

# LBIF's Shellfish Soirée Goes Swimmingly

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Photo by: Ryan Morrill

“Beauty of the Bay: A Shellfish Soirée” – held at the Long Beach Island Foundation of the Arts and Sciences in Loveladies on Friday – was more than just a pretty name for a fun night out in a glamorous setting. It was an opportunity to see, taste, learn, experience and celebrate what makes the bay such a valuable and delicate resource.

“Oysters are the new cupcakes,” quipped Angela Andersen, who co-coordinated the event with fellow LBIF board member Corinne Gray Ruff and moderated the panel discussion that followed a documentary screening. Clam and oyster tastings were accompanied by The Crusher wines and a selection of beers. Throughout the LBIF's Main Gallery and Blai Gallery, tables displayed literature and specialty items from Parson's Seafood, Maxwell Shellfish, the Old Causeway Steak & Oyster House, Tuckerton Seaport and ReClam the Bay. An art wall displayed bay-related works for sale in various media.

The driving concept was to bring people together in the name of Barnegat Bay, in line with LBIF's objective to create opportunities for education and participation in local arts and sciences. Andersen said the multifaceted event was designed to offer “something to feed your mind, feed your soul and feed your belly.”

Ruff said she hopes that, going forward, similar themed events will be held at LBIF, with a film screening that ties in many different facets of the community to marry art, science, education and culture.

Ahead of the oyster trend is the Old Causeway Steak and Oyster House, which opened earlier this year and was a main sponsor of the soirée, along with ReClam the Bay and the Spotted Whale gift shop in Barnegat Light. Panelists included oyster farmers and bay specialists: Dale Parsons of Parson's Seafood in Tuckerton and Matt Gregg of Forty North Oyster Farms in Mantoloking and LBI; Helen Henderson from the American Littoral Society; Gef Flimlin from Rutgers Cooperative Extension and the Barnegat Bay Shellfish Restoration Program; and Amy Williams from Alliance for a Living Ocean and the Stevens Institute of Technology.

The take-home messages from the panel discussion were clear:

Eat more shellfish – and learn the histories behind the different varieties. “People don't buy oysters; they buy a story,” Flimlin said.

Visit littorasociety.org and sign the petition to protect Barnegat Bay.

Limit/modify harmful behaviors on land (e.g. lawn fertilizer) to lessen human impact on the bay.

Overall, the prognosis for wild clam and oyster populations may not be as bad as it seems. Parsons, a multi-generation bayman, said when he was a kid no one had spoken of an oyster in local waters for 30 or 40 years. But nowadays some evidence of naturally occurring shellfish is being seen.

For Ruff, inspiration for the event struck in the form of a question: How much do we really know about this bay we all love? A little digging led her to discover “Shellshocked: Saving Oysters to Save Ourselves,” a documentary about efforts in New York Harbor – at one time “the oyster capital of the world” – to bring wild oyster reefs back from the brink of extinction, in order to restore the waterways.

Oysters grow naturally in brackish estuaries, where saltwater meets fresh water to create the ideal salinity. Because they filter the water in which they live, oysters play a vital role in maintaining the health of the oceans and other waterways. Over-harvesting and pollution have contributed to the decline, but aquaculture, or underwater farming, has largely reshaped the industry.

One adult oyster can filter 50 gallons of water a day, according to the documentary. Therefore, where oysters are plentiful, water quality tends to be better. For one thing they remove nitrogen, which prevents “algae blooms” from robbing oxygen from other life forms. They also protect shorelines. As a “keystone species” they provide an important basis for diversity. But oyster larvae need a place to settle, i.e., existing oysters, and 85 percent of once-thriving oyster reefs have been lost, rendering wild oysters “functionally extinct.” But the news is not all bad; the research shows that, with help, nature can regain its balance.

For help in the event planning process, which unfolded over the course of about six weeks, Ruff turned to Andersen, whom she affectionately dubbed the “Bay Queen,” who provided background knowledge to help formulate the event and guide the panel questions.

Andersen also made the jewelry worn by the event participants to showcase the beauty of simple shells on beaded strands. She and Ruff wore identical necklaces with pendants of ribbed mussels – “the true kidney of the bay,” Andersen explained – which have a symbiotic relationship with spartina, or cordgrass.

Seemingly, everyone in the LBI region with a stake in the shellfish industry contributed in some way to make the soirée a success, with roughly 120 tickets sold. Bistro 14’s executive chef and owner Rich Vaughan provided the mignonette sauce for the oysters from Forty North, explaining acidic dipping sauces such as lemon, vinegar and hot sauce complement oysters’ intrinsic fattiness.

Gregg, whose methodology might be considered progressive, said the secret to his oysters is a deeper cup. He studied marine coastal policy, aquaculture and fisheries at the University of Rhode Island, furthered his understanding and experience by working with Flimlin and the Rutgers Cooperative Extension and started his own farm about five years ago. His oysters are spawned in a hatchery but grown in the wild, in suspended cages where they feed on algae at the water’s surface. They are then placed on the bay bottom for protection from winter conditions, and later relocated 35 miles south to a secret sandy cove near Long Beach Island. The result is a denser, richer oyster with remarkable flavor.

“I’d say that ours (technique) is pretty unique,” Gregg said. “This is the method we’ve developed, but it’s always evolving.”

