

# Oyster Roast

By Andrea Weigl

You can't **roast oysters** without one piece of essential equipment: a pint of beer.

That's the first lesson I learned from award-winning cookbook authors Matt and Ted Lee, who let me persuade them to show me how to throw an **oyster roast**.

**Oyster roasts** are a culinary tradition in South Carolina's Lowcountry, where the Lee brothers grew up. The Lees were in town on a recent swing through North Carolina promoting their latest cookbook, "The Lee Bros. Charleston Kitchen."

Before they arrived, they gave strict instructions about everything to have on hand to ensure a successful **roast**: a stack of firewood, four cinder blocks, a 4-by-6-foot sheet of steel, a shovel, burlap sacks soaking in water, a bushel of **oysters**, and, of course, plenty of beer to drink.

And so, on a recent Thursday in March, the Lee brothers, a few friends and I, each with a pint of beer, gathered under a large maple tree in my backyard. The brothers scoped out a flat place in the grass. Matt stood the cinder blocks upright, creating a rectangle on which to lay the sheet of metal. Once the metal was laid on top of the bricks, Ted asked, "Is it level?"

Matt poured some beer out of his pint glass onto the metal sheet. The golden ale pooled in the center. Matt declared: "It's pretty darn level."

When it comes to **oyster roasts**, the brothers speak from experience. In the high season from October to March, they said, they might get invited to an **oyster roast** a week for any occasion, including birthdays, sporting events and pre-wedding celebrations. A Thursday night **oyster roast** has become a traditional preamble to a Saturday wedding among Charleston couples.

But **roasting oysters** dates much farther back, as the brothers learned while researching their new cookbook. Mounds of **oyster** shells dating to prehistoric times have been found on Edisto Island, south of Charleston.

"The **oyster roast** is the one thing that ties together the pre-European settlers to the tourists," Matt said. "The thing we like to remind ourselves is: It really hasn't changed at all for thousands of years."

And really, Ted said, not much has changed in the modern era. At most, all that is required is four cinder blocks and a sheet of metal.

In my backyard, a fire was soon lit. Using a hose, Matt rinsed the mud off the **oysters**.

"This separates a bad **oyster roast** from a good one," Ted explained.

"Let's see how hot our griddle is," Matt said before spraying it with water. The droplets bounced and hissed as steam rose from the surface.

A shovel-full of **oysters** was laid out on the hot metal. The mollusks were covered with a wet burlap sack. Within five minutes, Matt removed the burlap and shoveled the first batch of steamed **oysters** onto a nearby table covered with newspaper. Soon all that could be heard was the popping of shells and the slurping of **oysters**. The brothers declared the first batch a tad overdone. The next batch came out right: just barely cooked.

"Practice makes perfect," Matt said.

Twelve dozen **oysters** later, Matt wrestled with a large **oyster** that refused to open. He had put the **oyster** back on the fire several times to see if it would open on its own. "I'm not letting this **oyster** beat me," Matt said.

Finally, the shell popped and Matt savored his last **oyster**: "It wasn't the very best of the day but it still felt good to be the victor."

Among the many lessons I learned that afternoon was this: **Roasting oysters** isn't an exact science.

It may take several attempts to perfectly **roast** an **oyster** or to pry a stubborn one from its shell. Even an overdone or troublesome **oyster** can't ruin a spring afternoon spent outside with friends under a maple tree with the smell of wood smoke all around and a pint of beer in your hand.

### Where to buy the materials

Dillon Supply stores in Raleigh and Durham sell a 4-by-8-foot section of 3/16th-inch-thick steel plate for \$145. They will cut it in half for \$10. Before cooking on the steel, you should use an industrial cleaner (available at Dillon) to remove any oil from it. Then, burn a fire under it at least once to remove any remaining residue.

JoAnn Fabric and Craft stores sell burlap for \$3.99 per yard. I also found burlap sacks for \$3.95 each at [lehmans.com](http://lehmans.com).

Order your **oysters** ahead of time from a store that specializes in fresh seafood. In the Triangle, consider Earp's Seafood Market, Capital Seafood Market, Grand Asia Market, the Sea Depot and Tom Robinson's Seafood. A bushel of **oysters** costs about \$60 and will feed 6-8 people depending upon what else you are serving.

### When should we eat oysters?

Many people adhere to that old adage to eat **oysters** only in months with the letter "R" in them. That limits **oyster** consumption to fall, winter and early spring. Steve Murphey, an environmental health supervisor with the state Division of Marine Fisheries, says that advice has to do with the quality of the **oyster** meat. In colder months, **oysters** are more plump and contain more fat. In the summer, **oyster** meat is more watery.

"The quality of the meat isn't as good in the summer as in the winter months," Murphey says.

But, Murphey points out, **oysters** are now available year-round. The wild harvest season in North Carolina has ended, but farmed **oysters** are available through the summer. If you do eat **oysters** in the summer, make sure the **oysters** are kept at 45 degrees to prevent naturally occurring bacteria from creating pathogens that can make people sick.

Don't eat a dead **oyster**: A live **oyster** keeps its shell tightly closed. If you tap a live **oyster**, it will close its shell even tighter. A dead **oyster's** shell will be slightly open and won't close when you tap it.

