

Score One for the Home Team at

GALWAY

FPO. PENDING CLIENT
APPROVAL

By Necee Regis

On the rugged western coast of Ireland, the cobblestone streets of this medieval city are jammed with restaurants, boutiques, jewelers, bookstores, bakeries, and other shops that appeal to residents, tourists, and local university students. But when the last weekend in September rolls around, the entire town dedicates itself to celebrating *Ostrea edulis*, also known as the European Flat Oyster. In 2008, I came to Galway for the first time to see it all for myself.

The idea of an oyster celebration leaves some feeling wet and cold, but not me. The annual Galway International Oyster Festival, hosted in a cavernous red and white striped tent overlooking a beautiful bay, involves four days and nights of eating delicious seafood, drinking wine and beer, dancing, watching parades and cabaret performances, and attending a formal gala. I was thrilled to be there.

In addition, the festival centerpiece is the Guinness World Oyster Opening

Championship. When it comes to oyster competitions, winning at Galway is equivalent to earning a gold medal at the Olympics. An American hadn't won the event in 32 years, until last September when William "Chopper" Young from Wellfleet, Massachusetts, arrived as the U.S. representative. I am glad to say I was there to watch Chopper take the title.

Meet Chopper

A stocky shell-fisherman with searing blue eyes, Young, 42, originally honed

Competitors from 17 countries vie to be the fastest oyster shucker in the world. (They are holding 2008 "Oyster Pearl," Laura.)





William "Chopper" Young drinks from the winner's cup with Laura, the "Oyster Pearl."

his talent by shucking sea scallops for the commercial market. He entered and won his first competition in 2002 at the Wellfleet OysterFest. Since then, Young has competed in regional and national competitions. The third time was the charm for Young at the St. Mary's County Oyster Festival in Leonardtown, Maryland, where he won the National Oyster Shucking Championship in 2007 to secure his ticket to Galway in 2008. I started following his career during regional competitions, and we became friends.

"My goal has always been to reach the top," says Young, whose grandfather gave him the nickname "Chops"—which turned into "Chopper"—because of his chubby baby cheeks. "A competition is a mental thing. Before you go up on the stage, you've already shucked those oysters a million times in your head."

In Galway, I watched Young face contenders from 16 other countries, including France,

Canada, England, Sweden, Singapore and the hometown favorite, Ireland.

At this level of competition and skill, the strategy is to find the right balance of speed and perfectionism as results are determined by both time and presentation. Penalties can ruin a quick time. If a shucker leaves an oyster with grit or a damaged shell, the judges add four seconds to his or her time. The same is true for a cut muscle and an oyster not severed from its shell. The worst infractions? A missing or unopened shell or an oyster with blood marks costs a competitor 30 seconds in overall time.

Young employs a special technique that involves opening an oyster from the side rather than prying open the rear hinge. In oyster shucking parlance he's a "hacker" rather than a "stabber."

The Right Tools for the Job

For the last 54 years, since the Galway festival's inception, the competition has

used Kelly Galway Oysters, whose beds are located in the inner bay near the Clarinbridge and Kilcolgan rivers. What Young didn't know when he arrived was these oysters, with their layered feathery edges, would crack when he hacked them from the side. Also, his favorite knife—a Dexter Russell handle with a modified Japanese blade—was too thin to enter the hinge without snapping.

All this spelled trouble for Young. On Friday night, less than 24 hours before the competition was to begin, he realized that his technique and his knife wouldn't work.

Per Olosson, the Swedish world champion in 2000, had met Young at a previous competition in Prince Edward Island. Olosson befriended Young again in Galway, providing him with an appropriate knife. Now all he had to do was practice.

"It was clear I was going to have to change my style if I was going to have a shot at winning," says Young.

On Saturday afternoon, I gathered with the crowd as clouds obscured the sun over Nimmo's Pier. The threat of rain didn't inhibit me or the other partygoers in the tent from having a rollicking good time dancing, drinking Guinness and feasting on raw oysters, locally smoked salmon and seafood chowder while waiting for the competition to begin.

