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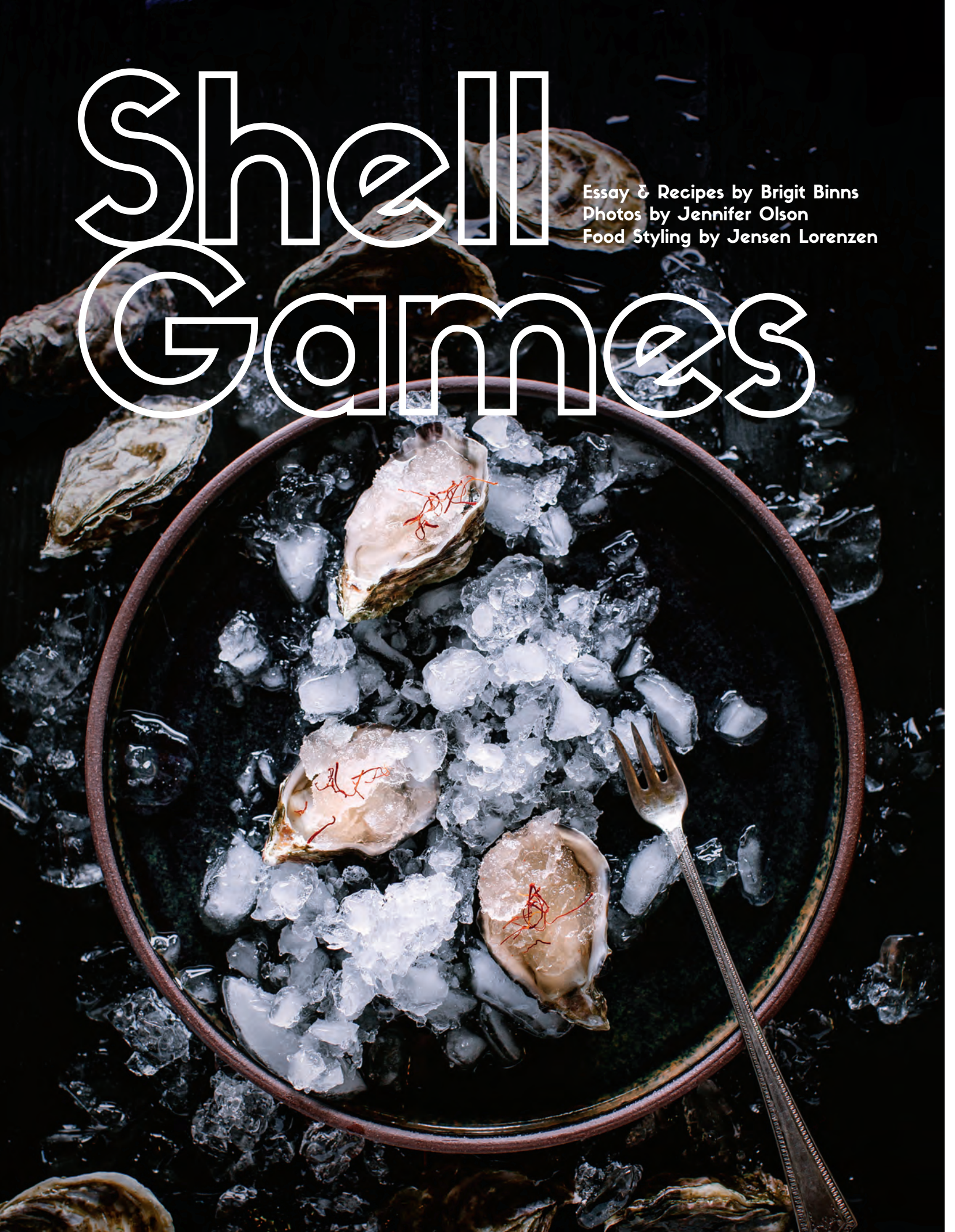
SAN LUIS OBISPO & WINE COUNTRY

Celebrating the Food and Drink Culture of SLO County

Member of Edible Communities

Shell Games

Essay & Recipes by Brigit Binns
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As a twelve-year-old only child, I followed my father like a puppy along the beach at the Hollister Ranch above Santa Barbara as he prised glossy black mussels from the rocks. Back at the rickety A-frame cabin, I perched on a stool as he dumped the mussels into a tall, dented aluminum pot, added a touch of wine, and clapped the lid on the top. A few minutes on the heat, gently jiggling the pan, he showed me, was all it took.

