

Museum on Main Street, Smithsonian Institution

Stories: Yes | Student Digital Storytelling Project

Bowen's Inn History and Food, Maryland

Speaker 1: Along the Chesapeake Bay waterways there are multiple restaurants that sell and provide seafood dishes to the general public across Maryland and Virginia. Amongst all one restaurant in particular caught people's attention from along the DC metropolitan area for their well known crab cakes and fried chicken, Bowen's Inn Known for its hotel, restaurant, bar and Marina. It quickly became one of the top spots for fishers, congressional and sports figures from Washington DC. Important people such as Arthur Godfrey, Harry Truman, Robert Mitchell, and even the 35th President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, have eaten here. Making Bowen's Inn popular throughout the years in the DC, Maryland and Virginia tri state area.

Speaker 1: [0:41] Starting up in 1918, Bowen's Inn was a popular tourist attraction. Well known for its cheap drinks and lively bands. Sitting next the claim then was the infamous lighthouse and both well-liked by Marylanders and tourists alike. While one was known for the live shows and drinks, the other boasts of the skip check-in and the boat bar with an amazing atmosphere and beer. Yet Sadly on Wednesday, March 15th, 2006, a blazing fire fueled by 40 mile per hour winds took out the landmark in just under two hours. It took over 50 firefighters and a few tugboats to finally clear the fire, but by then, the damage was done. Bowen's Inn was no more.

Speaker 1: [1:16] The historic establishment which would had stood since 1918 have been wiped off the face of the earth. 12 years later, after the fire on May 18th, 2018, the great granddaughter of Mortimer Bowen, Gwyn Novak established a small cooking class business with her husband Donald called, No Thyme to Cook. As a native Southern Marylander, Gwyn wanted to be able to continue creating great food and spirit hospitality like her family did years ago throughout the community.

Gyne: [1:41] So I'm Gwyn Novak, and I'm the chef and owner here, at No Thyme to Cook. I started No Thyme to Cook after I'd been out of cooking school for a number of years and worked in restaurants and catering companies. And I just did not love the same thing day in day after day that you often get in a restaurant. So, I started No Thyme to Cook as a personal chef service. That was great, great business, until the economy kind of tanked back in '08. And oddly enough, the first thing that people cut out of their budget was the chef, believe it or not. And so I took a little hiatus and then about six years ago, I started teaching cooking classes. And then within the last year, it's turned into this beautiful building.

Speaker 1: [2:18] In Maryland, one of the most popular dishes is oyster Rockefeller. With Gwyn Novak, having a husband that is a Waterman, she usually gets fresh flushes of oysters for the meal she prepares for cooking classes, watches her husband share the art of shucking oysters.

Donald: [2:33] How do you shuck an oyster? An oyster is pretty simple by design. It has a hinge and a bill. Traditionally, the way to shuck an oyster is bill first, you shuck it through the bill. Some people attack it from the hinge and pry it open, but I use a traditional shucking knife,

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then blade, pointy and sharp, in through the bill, you find the muscle on one of the shells, it's attached to, I don't know if you can see it, but it's attached right there. You can see that? Once you get the knife blade in, and cut that muscle, he's done. It'll pry right open 'cause the whole oyster is basically just muscle on this side muscle on the other side. That's all it is. And when you cut one side, he can't hold the shell together anymore. Pry him open cut the other side and he's done. That's it. It's that simple.

Speaker 1: [3:33] Now that we know how to properly shuck an oyster, Miss Novak will demonstrate how to make oyster Rockefeller.

Gwyn: [3:39] What we have is some bacon, we have some cheese, we have some butter, we have some Sherry, and some thyme and salt and pepper. So what I'm gonna do is, I kind of pack cook these a little bit, meaning partially cook them, so that by the time the other things cooked, the oysters wouldn't still be raw. So we're gonna do is add a little bit of butter first of all 'cause I think everything's been with butter and bacon. You can use salted or unsalted butter, it's your call. And then I'm gonna give it a splash of Sherry. This is also really good to do with brandy, cognac.

Gwyn: [4:19] You could do it with wine if you didn't have either one of these, or if you don't have to do it with alcohol at all. Okay, now let's add a little bit of bacon. So definitely precooked the bacon, because it will take a lot longer to cook than the oysters will. That's the beauty of oysters they cook really quickly. So let's add a little bit of pepper to this stash. Well cracked pepper, always fresh cracked pepper, and I'm gonna add a pinch of salt but not much, because there's a fair bit of salt in the bacon. But these oysters are not that salty. Again, oysters will vary depending on where they've been harvested, the amount of salinity in them. So just know where your oysters come from.

Gwyn: [5:07] And I know these are not that salty. And now I'm gonna add some dried thyme. These are just a really kind of earthy herb, that is gonna work great with the oysters and with this bacon. But just a pinch on each because, earthy can be a little bit powerful. You want to taste the oyster, not just the time. And now let's add a tiny bit of freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano, Parmesan cheese. And then we're gonna put this tray of oysters in a 400 degree oven for about five minutes, and see what happens.

Speaker 1: [6:03] The main food sources people use in the Bay are rockfish, oysters and blue crabs. With the water being poor and overfishing increasing over the years, all three of these seafood sources have been declining over the past 10 to 20 years.

Donald: [6:16] So decline in crab population, or oysters or whatever product we have, whether it's clams or any of it definitely affects the industry. I mean, there's a limited amount of clam

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market for instance, white clams, manna as we call them here. And we had an overabundance of fresh water came down in the upper Bay from Tilman Island North, the white clams died in about a week. We were catching 15 bushel a day, our limit, and went from that to none, zero. What does the market do with that? You either have a product or you don't have a product. And it can vanish. It can vanish overnight if you want it to.

