

The Provincetown INDEPENDENT

RESTAURANT REDUX

Garrett Smythe Is ‘All In’ at the Wicked Oyster

A chef comes full circle at a revived year-round place on Wellfleet’s Main Street

BY EDOUARD FONTENOT · DEC 3, 2025



Garrett Smythe is at home at Wellfleet’s Wicked Oyster — it’s the restaurant that helped to launch his cooking career over 20 years ago. It’s also where he returned last year to helm the kitchen as one of a three-person team of new owners with Sebastien Taffara and Alex Hay.

On a bustling late fall evening, Smythe glances at the pass before answering a question about the path that led him back to the Outer Cape.

“I didn’t grow up cooking,” he says. “It wasn’t really a thing in my family. I was an Army brat, one of seven. Both of my parents were colonels in the Marine Corps, and for us food was just fuel.”

Smythe's realization that food was more than just fuel began in the back yard at the Wicked Oyster in its earlier incarnation in 2004. He had a degree in anthropology from Radford University in hand and not a clue about pursuing a career in that field. He'd come to Wellfleet for a landscaping job, but it had fallen through. It was over lunch here that his friend Caleb Potter suggested that the restaurant might be the answer to Smythe's immediate problem. And sure enough, Ken Kozak, who owned the place back then with his wife, Eliza Fitts, said he could use a dishwasher and jack-of-all-trades.

When Smythe stepped into the Wicked's kitchen, he says, his direction in the world began to take shape. "I just fell in love with the cooking and with everything about the restaurant," he says. The job offered an education not just in how to run a kitchen but in how a group of people can join forces to pull off something special.

Soon, Smythe was "head of prep," which meant being "the guy who made sure that everything needed for service was in place, the one who jumped in when something went wrong." It was an experience that he says has shaped his leadership style. He strives to be "the glue that holds it all together, no matter what."

Smythe moved to San Francisco in 2006 and answered an ad that landed him an interview with Michael Mina. The chef, whose eponymous restaurant would get two Michelin stars that year, immediately saw how green he was, says Smythe, but offered him a stage — a kind of apprenticeship — anyway. "He told me to show up the next day with my knives and my chef's whites," Smythe says. "I was too embarrassed to tell him that I didn't have any knives, and I didn't know what chef's whites were."

Several years on the West Coast were followed by cooking stints in Boston and New York City, but he returned to the Cape to become chef and co-owner of Sunbird Kitchen, then a Wellfleet food truck, now a brick-and-mortar restaurant in Orleans, and later at The Pheasant in Dennis before making his way back to the Wicked.

"I always thought the Wicked Oyster was the coolest place to work," he says. "I never forgot it."



It wasn't only the restaurant Smythe had fallen for. He loved the town and whole sweep of the Outer Cape, he says. And he met his wife, Chelsea Rose, here. "I'm all in on Wellfleet."

Smythe and his partners updated the restaurant's interior, adding a lounge for live music in winter, and developed a new menu. "We're not shooting for 'It's pretty good, for the Cape,'" he says. But two things haven't changed; the name and the Wicked's longtime role as a community gathering place, evidenced by the decision to keep the lights on year-round in a town nearly bereft of winter restaurants.

As the restaurant turns the corner into its second off-season, Smythe says a lot of people ask if winter's the hardest time of year. He finds the question difficult to answer. "It's like asking parents which age is the hardest when it comes to raising kids," he says. "They're all different, and they're all hard in different ways."

Summer means long hours in the kitchen and away from his wife and children — Milo is seven and twins Rose and Lenin are four. Smythe isn't afraid of the work, but he and his partners are also trying to create a sustainable project, he says. He wants the restaurant to be special not only for guests but also for staff — the way it was for him when he was younger.

It's a vision that's easier to imagine realizing in winter, amid a crowd mellowed by jazz — the Volunteers, sometimes including co-owner Alex Hay on drums, play here — and by big bowls of Smythe's clam stew.

The stew was the first dish I tasted when the new Wicked Oyster opened last year, and it's the one that has me looking forward to winter again. Made with local clams, their juices thickened with creamy potatoes and white beans and flecked with smoky bacon, the whole thing is ladled over a slab of sourdough toast. It's part something familiar, an homage to the oyster stew that was a specialty of the original Wicked, and part something new.

"It's a chowder," Smythe says, "but on our own terms."



WICKED OYSTER CLAM STEW

Makes 6 servings

Sourdough toast and heirloom Rancho Gordo white beans distinguish Smythe's clam stew from more traditional interpretations.

50 littleneck clams

1½ cups dry white wine

2 lbs. thick-cut bacon, diced and fried until brown and crisp (keep the bacon warm and reserve the bacon fat)

2 lbs. potatoes, boiled, peeled, and coarsely mashed (Smythe uses fingerlings, but any will do, even leftover mashed potatoes)

1 quart cooked cannellini (or any light-colored bean in your pantry), cooking liquid reserved

2 quarts broth made by combining the reserved clam and bean cooking liquids

1 large bunch of celery, thinly sliced, inner leaves reserved for garnish

1 lemon

Kosher salt and coarsely ground black pepper

Good extra virgin olive oil

1 sourdough boule (or other crusty bread) sliced into 6 thick slabs

1. Wash the clams well in cold water. Put them in a large pot with the wine and bring to a boil. Cover the pot and stir from time to time. When most of the clams are open, remove from heat and set aside until cool enough to handle. Strain off and reserve the broth. Remove the clam meats from their shells; rinse to remove any remaining sand or bits of shell and reserve.
2. In a blender, puree the potatoes with enough of the reserved clam broth to make a smooth puree that's not too thick. Season with some of the reserved smoky bacon fat.
3. Warm the puree, add the broth mixture and the celery, and simmer to soften. Add the beans and some additional broth to adjust thickness of the soup. Season with black pepper to taste and heat through.
4. Brush the bread slices liberally with olive oil and fry on both sides in a large skillet. The bread should be brown and crusty on the outside but still soft on the inside. Place each piece of toast in a wide soup bowl and set aside.
5. When ready to serve, add the clams to the soup until just heated through (the goal is to warm the clams without cooking further, which would toughen them). Squeeze the juice of half a lemon into stew. Taste and adjust seasonings.
6. Working quickly, ladle equal amounts of the warm stew over the toast and finish each bowl with a scattering of bacon and celery leaves and a drizzle of olive oil. Serve immediately, with a soup spoon and a fork and knife for cutting the bread.