



ENTERTAINING

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DINING/
WASHINGTON STATE

Pacific plates

Known for its natural beauty, Orcas Island has been growing a community-based culinary scene as organic as the fresh produce on which it relies.

By *Mary Holland*
Photography *Alana Paterson*

“There’s a vibrant food scene developing out here,” says Jon Chappelle, a former chef at Doe Bay Café at the Doe Bay Resort on the eastern corner of Orcas Island. We’re sitting on the sun-drenched deck with towering fir and alder trees around us and the glimmering Pacific Ocean just beyond. It’s two hours before dinner service and Chappelle looks impossibly laid-back. But the more time you spend here, on the largest of the San Juan Islands off the northwestern corner of Washington state, the more you see that this is the default attitude.

The ocean-facing property has a vegetable garden, three saltwater soaking tubs and a collection of yurts and wood cabins peppered on a pillowy green lawn. The simple interior of the restaurant, all wooden booths, pitched ceiling and

French windows, is more rustic than the food from the kitchen, which includes handmade pasta; clams with ’nduja vinaigrette; and black cod with island-grown plums, *shishito*, pea shoots and herbs.

Chappelle, who also runs a restaurant called Voyager Sandwiches and Seafood, moved to Orcas 10 years ago for its mellow pace of life. The island provides plenty of inspiration for the chef. “We know the farmers so we can have conversations about what we want,” he says. “Growing small-scale is evident in the quality of the products.” Chappelle says that the island is a tight-knit community. “There’s a sense that the more we work together and foster a good community of restaurants, the better it is for all of us.”

In the past, Orcas wasn’t known for its food but has long attracted hikers, rowers



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and nature lovers. Here pebbled shores are lapped by the cobalt-blue ocean, while emerald-green forests climb mountains and freshwater lakes are tucked inside nature reserves – it’s all very beautiful. And while the nature-lovers keep coming, the island is tempting a new crowd.

Audra Lawlor founded Girl Meets Dirt and makes jam; she moved from New York to Orcas for hiking but fell in with the food community. “That’s what sold me on it,” she says. Lawlor began making preserves in 2013 from plums



and pears from the trees in her garden before expanding into a full business, selling products across the US. Like so many entrepreneurs on the island, she collaborates on the project. Her tomato jam was created with John Steward, the farmer at Maple Rock Farm and self-dubbed tomato king. “He does what no one else is doing on the island, which is to grow the tomatoes outside,” says Lawlor. “He’s working with what the island has to offer.” Lawlor had known Steward for years before he started growing a varietal of heirloom tomatoes for her jam. He’d sipped whiskey around her campfire and flipped pizzas for her in his backyard when they cooked up the idea.

In truth, the growers and chefs on Orcas don’t have much of a choice other than to be creative. “If no one grows

onions, then there are no onions,” says Jay Blackinton, chef and co-owner of Hogstone’s Wood Oven and Aelder restaurants. He opened the venue about seven years ago with his former partner: Steward, the tomato king. They began growing vegetables and selling them at the Saturday market, then firing up pizzas on Friday nights, before opening the restaurant. “When we opened I didn’t know what I was doing,” says Blackinton with a laugh. “We don’t have any luxury ingredients to rely on so we have to make do with what we have. It can be limiting but it can also be great.”

At Aelder, graceful but uncomplicated dishes, such as Dungeness crab with nasturtium emulsion, and lettuce root with rye and hazelnut – fly out of the small kitchen. One snack is an undressed,

“We don’t have any luxury ingredients so we make do with what we have. It can be limiting but it can be great”



Previous page: (1) Orcas Island ferry dock (2) Laura Bergsma, Buck Bay Shellfish Farm (3) King salmon, Doe Bay Café (4) Fresh catch
This spread: (1) Orcas Island Winery (2) Champagne Champagne (3) Doe Bay Café (4) Motel on the mainland (5) Cole Sisson, Doe Bay Wine Co (6) Doe Bay Café’s vegetable salad

unseasoned carrot served on a wooden board. “I know this looks precious,” says Blackinton. “But carrots are really hard to grow around here and this is the first year we’ve had a good crop.”

A seat at Hogstone’s has become one of the most sought-after on Orcas but it was the Willow’s Inn on nearby Lummi Island that kick-started the culinary shake-up across the islands of the Pacific Northwest. “The Willow’s Inn helped bring attention to the area,” says Avery Adams, chef at The Loft at Madrona, an overhauled restaurant set in a converted seaside loft. Indeed, tell someone on Orcas that you’re going to Lummi Island and they will assume it’s to visit the Willow’s Inn.

The food scene here has generated plenty of interest and a growing number of people have been setting their sights on



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Orcas Island address book:

EAT: **Doe Bay Café:** Eat fresh oysters on the sun-filled deck, while gazing at the inky ocean. doebay.com/cafe

EAT: **Roses Bakery:** Come for a stellar lunch of clam spaghetti and heirloom tomato salad. rosesbakerycafe.com

EAT: **Hogstone’s Wood Oven and Aelder:** These restaurants draw people from afar. The space rotates between Hogstone’s Wood Oven and Aelder, so call ahead. hogstone.com

EAT: **The Loft at Madrona:** Seasonal dishes and natural wine in an overhauled loft by the sea. madronaloft.com

EAT: **Buck Bay Shellfish:** Clams and oysters in an unfussy spot where the chefs get their shellfish. buckbayshellfishfarm.com

SHOP: **Doe Bay Wine Company:** A collection of wines from near and far, opened by a young wine-loving couple. doebaywinecompany.com

SHOP: **Girl Meets Dirt:** Buy zingy, crafted preserves and shrubs made from local fruit. girlmeetsdirt.com

