

Dan and Louis Oyster Bar

By Michael Schepps

Dan and Louis Oyster Bar is a family-owned seafood restaurant that has operated at the same location in downtown Portland for over a century. Known for its eclectic decor featuring hundreds of collectible plates, mementos, and nautical memorabilia, the restaurant has a clubby atmosphere. Historical artifacts include elements of the Battleship USS *Oregon* that were preserved prior to its scrapping and the wheel from the steamer *Brother Jonathan*, which wrecked off the coast of Crescent City, California, in 1865. The restaurant's owners, the Wachsmuths, have long championed the endemic Olympia oyster (*ostrea lurida*), and their efforts have contributed to the survival of the threatened subspecies.

Born in San Francisco in 1877, Louis Charles Wachsmuth grew up on Willapa Bay in Oysterville, Washington. He started work early in the aquaculture industry, shucking oysters for his father, Meinert Wachsmuth, a German immigrant from the island of Sylt in the North Sea. Meinert had three other sons, some of whom also worked in the family aquaculture business. When Meinert sold his oyster beds in 1903, Louis went to Portland where he worked as a deliveryman, oyster shucker, and cook. In 1907, he founded the Oregon Oyster Company, a storefront retail and wholesale market on Southwest Ankeny Street that specialized in fresh seafood brought from the coast by railroad.

The affable Louis Wachsmuth served raw oysters (often with ketchup) and his signature milk-based oyster stew to the hangers-on at the small storefront. By 1919, he was ready to launch a fulltime restaurant as an adjunct to the fish market. He took over the food bar from the nearby Merchants Exchange building and in 1922 acquired oyster beds of his own in Yaquina, near Newport on the central Oregon Coast, and started the Oregon Oyster Company. The company continues as Oregon Oyster Farms and is still associated with the Wachsmuth family.

The restaurant expanded over the following century, creating dining spaces, including one whose shape mimics that of a sailing vessel, and continuing to sell fresh oysters and other seafood. The restaurant eventually had a seating capacity of about a hundred diners. As a devoted advocate for the flavor of the Olympias, Wachsmuth claimed that one “can’t beat” their fresh taste. He encouraged the public to eat the freshest oysters available. People should “eat ‘em alive!” he advised.

Wachsmuth was committed to the preservation of native Olympia oysters, small, sweet endemic bivalves that grow more slowly than imported species. Their beds were intensively harvested from the 1850s until the early 1900s, at which point they were nearly extinct. By 1930, the State of Oregon had leased most of Yaquina Bay to the Oregon Oyster Company which, the *Oregonian* reported on March 23, 1930, was due to the “firm’s sincere desire to conserve the oyster.” Many of Wachsmuth’s Depression-era proposals for the bay, including pollution mitigation and restricted harvests, were intended to create a sustainable fishery. Throughout his life, he was a tireless booster of Oregon’s aquaculture industry.

By September 1941, Wachsmuth’s efforts in sustainable aquaculture had succeeded. He spent \$100,000 on remediation of the Yaquina oyster beds, an effort that involved depositing “65 carloads” of cleaned oyster shells into the water. He also transplanted non-native species to reduce the pressure on the slower-growing Olympias. Under Wachsmuth’s leadership, the popularity of Louis’ Oyster Bar and the oyster farm continued to grow, and by 1941 he was shipping Yaquina Bay oysters to the Waldorf Astoria in New York and the Denver Athletic Club. The Oyster Bar had also become a favored haunt of journalists from the *Oregonian* and the *Oregon Journal* and for Oregon politicians such as Senator Mark Hatfield, who held his 1984 reelection celebration there.

In 1938, Louis Wachsmuth’s oldest son Daniel died of influenza, and the restaurant was renamed Dan and Louis Oyster Bar in his memory. When Louis died in 1958, he was succeeded by his sons, Louis A. and Chester (known as Tuck), who in 1977 passed the business on to their sons, Louis J. and Doug. Over the decades, five generations of the Wachsmuth family worked at the restaurant, including Cory Schreiber, one of Louis’s grandsons who in 1998 was a James Beard Award winner for Best Chef in the Pacific Northwest through his restaurant Wildwood in northwest Portland.

In 1991, Doug Wachsmuth bought out his brother's share of the restaurant. He owned it until 2013 when he passed Dan and Louis Oyster Bar on to his son Keoni and daughter-in-law Michelle. As of 2022 the restaurant remains in the Wachsmuth family, with plans to continue into the next generation. Though the restaurant's menu has expanded over the years, the focus remains on raw oysters and fresh seafood, with Louis's signature oyster stew still featured on the menu.

Sources

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