

FOOD&WINE

The Country's First Oyster Vodka Tastes Like the Ocean and Makes a Mean Martini

Ostreida is made by Providence, Rhode Island's first distillery since Prohibition.

By **Regan Stephens** | January 21, 2022

In Rhode Island, known as the Ocean State for its roughly 400 miles of coastline, you can get oysters in stew, fried and tucked into tacos, and freshly-shucked, for a buck, at happy hour. And as of this month, you can also get them in vodka.

The Industrious Spirit Company in Providence just launched Ostreida oyster vodka, the first of its kind made with its organic corn neutral spirit and local oysters.

"It's delicious," says Manya Rubinstein, the company's co-founder and CEO, "it reads like a dirty martini—the brininess comes through."

The idea for oyster vodka sprung from a celebration of ISCO's first year in business. The team was toasting with vodka cocktails and oysters at Matunuck Oyster Bar near Narragansett, and wondered how combining the two would taste. It sounds like an obvious pairing, vodka and oysters, but they haven't found anyone else making it the same way—specifically, including oysters in the final distillation. A distillery in Oakland, California, made gin with oysters, and one in the Netherlands infuses its vodka with bivalves and seawater after distilling it, but ISCO cracked the code for something new.

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After a series of trial and error—led by head distiller Dan Neff (who's also a master welder, ceramicist, and performance artist)—they found the answer. Smooth and balanced with hints of minerality and salty ocean, Ostreida tastes like a pure distillation of Rhode Island.

Located in the Valley neighborhood of the city, the Industrious Spirit Company is Providence's first distillery since prohibition. Rubinstein, along with co-founders Neff, Doug Randall, and Johnny Curtin, opened ISCO to the public in the summer of 2020, though they first began work on the business years earlier. On the site of a former industrial mill complex that was once home to producers of structural and ornamental steel, they make from-scratch vodka, gins, and bourbons.



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"I think working out of this site is a little inspirational for all of us, because we're continuing to breathe life into a space that's been a host for so many things over such a long period of time," she says.

One driving force in the idea to bring back distilling to Rhode Island's capital city, according to Rubinstein, was to use spirits to engage with issues around sustainable farming.

"Distilling is such a perfect expression of agriculture," she says. "Many farms used to process their excess agricultural products into spirits are shelf stable, that also captured the flavors of the season."

While people are increasingly making the connection between farms and the food they eat, buying local and investing in learning the story of how something was made and grown, Rubinstein says it's still a work in progress when it comes to the spirits they drink. ISCO sources organic corn from Stone House Grain, a regenerative farm in Hudson Valley, and what could draw the connection between farms and spirits more vividly for Rhode Islanders than creating a spirit with oysters pulled from the local waters?

In keeping with its commitment to regenerative farming, ISCO is donating a portion of the sales of Ostreida bottles to [Greenwave](#), an organization with a mission to scale regenerative ocean farming to help combat climate change.

Osteitra, like all the ISCO spirits, says Rubinstein, is good enough to drink alone over an ice cube. But bar manager Andrew Kientz also created a few recipes that showcase the spirit's versatility, including Pearl, a vodka martini made with a wine vinegar [mignonette](#), toasted cracked peppercorn, and cocktail onions, and, obviously, a variation on a Bloody Mary called the Chi of the Sea, starring kimchi juice from local producer Chi Kitchen. They're also fat-washing Ostreida with pepperoncini butter to make a Hot & Dirty cocktail, a kind of play on Rhode Island's famous spicy [fried calamari](#).



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While ISCO is celebrating its new, one-of-a-kind vodka, the distillery is also looking ahead at what's next, testing batches made with different types of oysters, harvested both locally and beyond. The taste profile of the vodka remains the same, but the flavors of the different oysters come through in each new batch. They're going to start labeling each bottle with where the oysters are from, and when they were harvested.

"There's so many possibilities for us moving forward," says Rubinstein.

In other words, the world is their oyster.