DRINK: **Champagne Champagne:** Located at the ferry dock, this bar serves natural wine. champagnechampagne.me/bar

DRINK: **Orcas Island Winery:** Set in a modern farmhouse, this winery uses Washington State grapes. orcasislandwinery.com

STAY: **Outlook Inn:** A small hotel on the edge of town. Book one of the new waterfront suites. outlookinn.com

STAY: **Rosario Resort:** The only hotel on the island with a spa and two pools. rosarioresort.com



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(1) Jon Chappelle, chef and general manager at Doe Bay Café (2) Pete McWilliams, the café's executive chef (3) Amelia Carver and Brian Crum, owners of Champagne Champagne (4) Wes and Tera Landman, co-owners of Orcas Island Winery (5) Julien Kos processing salmon at Buck Bay Shellfish Farm (6) Toni Knudson, co-owner and manager of Buck Bay Shellfish (7) Jay Blackinton, co-owner-chef at Hogstone's (8) Jocelyn Cecil, Hogstone's general manager (9) The ferry to Orcas Island docking at Orcas Village (10) Fishing floats outside Buck Bay Shellfish shopfront (11) Seafood platter at Buck Bay Shellfish (12) Viewing the sunset from the island's northern tip



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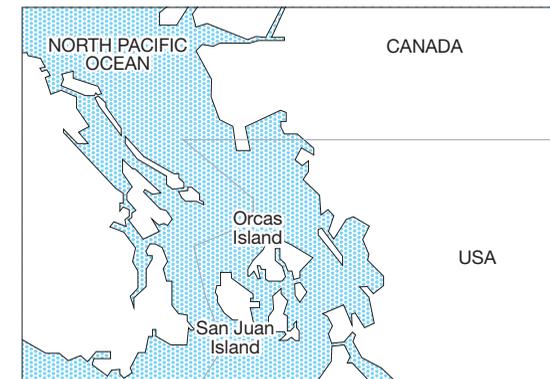


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“A growing number of people have been setting their sights on the island as an escape”



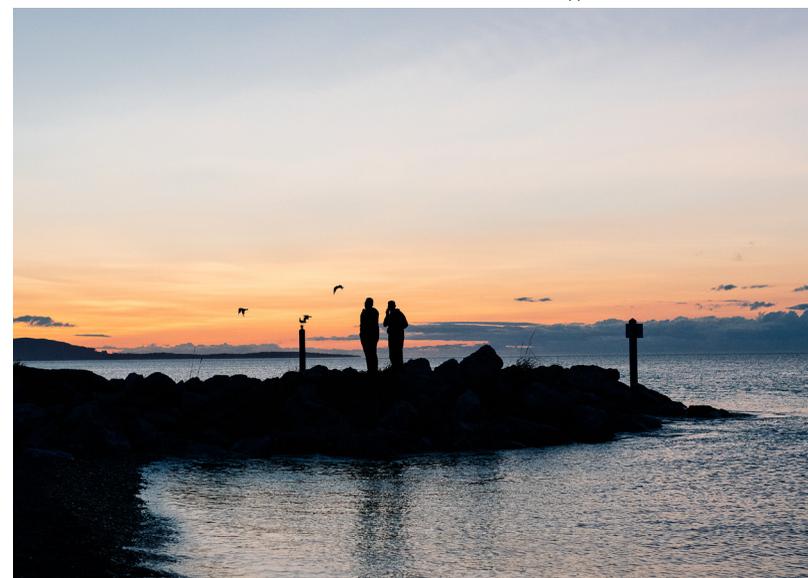
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the island as an escape. Some locals aren't thrilled about the summer traffic but most are glad of the business. “We understand why people come here: it's beautiful,” says straight-talking Tomi Knudson, co-owner of Buck Bay Shellfish Farm, where islanders collect their clams, oysters and smoked fish. Knudson's business has grown significantly in the past few years but she feels that the island hasn't changed much.

Others say that it's become even better. “We used to call it Orcatraz,” says Cole Sisson, native islander and co-founder of Doe Bay Wine Company and the Orcas Project. Sisson moved back here to open the wine shop and launch the Orcas Project, a range of wine labels resulting from collaborations between wine-makers and artists to draw attention

to Pacific Northwest wine. “We try to include as many people from the island as possible,” says Sisson. “Nowadays, there’s room to be creative.”

The influx of entrepreneurs expanding the food community, such as Sisson and Blackington, has been steady. Wesley and Tera Landman moved to Orcas from California to seek a better quality of life. They bought Orcas Island Winery, which makes wine from Washington State grapes, knowing next to nothing about wine. “We felt such a synergy with the



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(1) Crab claw crackers from Buck Bay Shellfish Farm (2) Doe Bay Wine Company’s East Sound Village façade (3) Fruits of the oyster harvest at Buck Bay Shellfish (4) Jessie Poole, Doe Bay’s front-of-house manager, pouring a negroni



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“We try to include as many people from the island as possible. There’s room to be creative”

island and the winery,” says Landman, who was looking for a business opportunity in a small community. “Everyone is like-minded and it enriches the culture tremendously.” On the west side of the island, Amelia Carver and Brian Crum, a chatty couple who had been living in Boston, opened Champagne Champagne, a low-key natural-wine bar at the ferry dock. “We want to be the bar that people go to,” says Carver as she pours a glass of rosy Austrian frizzante.

At Roses Bakery, a sunny all-day café, MONOCLE overhears two men making conversation over a casual midday meal. “How long have you been here?” one asks. “Forty years,” says the other, raising his glass of red wine to the man tucking into a clam linguine. “It’s a good life, isn’t it? It’s a very good life.” — (M)