### Hosting an oyster roast

*These instructions, designed to feed 6-8 people, are adapted from the award-winning "The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook," by Matt and Ted Lee (W.W. Norton, 2006).*

#### Supplies

4 cinder blocks

1 **large** sheet of steel, about 4 feet square

**Lots of dry** split wood, plus kindling

1 burlap bag or 2 old bath towels

A **5-gallon** bucket filled with water

1 metal shovel

1 pair work gloves per person, or old kitchen towels (to protect hands while shucking)

1 **oyster** knife per person

1 bushel unshucked **oysters** or more depending on number of guests

#### Step by step

Create a level, well-swept clearing on the ground and stand the cinder blocks upright so that they form the corners of a rectangle to support the metal sheet. Lay the metal over the cinder blocks and test it to make certain it is secure.

Remove the metal sheet and build a fire in the center of the cinder blocks. When the fire is roaring, place the metal squarely on the cinder blocks. Dunk the burlap bag in the pail of water.

When a handful of water tossed on the metal sizzles, place 2 to 3 shovels-full of **oysters** on it and blanket them with the soaked burlap. Let **oysters** steam for about 5 minutes or until some, but not all, have opened, then remove burlap and return it to the water bucket. Shovel **oysters** off the metal and onto a table for shucking.

When guests have nearly devoured the first batch, begin the second batch. When all the **oysters** have been steamed, you can douse the fire with any water left in the pail.

### **Serving**

*Serve the **oysters** with Pepper Vinegar, Red Rice and Sunday Collards (see recipes). Also consider setting out saltines, various types of hot sauce, several rolls of paper towels and, of course, cold beer.*

### **Red Rice**

*From the award-winning "The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook," by Matt and Ted Lee (W.W. Norton, 2006).*

2 slices thick-cut bacon, cut into small dice

1 1/2 cups diced yellow onion (about 1 large onion)

3 cloves garlic, crushed

1 1/2 cups long-grain rice

2 to 2 1/2 cups chicken broth

1 (28-ounce) can whole Italian tomatoes, drained

1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes

1 teaspoon Spanish smoked paprika

1 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper

**HEAT** oven to 425 degrees.

**FRY** bacon in a 12-inch ovenproof skillet or Dutch oven over medium-high heat, until firm and barely crisp, about 4 minutes. Use a slotted spoon, transfer bacon to a small bowl. Set aside. Sauté onion and garlic in the bacon fat over medium heat until softened, about 5 minutes. Add rice and cook, stirring occasionally, for 1 to 2 minutes, until fragrant and slightly translucent. Add 2 cups broth and turn off heat.

**PUREE** tomatoes in a food processor. Stir in the crushed red pepper flakes, smoked paprika, salt and pepper and pour puree into the skillet. Stir to combine.

**BRING** mixture to a boil over high heat, then reduce heat to medium-low, cover and simmer vigorously until the rice is tender but soupy, about 20 minutes. Add 1 tablespoon of broth at a time if the rice is not soupy.

**TRANSFER** skillet or Dutch oven to the oven and bake on the middle rack for 25 minutes, or until all the liquid has been absorbed. Serve rice in a bowl. Garnish with reserved bacon.

*Yield: 5 cups*

### **Sunday Collards**

*From the award-winning "The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook," by Matt and Ted Lee (W.W. Norton, 2006).*

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil, peanut oil or canola oil

1 smoked ham hock or smoked hog jowl or 1/4 pound slab bacon, diced

8 cups water

3 dried chile peppers or 1 tablespoon crushed red pepper flakes

1 tablespoon kosher salt

3 3/4 pounds collard greens (about 3 bunches, ribbed, washed and cut into 1-inch wide strips)

**POUR** oil into an 8-quart stockpot over medium-high heat and swirl it around so it covers the bottom. Score ham hock with a small sharp knife, and when the oil begins to shimmer, set it in the pot. Sear the hock all over as best you can and allow it to render some fat, about 6 minutes. (Since a hock's shape is so oblique, it will become spottily browned, but that is fine.)

**POUR** water into the pot; it will hiss and pop for a few seconds. Add chiles and salt and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer for 30 minutes, until the stock is deeply flavored with smoke and spiciness.

**ADD** a few handfuls of collards to the pot. The greens will float to the surface, so stir them frequently, submerging them with the spoon, until they have turned a bright green, about 3 to 5 minutes, and become floppier and more compact, so you can add more handfuls. Continue adding collards, stirring and submerging them, until all the greens are in the pot. Turn heat to low and simmer gently for 1 hour. The greens will be very dark matte green and should be completely tender. If not tender, continue cooking.

**USE** a slotted spoon to serve greens and pass a cruet of pepper vinegar (recipe above.)

*Yield: 6-8 servings*

### **Pepper Vinegar**

*Adapted from "The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook," by Matt and Ted Lee (W.W. Norton, 2006).*

1 cup white vinegar

2 Thai, Serrano or bird's eye chiles, fresh or dried

**USE** a funnel to pour the vinegar in a cruet. Add chiles and use a chopstick or the handle of a wooden spoon to submerge them, if necessary. Cap the cruet and place it in the refrigerator. The vinegar will be well infused in 24 hours and will keep for months in the refrigerator.

*Yield: 1 cup*