

The Mercury News

WHY LAFAYETTE IS PERFECT FOR HOG ISLAND'S NEWEST LOCATION

The company's new bar and restaurant expected to boost city's dining scene



A platter of Hog Island Sweetwater oysters, a popular item on the menu at Hog Island Oyster Co. Courtesy of Hog Island Oyster Co.

By Martha Ross mross@bayareanewsgroup.com

As Hog Island Oyster Company began to consider its next location for a new bar and restaurant, serving platters of its famously plump, sweet and sustainably harvested oysters, it had plenty of options, even as far away as Monterey or Los Angeles.

But CEO and Hog Island cofounder John Finger said the seafood company, with its renowned Tomales Bay farm, was not in a rush to get too big, too fast. Hog Island wants to keep the focus on “home.” That is, the Bay Area. As he began to hear that a lot of Hog Island fans come from the East Bay suburbs, a combination of things — the right space and the right location — brought the company to Lafayette.

On Thursday, Hog Island announced the big news that is sure to turbocharge Lafayette's small but already lively dining scene: The company is preparing to open a new oyster bar, as its restaurants are known, along Mount Diablo Boulevard in early 2027.

As with Hog Island's five other Bay Area locations, the Lafayette bar will emphasize indoor-outdoor dining, and its lunch and dinner menus will feature some of its most popular seafood-centric small plates, sandwiches and entrees, along with, of course, its daily selection of raw and grilled oysters.

The new bar will also create special dishes for this particular location and offer a full selection of beer and wine, as well as its specialty cocktails.

“The location called to us,” Finger said about the 2,200-square-foot space at 3596 Mount Diablo Boulevard, which formerly housed the Peruvian restaurant Barranco and which is in the same block as Pizza Antica and Batch & Brine.

“When we walked in (to the space), I'm like, ‘Yeah, I can imagine us in this place,’” Finger continued. “I loved the inside-outside nature of it, the nice big patio in front and the old rustic-wood feel, and the fact that it could make a really spectacular-looking oyster bar inside.”

In terms of the location's desirability, Finger also was talking about Lafayette itself. The upscale community may be one of Contra Costa's smaller cities, but its modest size — as opposed to the urban bustle of neighboring Walnut Creek's downtown — appealed to the Hog Island ethos. In Lafayette, Finger said Hog Island aims to create “a neighborhood restaurant” around a “small-town” community, as well as around the intrinsically social nature of an oyster bar.

Finger agreed that Lafayette has become known as a place “where people like to go out and eat.” Locals also like to eat well. Lafayette's dining scene includes longtime favorites, such as Postino and Metro Lafayette, as well as the venerated Rêve Bistro and more lively hangouts like The Social Bird, The Breakfast Club, Tutu's Food and Drink and The Hideout.

Hog Island Oyster Co. started as a five-acre farm in Tomales Bay in 1983, with Finger and other founders who had backgrounds in marine science and in fishing and clamming. More than 40 years later, Hog Island has grown into one of the Bay Area's premier shellfish producers. Its website said it harvests and sells more than 5 million oysters and Manila clams each year from its farms in Tomales Bay and Humboldt Bay, while its food service operation has expanded to include oyster bars in Marshall, San Francisco's Ferry Building, Larkspur's Marin Country Market and Napa's Oxbow Market.

The company has also positioned itself as “one of the leading voices” in local conversations around sustainable food practices by emphasizing its partnership with vendors who responsibly source and catch seafood, usually within 100 miles of the Bay Area, the website said.

As for Hog Island's core oyster operations, Finger has said that “few foods carry the flavor of ‘place’ quite like an oyster.”

The oysters that come from Tomales Bay grow in water that is cool, clean and rich in plankton, and “they carry the unique flavor of this bay,” the website said. Pretty soon, people in the East Bay, who may have made day trips to Hog Island bars in Tomales Bay or in San Francisco for a taste of those famous oysters, won't have to travel so far.