the sound of current moving against boat hulls punctuated by the rattle and hum of the ice machine and the *shoosh* of passing tires on sand and pavement. Sometimes people stop by for fish or crabs, but most drop-ins come to visit and exchange views on everything from the condition of the Bay to global politics. H.M. Arnold, the oyster house proprietor, maintains a minimal kitchen in the old office, equipped with a countertop deep fryer and a bucket of preserved salt fish. The shucking hall adjacent, with its concrete floors and slant-topped worktables, is increasingly subject to flooding at high tide and during storms. No matter how high a tide might run, the shucking hall is the dining room for the annual September Bayford Oyster House party hosted by H.M. and Mary Lou Arnold, an event that has held sway in this place for the past quarter-century.

Where we eat speaks to an iteration of *terroir* grounded in the places where folks share meals and conversation. More than the taste of place, the *terroir* of where we eat speaks to the experiences of breaking bread and the enlivening practices of knowing place through the presence of our bodies. Place nourishes our understandings of who we are. The power of taste is immersive. When I reflect on where I eat, my thoughts turn to the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Wading creekside and shucking oysters culled from their beds or standing in an orchard plucking finger-soft and sun-warmed figs infuses the soul with salt and light. Sitting at the Exmore Diner counter and savoring a plate of spot fried head-on

and hard, served with greens and a brown sugar–crusted sweet potato, I am aware of how my elbows rest against forearm-burnished steel and Formica surfaces—the bright luster left by folks who have eaten here and the promise of those to come.

Sweating in the hallway of the Glorious Church of Jesus Christ with my friend Pooh Johnston, savoring the heat and smells of the kitchen adjoining the sanctuary, watching the women work at the stove and kitchen table, anticipating our takeaway lunches of clam fritters and pig feet with string beans and potato salad, I consider that where we take our meals reminds us of our tangible place in the world. Where we eat combines place and event. It bridges the everyday and the exceptional occasion. It speaks to a fundamental truism: Events take place, therefore place matters. Where we eat is about the substance of occasion. So it is with the Bayford Oyster House and the annual potluck dinner.

The party transforms the old work building into a one-night palace of culinary delight. Some diners come for the “atmosphere of the old building,” but, H.M. Arnold adds, “a lot of them that come though, they grew up here.” Slow-roasted venison hams are the centerpiece of the menu, along with homemade sides including crab dip, macaroni and cheese, collards, string beans, and cole slaw. “People just go out of their way to make good stuff,” he continues, “My gosh! Food keeps coming until ten o’clock.” As guests arrive, they arrange their dishes on the old

concrete-topped shucking tables. The diners file by, filling their plates as they go. Overhead strings of lights illuminate the proceedings. Talking and drinking, small groups of friends and acquaintances cluster together, politely standing back from the serving line. Outside, the crowd grows, and conversations multiply. New arrivals walk down the hill, enter the oyster house, and pay their respects to the old heads at ease in plastic chairs arranged in something of a receiving line. “They’re pretty much gone now,” H.M. says with a sigh. “I had a lot of old friends, and they’d sit in here and people would pass by and they’d say, ‘Now, who is that? Oh yeah, I knew their granddad. I knew their dad.’”

The dishes shared at the Bayford party are memorable, but it is the being there that matters most. People come in waves, H.M. explains. “You got the early crowd, the older ones.... They all liked to come down and, of course, they would be here first. And, my mother and them would say, ‘It’s time to eat. It’s time to eat!’ I’m going, ‘Well, the food’s not here. The food’s not here. If you start too soon, you’re going to miss a lot of stuff.’ So, I had to hold them off. She’d come back, ‘We got to eat. We got to eat!’ We used to let them go first and some of them needed help getting their food and stuff. So, I’d do that and then holler out, ‘Time to eat!’ And then there’d be a line and everybody would get in line and start eating... That crowd would eat and maybe stay around another hour and then you’d have the next age group and they would eat and they would stay around a couple more hours and then you had the next group—the hard core, I call them. They’d already eaten and they’re here until—we have been here until one or two o’clock in the morning.... Everybody gets along. They see people they don’t see but once or twice a year.”

When H.M. Arnold says that people come for the atmosphere, he speaks to a larger truth that place counts as much as what’s on the menu. In the case of the Bayford Oyster House the physical setting in and around the old building forms an imaginary mapped in memory, familiarity, and renewal. The Bayford party reminds us that in the worlds of everyday things and associations, place is on the menu. Where we eat is what we eat. 🍷



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PHOTOS by Bernie Herman.