



Checking All the Boxes

IN SEBASTOPOL, CA, **OYSTER** COMBINES THE TALENTS OF CHEF JAKE RAND AND WINEMAKER PAX MAHLE

CHEF/RESTAURATEUR JAKE RAND'S

latest venture, Oyster—which opened in Sebastopol, California's, food and wine hub, The Barlow Market District, last November—might have stood on the strength of its delicious, carefully thought-out food alone. But when neighboring winemaker Pax Mahle heard about the project, he approached Rand with what he calls a “purely selfish” proposition: If Rand was amenable, he would work to create the wine list he'd been “craving” for no compensation other than the pleasure of visiting a place that he and “every wine lover would want to find.” It certainly helped that Mahle is enormously fond of Champagne while appreciating the wide array of varieties and styles that would complement the seafood Rand intended to serve.

After establishing Sushi Koshō across the street, Rand had asked himself, “What comes after sushi?” Looking to develop “a more sustainable relationship with the oceans,” in his words, he revived a concept he'd created during his time as a restaurant consultant: one that feels like a European sidewalk café while promoting, for lack of a sexier term, “bivalve aquaculture.” Rand speaks enthusiastically about the positive impact that filter feeders such as oysters, mussels, and clams have on our ecosystem; they lower the ocean's pH, reduce corrosion, sequester carbon, and work synergistically with kelp beds. With the help of his designer, architect, and Mahle, Rand was able to “elicit a clearer vision” of Oyster. Honing in on the zinc bars of Paris as his inspiration, he lives up to it with such hits as French fries cooked in duck fat and moules marinières.

Wine lists in Sonoma County are typically flush with local greats, but Mahle saw the opportunity to fulfill a need and create something unique for the area. It starts with an extraordinary selection of Champagnes designed to go with “every-



*Chef/
restauranteur
Jake Rand.*

Oysters at Oyster.



PHOTOS: SUITED HOSPITALITY

thing fried,” as he puts it; it's also heavy on French whites. But beyond that, Mahle has no agenda other than to develop a program that's balanced and delicious. By refusing to be boxed in with respect to his selection, he succeeds in checking lots of boxes—from an affordable Muscadet for those who want to wash down oysters with something simple and refreshing to the perfect Chablis to partner with

seared scallops. The experience can be as lighthearted or as seriously indulgent as one wants.

Success often comes when creators stay true to their vision: Make it exactly how you would want it and chances are others will flock to it. Oyster stands as a perfect example of this—and of how a brilliant wine list can give a new restaurant an edge in the marketplace. *SJ*