Gwyn: [7:04] I won't say no rockfish, we're on the point of extinction virtually in the bay. And thankfully, that's not the case anymore. But it is seasonal. And so what we learn, what we actually have to educate our guests on is that, just because you want it, doesn't mean you can have it at this time. We focus very much on what is seasonal in our preparations here, because I think that locally sourced is just more flavorful, it supports our local economy and it supports our neighbors, so we're all about local.

Speaker 1: [7:34] For the blue crabs, there has been an 18% decrease of the blue crab population from 2017 to 2018. Over the past century, the watershed has experienced a change in land use as urban, suburban and agricultural areas have replaced forested lands. Since 1949, oysters have been getting diseases such as Jericho and MSX from the water, which is affecting oyster restoration due to the poor water quality. The rockfish population has been declining since 2004, from diseases due to water pollution. That's making seafood quality harder to get from the Bay.

Speaker 1: [8:09] To help stop the pollution within the bay, we need to reduce nutrient, sediment and toxic chemical pollution. You can do that by reducing the amount of runoff from your property, and not dumping toxic chemicals, and importantly, do not litter. If we are able to accomplish reducing pollution within the water, we can help stop the rapid depletion of wildlife within the Chesapeake Bay.

Speaker 1: [8:29] There also needs to be responsible fishers and watermen with the knowledge and awareness of the base conditions like Donald Novak. Who can ensure a healthy Bay allowing us to enjoy seafood state of Maryland, such as blue crabs, oysters and rockfish. Lastly, Miss Novak will demonstrate how to make a classic Maryland crab cake.

Gwyn: [8:56] Okay, so let's make some crab cakes. We're gonna start out with one egg, I'm gonna crack that in the bowl, and then we're gonna whip that up a little bit. And then to that we're gonna add two tablespoons of mayonnaise, which I have expertly measured here and then we're gonna add in a little bit of Worcestershire sauce, add a teaspoon, quite a bit of Tabasco, I like it spicy. And a little bit of dry mustard, add a teaspoon of dry mustard. Let's add a little salt and pepper. Crush your salt and fresh cracked pepper. Let's get all those whisked together, nice and smooth. You gonna pour this over one pound fresh crab meat. All that yumminess, out of the bowl, you need to gently toss it. To fold it because we don't want to

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break up these beautiful chunks of crab meat. Want to be able to have a nice flaky crab cake when it's all said and done.

Gwyn: And then the egg will help to hold it together, what would be considered a binder, but we're gonna go one step further. And I know you hear all the time, our crab cakes have no filler. This isn't a filler, this is a binder, it's the thing that's gonna hold that crab cake together. We're gonna use good old fashioned saltines and you can just take them put them in a bag and crush them, or you can take a rolling pin and kind of roll it on. I think it's just enough, probably about a third of a cup, to hold our crab meat together. And then fold that in gently. And then out of this pound, we'll get four nice sized crab cakes, for four ounce crab cakes. So divided in half, and then half again. Be really gentle with these guys. Again, you don't want to destroy that crabmeat and crush it. And then we'll pop these guys into the refrigerator to chill for a few minutes. It'll help them hold together in a pan and we'll cook them off. We want a medium high heat.

Gwyn: [11:52] We're gonna add some extra virgin olive oil to the pan and we're gonna let it get good and hot because we want a nice serum on the outside of these guys. Well crispy on the outside and nice and soft on the inside. Let's take these guys, All right, let's put them in this hot pan. We want to hear this "sss" sound. Sure hope it makes this sound. Yeah, you hear that? That's what we're looking for. You don't hear that "sss" sound your pan's not hot enough. You see these guys are trying to fall apart. That's good. Well, we'll see when we get a flip up. We hope that's good. That means that there's just enough binder in there to hold it together but not enough that it's too bready. All right now while those guys are frying, let's make some cocktail sauce. Because you gotta have some yummy cocktail sauce. So we have good old fashioned ketchup.

Gwyn: [12:45] We're gonna add some horseradish to it. And how much you add is totally dependent on how hot you like it. I like it pretty spicy. I thought let's add some more cracked pepper to it. And a pinch of salt. Everything's better with a little bit of salt, salt's a natural flavor enhancer. So you really wanted to add a little bit of that. We're gonna add a little bit of lemon juice to it too. So to get the most juice out of lemon, I'm gonna give it a squish, roll, kind of soften it up a little bit. You get about double the amount of juice out of this guy, that you would normally. Good, you see. Add a squirt. A little bit of citrus, brightens it up. Stir it all together. We got it, cocktail sauce, let's see how it tastes. All right. So let's try these guys. There we go. Beautiful.

Gwyn: [14:10] Little chef trick, what you could do is, now that you have a nice and golden brown on one side, it'll be the same within seconds on the second side but to get it in fully cooked through the middle and the only thing that we're looking to cook really is the egg. The crab is fully cooked, but to get that nice cook uniformly in the middle, we can take this entire pan and

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pop it into that convection oven for about six minutes. Perfect time to finish them through cocktail sauce, serve with each. We have it, traditional Maryland cupcakes.

Speaker 1: [14:58] No Thyme to Cook was creative 'cause Gwen Novak wanted to spread her passion and love of cooking throughout the community just like her family did with Bowen's Inn. Thus, continuing the family's legacy of cooking.