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SUPERSTAR CHEFS

Treasure Islands

How our remote archipelago of the San Juan Islands fosters community and self-reliance—not to mention the freshest food anywhere

BY SHANNON BORG

OUT STANDING IN THEIR FIELD
Left to right: Jon Chappelle of Doe Bay Café, Dante Miller of Roses Bakery and Cafe, Jay Blackinton of Hogstone's Wood Oven, Nick Coffey of Ursa Minor, Jason Aldous of Friday Harbor House, John Hamilton of Cask & Schooner and Tops I Sushi & Seafood, Israel Cruz of Cask and Hee Han of Tops'I, photographed at Coffelt Farms on Orcas Island

FINDING SEAFOOD straight from the water is easy on Lopez Island, where Nick and Sarah Jones harvest pink singing scallops, oysters and clams, and also raise pork and lamb—sought after by Seattle restaurants—at their Jones Family Farms. On neighboring San Juan Island, mussels and clams from Westcott Bay land in kitchens within an hour after they're harvested. And on Orcas Island, North Beach Mushrooms adds exotic mushroom species to the table, while foragers harvest greens and berries.

This local bounty is increasingly showing up on the menus of restaurants within the San Juan Islands, thanks to a growing group of artisan chefs who are exploring a vast palate of flavors, colors and textures growing in the fields and forests of the islands, and off the Salish Sea shorelines.

"What it comes down to is that I want to do what I love in a place that inspires me to do it. And that is Lopez," says Nick Coffey, formerly of Seattle's Sitka and Spruce, who recently opened Ursa Minor on tiny Lopez Island (population 2,500). But Coffey could be speaking for a group that includes Jay Blackinton of Hogstone's Wood Oven, on Orcas Island, and Jason Aldous of Friday Harbor House, on San Juan Island, all of whom have received accolades for their food. Aldous recently relocated to Friday Harbor from tiny Lummi Island, where he earned his chops at the world-famous Willows Inn; Blackinton, a self-taught chef, has been nominated three times for Rising Star Chef by the James Beard Foundation and was recently named one of the 10 Best New Chefs of 2017 by *Food & Wine* magazine.

All are lucky (and hard-working) enough to make a go of it in the season-driven islands, where most restaurants close for at least part of the winter.

Others making the islands a true food destination include Jon Chappelle of Doe Bay Café and Dante Miller at the iconic Roses Bakery and Cafe, both on Orcas

photograph by HAYLEY YOUNG

COMING OUT OF THEIR SHELL
Ursa Minor's raw butter clam with whey, fern root, and yarrow, plated with a pink scallop shell

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF URSA MINOR

Island, and John Hamilton of Cask & Schooner and Tops'l Sushi & Seafood, on San Juan Island, Inn at Ship's Bay Geddes Martin and New Leaf Cafe's Steve Debaste, along with a host of other chefs.

VISITORS TO THE ISLANDS can expect sophisticated menus from these chefs that highlight the local bounty.

"I'm loving the pink scallops right now," Coffey said in late spring. He's been serving them raw with fern root, caramelized whey, yarrow, sometimes using combinations unheard of, even to locals. He is looking forward to the upcoming urchin season, and plans to serve that seafood with apples and chrysanthemum greens.

At Friday Harbor House, Aldous works with locals to access top-quality ingredients. "I have a friend who is diving for geoduck, sea cucumbers, Dungeness and uni right here. So much of the harvest from the sea is shipped all over the world because it's the best in the world. It's incredible that I get to work with all these ingredients immediately after they have been caught. We are finding a bunch of great wild edibles, too: miner's lettuce, sea beans, elderflowers, fir tips, fern root, nettles and others."

Blackinton, who was drawn to the islands as a haven from the craziness of city life, focuses on the diversity of foods growing on Orcas Island, from the century-old Coffelt Farm, where lamb and poultry are raised, to the newer North Beach Mushrooms, where grower Jonathan Calhoun offers gourmet mushroom species that include oyster, lion's mane and shiitake. Blackinton and crew forage, too, finding nettles and salal berries in the woods, cattails in the ponds, and snails, well, just about anywhere.

SALAD DAYS
From Hogstone's Wood Oven: a salad of the first hen eggs and spring shoots of the season, with caramelized onions, a grilled fig leaf and berry vinegar sauce

Along with his chef credentials, Blackinton is also farming in a partnership with John Steward of Orcas Island's Maple Rock Farm. They're expanding the repertoire of their 4-acre farm to include microgreens, which they sell at their farm stand, through a CSA, and at the 2-year-old Orcas Food Co-op. The co-op is a community of chefs, farmers and fishers intensely committed to the islands.

Doe Bay Café's Chappelle, another chef closely connected to the land, has been quietly creating some of the best food in the islands for about eight years. The Doe Bay property includes a 1-acre garden and fruit trees. "Every year we are trying new crops," he says. "The connection between the place and the café is really what we try to highlight and are excited about."

New wild foods also play a major role on the café's menu. "I love using nettles in the spring," he says. "We are doing a gnocchi dish with nettles and green garlic that shows off what I love about spring. Sea beans are another ingredient that we forage on the island that is great to work with. I love the brininess that it brings to a shellfish broth. It is great pickled, and you can use it to bring salt to a dish without adding any."

There's no doubt that financial survival is a challenge to any island business that depends, at least in part, on seasonal tourism. But the close community on the islands is a plus to these four chefs. "Everyone helps each other, and people don't just ignore their neighbors like they do in the city," says Coffey. "I love working amongst all the artisans that are drawn to the islands."

WATER'S BOUNTY
Doe Bay Café's stuffed squid with pine nuts, kale, Parmesan and bread crumbs

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW PLOTSKY, FARMRUN.COM

Chapelle speaks for these four, and other chefs in the islands, when he says: "I don't know if this makes us unique or not, but we are really just trying to show our excitement for the products as they come into season, and preserve and ferment them in cool ways so that we can continue to use them in the leaner months," says Chapelle. "We want to make great food that is well thought out, tastes great, and at the same time unpretentious and approachable."

Grown in the San Juans

Farmers are organizing to let the world know about food "Island Grown in the San Juans" (islandgrowns.com) through the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild, which has set standards for farmers, shops and chefs. Produce bearing the Island Grown logo is grown in San Juan County. Livestock and products derived from animals are guaranteed to have spent at least 50 percent of their lives in San Juan County, and 95 percent of the defining ingredient in value-added products is required to be grown or produced in San Juan County. San Juan County is also a non-GMO county, the first in the country.