I surged forward with the pack as the first five shuckers assembled on the stage. A balding man in a pale green suit gripped a microphone and strolled across the apron, his voice booming above the throng of 1,500 revelers. He requested *nom de plumes* for each competitor so that the judges, sequestered outside, wouldn't be biased when they evaluated the trays.



Galway, Ireland

The audience responded each time by calling out a wild assortment of names: Penny Pincher! The Duke! Shark! Sarkozy! Obama! Biffo! Bex! Posh! The Striker!

Behind the stage, Young jumped up and down to relieve tension. Holding the borrowed knife in his gloved hand, he shucked imaginary oysters the way an on-deck batter swings at an imaginary ball. When called to the stage, he was dubbed a most appropriate name—His Excellency.

I watched along with the others as Young examined each of his 30 allotted oysters, arranging them in rows on his tray. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, gathering his strength into one tight ball before crouching, arms raised in motionless anticipation for the signal to begin.

“Go!” the man in the green suit shouted to Young and his on-stage competitors.

Shells flew as the band struck up a tune and the master of ceremonies provided running commentary on the competitors’ progress.

“Nineteen for the Duke! Twenty-three for the Striker! Twenty-one for His Excellency! Twenty-eight for the Penny Pincher!”

And the Winner Is...

It took an hour for the results to be tallied. Young’s finishing time was 2:47, but everyone in attendance was well aware a fast time alone wouldn’t clinch the title.

The winners were announced in reverse order, and eventually Young stood in the top two with the Irish national champion, Michael Moran. Though Moran’s time matched Young’s at 2:47, his penalties inched him into second place. Young was the winner! I couldn’t believe my good fortune—my first trip to Galway and one of my countrymen had won the title.

Champagne showered the stage as the crowd applauded and visitors angled to

have their photo snapped with the new world champ. On the flight home, Young swore off future competitions, saying he had achieved his goal. Two weeks later, he traveled to Maryland to observe the national competition and couldn’t resist the urge to compete. He hopped on stage. He won.

Get ready, Galway: William “Chopper” Young returns in September to defend his title.

Necce Regis writes about travel, food, and culture for various publications, including The Washington Post, The Boston Globe, and American Way magazine. She has never met an oyster she didn’t want to eat. ■

Houses line Ballyknow Quay in Galway, Ireland



SEE 'EM SHUCK!

Oysters shucking competitions are held across the United States. At many events, the oysters shucked in competition are given away or sold at reasonable prices. Check out the dates and locations of international, national and regional competitions.

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

Galway International Oyster Festival
Galway, Ireland

September 24–27

www.galwayoysterfest.com

The year 2009 marks the 55th year of this festival and the Guinness World Oyster Opening Championship.

U.S. NATIONAL COMPETITION

St. Mary’s County Oyster Festival
Leonardtown, Maryland

October 17–18

www.usoysterfest.com

The National Oyster Shucking Championship is part of this event featuring Chesapeake Bay oysters. The winner becomes the U.S. representative in the International competition in Galway.

REGIONAL COMPETITIONS

Wellfleet Oysterfest

Wellfleet, Massachusetts

October 17–18

www.wellfleetoysterfest.org

The hometown festival of William “Chopper” Young—this two-day street party and events celebrate the town’s famous oysters, clams and shellfishing traditions.

Florida Seafood Festival

Apalachicola, Florida

November 6–7

www.floridaseafoodfestival.com

The oyster shucking contest features Apalachicola Bay Oysters. In addition to prizes, the Florida Seafood Festival champion goes on to compete in the national championship.

Urbanna Oyster Festival

Urbanna, Virginia

November 6–7

www.urbannaoysterfestival.com

A highlight of the festival is the State Oyster Shucking Contest. The winner goes to St. Mary’s, Maryland, to compete in the national championship.