Voila! he cried, as he lifted the lid. Miraculously to my wide-open eyes, the crusty and threatening bivalves had opened to reveal smooth, neon orange creatures who took to a bath of melted butter like it was their natural habitat. The possibilities for shellfish and butter skipped ahead of me, crooking a finger back as if to say, *this way lies your future.*

I collected volcano-like limpets and made them into tiny villages in the sand, with streets and saltwater ponds. The huge abalone shells we found had lost their inhabitants to eels, otters, and other natural causes but they made great ashtrays, ubiquitous in my Los Angeles childhood. That beach became mine, and Dad my hero. Neither status was destined to last.

One such idyllic day was followed by a booze-fueled beach bacchanal that I didn't fully understand until years later. All I knew then was that in the dark hours of the early morning, adults behaved like children, and children were, as usual, left to fill in the gaps. That night was the beginning of the end of my parents' marriage and my life



within a family of three.

I was left all alone with an angry woman who held an unassailable faith in her own righteousness and the sharp tongue with which to reinforce it. (She did, however, teach me how to make a mean cheese soufflé.) Only the abalone ashtrays remained, now clean and gleaming with the ocean's iridescence, mute reminders of my father's failings. Soon after, the Hollister Ranch was sold and there were no more sand-blasted, sun-kissed days of shell fishing.

Thirteen years later, Dad and I sat together at a counter in a brightly lit hall. Vast, cavernous, bustling with diners from all points of the compass, Grand Central Station is a beloved landmark of Beaux-Arts architecture, and the subterranean oyster bar was and still is its most venerable eatery. At the age of 25, Dad introduced me to oysters his way. His preference was for Blue Points, raw on the half-shell. "Do you DO anything to your oysters?" he'd ask the unsuspecting, his scornful tone and glare signaling disdain for anyone who added more than a spray of lemon. But in those halcyon days of my young adulthood just after college, with the half-sisters elsewhere, it was, for once, just Dad and me. At that bar, we rekindled a relationship that had curdled under my mother's merciless gaze in the decade since their acrimonious divorce. He had escaped, cleaving to his East Coast while I clung to my beloved West, where she was always inescapably present.

But now I was a fully employed denizen of New York City, ripe with self-determination and eager to grow. Under the disinterested eyes of the uniformed oyster wranglers at the Grand Central Oyster Bar, Dad showed me his spiritual home. Not his true home, on the wrong side of Philly where the large, dirt-poor Quaker family famously subsisted on "pepper pot soup," but the gleaming canyons of New York. Here, he had long ago cultivated and finally assumed the civilized life of a working actor. I suddenly saw him as a man made up of equal parts gravitas and corny humor, a man worthy of my respect as well as my love. It was a view that had long been obscured by the shadow of a self-involved woman. I soaked up his wisdom, humor, and smarts like the bread we used to mop up our creamy and buttery oyster stew.

At the juncture of youth and adulthood I had found a rich bounty not unlike that which exists at the end of the land and the edge of the shining sea.



Humans have been nourished by the shellfish of California's coast since man first walked these beaches. Middens—basically ancient trash heaps up to 30 feet deep and comprised mostly of

shells—reveal layers of mussels, red and black abalone, oysters, crabs, clams, cockles, barnacles, sea urchins, and many others. There are old stories of bonfires built to cook the abundance revealed during moon-influenced "minus tides," when intertidal denizens like the (prehistoric-looking) "gumboot" chitons could be plucked from the foam and added to the feast. The abundance of those times is of course long gone; abalone and many shellfish still existing in the wild are strictly protected—as they must be if we hope to save them from the extinction that threatens black abalone and other species.

Thankfully, both oysters and abalone are sustainably farmed within a 25-minute drive of San Luis Obispo. **Morro Bay Oyster Company** (MorroBayOysters.com) has just finished a massive upgrade, adding tanks that hold 40,000 pounds of chilled and highly oxygenated, bacteria-free water. The tanks mimic the natural environment of the bay, meaning pristine Pacific Gold oysters and far fewer rain-caused closures. And by June you'll be able to buy oysters straight from the tanks. Now there's a reason to drive to the beach, as if you needed another one.

