

AW SHUCKS

No raw oysters at Bivalve Bash



Cynthia Franz of Anacortes takes a bite of steamed clam at Saturday's Bivalve Bash at Taylor Shellfish Farms in Bow.

Natural bacteria in Sound oysters can cause illness

By **LEVI PULKKINEN**
Staff Writer

SAMISH BAY — Stirring a steaming skillet full of curried mussels, Xinh Dwelley rushed Saturday to keep up with the steady stream of customers wandering by her booth.

MORE INSIDE
■ Participants dash and splash at bash. / **C1**

Dwelley, a chef at Xinh's Clam & Oyster House in Shelton, is a regular at the Bivalve Bash. She's served her Vietnamese-styled cuisine at the Taylor Shellfish Farms event since it was launched four years ago.

Most years, her offerings are eclipsed by the event's star — the oyster on a half shell. But that wasn't the case Saturday, thanks to Mother Nature.

Raw oysters were absent this year because higher than usual levels of a naturally occurring



Photos by **Matt Wallis** / Skagit Valley Herald

(From left) Brooke Wilke, 17, of Santa Monica, Calif., sends Mike McCarthy, 17, of Bellingham belly first into the Samish Bay mud with the help of Krisann Jones, 16, of Bellingham on Saturday during the Low Tide Mud Run at the fourth annual Bivalve Bash in Bow.

Oysters: Event proceeds go to clean water programs

Continued from Page A1

bacterium have been found in some Puget Sound oysters.

The bacteria, vibrio parahaemolyticus, has sickened at least 72 Washingtonians so far this summer, a state Department of Health spokesman said. While the infection is rarely serious — only three of those infected this year have been hospitalized — it can cause severe intestinal distress, and threaten the lives of people whose immune systems are already weakened.

State officials have closed much of Hood Canal and several south Sound beaches to recreational oyster harvesting. Commercial growers are still allowed to harvest oysters from the closed areas, but oysters they pull must be shucked, packed and labeled "for cooking only."

Cooked oysters safe

Although Talyor Shellfish's Samish Bay beds have not been severely hit by the bacteria, the company chose not to offer raw oysters at the event because of a Health Department warning, said Paul Taylor, one of the fam-

The department will continue monitoring levels around Puget Sound through October, Smith said. By then cooler water flowing through the Sound should suppress the bacteria's growth.

'A good time' sans oysters

While the oysters in the raw were missed at Saturday's festival, some of those attending the fourth annual bash were less than heartbroken that the raw bivalves were missing from the menu. Others didn't notice they were gone.

Seated in the festival beer garden, Cynthia Franz of Anacortes sat down to a cardboard plate packed with steamed clams. While she professed her love for the raw oyster, she said she was surprised to learn that they wouldn't be served at Saturday's event.

But Franz said she was pleased with the variety of seafood available.

"It's a good time," said Franz, a first-timer at the bash.

In addition to mussels, Dwelley's staff served up geoduck ceviche and tahini-marinated mussels. Festival organiz-

er Paul Taylor, one of the family-run company's owners.

"We're abiding by that recommendation," Taylor said.

Unusually warm temperatures in Puget Sound prompted levels of the potentially gut-wrenching bacteria to spike this summer, said Richard Lillie of the state's Office of Food Safety and Shellfish. The bacteria only affect oysters.

Lillie said in a statement that risk of infection increases most summers, but usually not to the levels Health Department researchers have found on Washington beaches.

And, while the closures are unusual, Lillie said the department always discourages eating raw oysters.

"While many people think it's great to slurp a fresh oyster, they can expose themselves to a variety of health risks," Lillie said.

Heating the oysters to 145 degrees kills the bacteria and insures that the oysters are safe to eat, he added.

Health Department spokesman Jeff Smith said the bacteria often causes intestinal cramps and diarrhea, which persist for several days after exposure. But Smith said the infection often is very mild, causing little more than discomfort.

Smith said it's impossible to tell how long levels of the bacteria will remain elevated.

ated mussels. Festival organizers brought in crab and shrimp cocktails to fill the void left by the missing bivalve.

Even without raw oysters, Taylor said the daylong festival serves its purpose — to teach Northwest Washington residents how to protect Puget Sound.

Along with the Skagit Conservation Education Alliance and a variety of sponsors, Taylor Shellfish Farms hosted the event at its Bow oyster and clam farm. Proceeds from the event help fund clean water programs in Whatcom and Skagit counties.

The event was first organized in 2002 as a celebration of the cultural and economic importance of shellfish grown in Northwest Washington waters, Taylor said.

"We wanted it to be a fun event to let people know about water quality," he said.

The raw oysters are usually a staple at the annual event. But, scanning the crowd wandering through at his family's oyster farm, Taylor said he was pretty pleased with this year's bash.

"It looks like people are having a good time," he said.

The Department of Health will post updated advisories on its biotoxin hot line, 800-562-5632.

■ Levi Pulkkinen can be reached at 360-416-2138 or by e-mail at levip@skagitvalleyherald.com.