

INTERVIEW



Clockwise from opposite page: Irish oysters from Harty's in Waterford on the Great Wall of China for the 2017 Shuck Off; a Chinese competitor; Harty's oysters being served in Shanghai



"Now it's sexy in China to eat oysters raw"

back in school on Monday morning."

Each week, Harty's produces between five and eight tonnes of oysters — about 60,000 pieces. Only 5pc are for the domestic market; customers include Chapter One, the Cliff House Hotel, Lyrath Estate and Waterford Castle. The rest are for export.

"We started in China about four years ago," says Joe. "It took about a year-and-a-half to get it off the ground. Bord Bia arranged all the meetings and came around with me to the Irish and English chefs working in Shanghai. We got the oysters into the Waldorf Astoria, the Shangri-La. I'd hang out in Irish bars and find the Irish chefs working here, have the craic. One

thing led to another; the chefs all talk to one another."

Rudy Guo, a restaurateur with five restaurants in Shanghai, Beijing and Fuzhou, is the Chinese-Canadian organiser of Shuck Fest, the Chinese National Oyster Shucking Championship, and the first International Shuck Cup, which was held in Fuzhou in May. The 30-something entrepreneur invited the international shuckers to compete in Shuck Fest to help promote the newly fashionable culture of oyster-eating.

"Oysters are the original Chinese fast food," explains Rudy, "but traditionally they have been eaten cooked, either in omelettes or on the barbecue, because the waters here are not so clean. Recently, there has been a shift to eating oysters raw, with imports coming from France, North America, New Zealand, Korea and — increasingly — Ireland, where the water is cleaner. Now it's sexy to eat them raw."

In the new China, imported oysters are a



MEET THE MASTER SHUCKERS

HONOR ALLEN

The baby-faced 23-year-old from Panama City (centre picture, right, with Anti Lempi) is the reigning US champion. At Hunt's Oyster Bar, where he works, they sell between 80 and 100 dozen oysters a day, priced at a democratic and accessible \$8.99 per 12. He starts each day by shucking 30 dozen, by way of prep.

of an oyster knife on his inner upper arm. Respected by his peers, Clark is always regarded as the one to beat.

JOHANN MALM

The reigning world champion, and the hippest shucker on the circuit, with the look of a Kooles model about him, the lanky Malm will be defending his title in Galway in September. Last year he won by shucking 30 oysters in two minutes, 57 seconds. His Restaurant Gabriel specialises in seafood.

STEPHEN NOLAN

Nolan (left) is the son of a clam and oyster fisherman, and the current European champion, winning the title in Trollhättan last January. The Irish man's uncle, Vincent Graham of Linnane's Lobster Bar, taught him how to shuck, and he honed his skills at Moran's, where he worked part-time for nine years through school and college.

MARIA PETERSEN

The Norwegian champion inherited her oyster shucking genes from her father, Heini, a chef and former European and world champion. The only woman in the competition, she says: "I open exactly like my dad. My trays look just like his. I've competed against my dad three times in the Norwegians and three times in the Nordics, but I've only beaten him once. I take competition seriously but my dad is much more competitive than me. He would never let me win."

ANTI LEMPI

Holder of the World Cup 2016, and the world champion in 2015, the Estonian (left, in white) takes his shucking seriously. His day job is overseeing the catering on board a large number of cruise ships.

MICHAEL MORAN

Galway's two-time world champion has oysters in his DNA; his father held the title before him. He works part-time at his family business, Moran's Oyster Cottage in Oranmore. "I'm getting a bit of passion back. The knife can't be too sharp or too blunt: it has to be just right."

DANIEL NOTKIN

The current Canadian champion was taught to shuck by his sister Joanna. He owns Notkins seafood restaurant in Montreal. "I find competing insanely stressful. I'm super nerdy, and for about six weeks before a big competition, I won't drink and I'll be rigorous about going to the gym and meditating. Subconsciously, you know you have very little time; there's no room for error. When you're competing against guys like Stephen and Michael, it's really tough. I take a picture of every plate I've ever shucked in a competition, and I've had about 18 first-places so far."

JESPER KNUDSEN

Head chef (left) at Lego in Denmark, where he is responsible for feeding 3,000 employees each day. He was the world champion in 2013.

LI 'EVEN' YUNYI

The new Chinese champion won in Fuzhou and will be competing at the World Championships in Galway in September. Aged just 19 and with just over a year's experience, Shanghai native Even (real name Li Yunyi) has an impressive oyster résumé. He placed second at the 2016 National Championship and came back this year taking the national title. He battled 10 international oyster champions and placed second in the first international Shuck Cup.

EAMON CLARK

The winner of the first international Shuck Cup 2017 in China. His family own the famous Rodney's oyster restaurant in Toronto. The Canadian has a tattoo