At the **Abalone Farm** (AbaloneFarm.com) in Cayucos—one of only three such farms in California—white tubs are spread across a promontory right by the ocean, looking much like Esalen did in the seventies except that here the tubs are filled with abalone instead of naked people. Abalone may seem pricey until you realize the time and care required to bring the tiny gastropods to market size. Many home cooks are put off by the prospect of pounding and tenderizing abalone; here, all is taken care of for you. So go right ahead, take a big, briny bite of California's rich coastal history.



Special thanks to Morro Bay Oyster Company, the Abalone Farm, Heidi Peterson Ceramics (handmade stoneware), and Zoé Arkfeld (cotton/linen napkin) for sharing their products for these photos.

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RAW OYSTERS WITH SAFFRON & GRENACHE BLANC GRANITA



Cappellini with Oysters, Spicy Sausage, White Wine, & Watercress

Serves 4

Preheat a griddle, a large cast-iron skillet, or a broiler until hot. Cut **12 ounces of pre-cooked hot sausage** into 1/2-inch slices. Grill them until brown and crisp on both sides. Set aside. Shuck **16 live Pacific oysters** (Gold Reserve from Morro Bay Oyster Co, shown here), reserving all their precious liquor.

Bring a large pot of water to a boil and add **1 tablespoon of kosher salt**. Warm four wide bowls in a low oven. When the water is about to boil, melt **2 tablespoons butter** in a very large sauté pan over medium-low heat.

Add **2 large, finely chopped shallots** to the butter and sauté until softened, stirring, about 5 minutes. Add **1 ½ cups homemade or store-bought chicken broth** and **2 tablespoons white wine** to the pan and increase the heat to medium-high. Simmer the broth briskly for 2 minutes. Now add **1 pound of capellini or angel hair pasta** to the boiling water and, at the same time, stir **1 ½ cups heavy cream** and **a good pinch of white pepper** into the broth.

Cook both the sauce and the pasta for 2–3 minutes (according to package instructions for the pasta), then quickly but thoroughly drain the pasta; add the pasta to the sauce along with the oysters and all their liquor, crispy sausage, and **a handful of coarsely chopped watercress**, tender leaves and stems only. Decrease the heat to low and toss the mixture with tongs just until the pasta is evenly coated and heated through; do not overcook or the oysters will be tough. Divide equitably among the warm bowls and top with another small handful of watercress.



Abalone, Avocado, & Kumquat Ceviche

Serves 6

Freeze **8 ounces of abalone** (young abalones from Abalone Farm in Cayucos shown here) for about 20 minutes, to make it easier to dice. With a very sharp knife, cut the abalone into ½-inch slices, then again crosswise into ¼-inch dice. In a glass or ceramic bowl, combine the abalone, **½ cup fresh lime juice**, **¼ cup orange juice**, **¾ teaspoon sea salt**, **a pinch of red pepper flakes**, and **3 dashes of Tabasco**. Toss gently and cover. Refrigerate for at least 3 hours and up to 6 hours, tossing every hour.

When ready to serve, fold in **½ cup peeled and diced jicama**, **¼ cup finely diced red onion**, and **4 very thinly sliced kumquats**. Just before serving, pit, peel, and cut **2 small, ripe avocados** into small dice; add to the bowl and fold in gently. Spoon into shallow bowls, drizzle each with **a teaspoon or so of your best olive oil**, and scatter with **a pinch of black salt** and **lime zest**. Serve with **tortilla chips**.



Raw Oysters with Saffron & Grenache Blanc Granita

Makes 40 oysters on the half-shell

In a small saucepan, bring **2 cups of Central Coast Grenache Blanc** to a boil over medium heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and add a **pinch of saffron threads**. Allow to cool fully, to room temperature, then stir in **½ cup water, 2 teaspoons lemon juice, ½ teaspoon salt, and a few grinds of black pepper**. Pour into a large aluminum or lightweight roasting pan, and freeze for 3 hours.

Scrape with a fork to flake the ice, then freeze for 45–60 minutes more, scraping the ice crystals every 20–30 minutes, or until the granita is pale and fluffy.

Line 1 or 2 large platters with crushed ice and arrange on the ice **40 shucked oysters**, on the half-shell. (Gold Reserve Oysters from Morro Bay Oyster Co, shown here.) Spoon a teaspoon or so of the saffron-flecked granita over each oyster and scatter with a **little fleur de sel**; serve immediately.