



# DYLAN'S OYSTER CELLAR

"BEHIND EVERY GREAT MAN IS A GREAT WOMAN."  
QUEUE IRENE DONNELLY

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN | IMAGES BY ASHLI MIX PHOTOGRAPHY

In this ongoing series of articles on Maryland and D.C. bars, restaurants, and taverns named after their owner (or a legacy family member), I typically talk to the actual namesake of the place. For Dylan's Oyster Cellar in Baltimore, owner Dylan Salmon was unavailable. In journalism, though, one must be flexible. And, in this case, that flexibility paid off in the form of an excellent interview with Dylan's wife, Irene Donnelly, the establishment's co-owner.

She has been with him from the start, and she remembers some early trepidation upon making their restaurant a self-named eating and drinking place. She recalled, "There was a brief time where he felt, 'I think I might have cursed myself because I put my name on the business.' There was definitely a whole set of expectations that went with that he felt, and still feels, that I don't necessarily feel. I watch him go around and talk to tables. And people are like, 'Who is this guy?' That's because Dylan is very casual. He wears T-shirts and you'll often see him in a beanie or a hat. He doesn't present like a manager or an owner. He's just a dude. But as soon as he says, 'I'm Dylan' then everybody lights up and gets really excited and they're like, 'Oh my God, you're Dylan!' It's a lot for him, but he likes it."



IMAGE BY PAULA B PHOTO

**Irene Donnelly**  
Co-Owner & Co-Operator  
Dylan's Oyster Cellar

Dylan's Oyster Cellar is open evenings, Tuesday through Saturday, from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Located in the Hampden neighborhood of Charm City, Dylan's celebrated its seventh anniversary this past December. So, what has made the place stand out? Donnelly was quick to answer: "We have an open raw bar with master shuckers who are right in front of the guests, interacting with them and shucking. It's rare to sit right in front of the oyster bar and hang out with the experts. We usually have at least seven different varieties of oysters every night. I really don't think you can find that anywhere else, at least not in Baltimore."

She added, "There is also the community aspect. We're a neighborhood bar, for sure. But we do get a lot of tourists. They like to come and have that sort of authentic, neighborhood feel."

It's the customers that both Donnelly and Salmon enjoy the most. "We especially love the community aspect of it, seeing regulars and making connections with people," she said. "We live in this neighborhood, so I feel like we're the people's pub. Restaurants and pubs are special places where people get together, and so many of us got hit pretty hard during the pandemic. But I really think we've come back well. I was in the dish pit the other day, scraping plates, and then doing my rounds around the restaurant. And I briefly stopped



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**Dylan Salmon**  
Co-Owner & Co-Operator  
Dylan's Oyster Cellar

She is especially proud of the fact that some of Dylan's staffers over the years have gone on to become successful entrepreneurs in their own right. "Restaurants can feel like dead-end jobs for some people," she stated. "But they don't have to be. One of the things Dylan and I hold really high is the number of people we've encouraged and inspired to open their own places. We have had at least one bar manager, one chef, and an oyster shucker who have left Dylan's and started their own businesses. I know our current chef is in the works of opening his own place. If we can do it, they can do it. So, we encourage it. Our first chef, Karl, opened his own place with his wife and named it after the nickname her niece gave her. The business's name is Chachi's, but her name is Stephanie."

And her advice to them and others reading this who may want to open their own self-named bar or restaurant one day? "Work for a small business owner first! I worked for a lot of small businesses before opening our own. You learn a lot working with owners directly. Be sure to pick their brains and figure out what they're doing well and how they're doing it. I think it's harder to go from working for a big chain to owning your own place." ■

and said to myself, "This is just the best! I love this!"

One of the things their customers love the most is Dylan's full bar with its Happy Hour drink specials each weekday from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. They also like some of the legacy drinks that the couple has come up with.

"We have a drink that's been on our menu for years," she remarked. "It's called A Stern Fern. It's our version of a dirty martini. We're infusing gin and vodka in kelp and garnishing it with an olive. It's not everybody's cup of tea, but I think it's a cool drink. Dylan has made extensive moves on our non-alcohol offerings. He has made a specific drink called a Turmeric Tonic, and it's proved to be popular. I think he's hesitant to call it a 'mocktail.' He just calls it a 'good drink.'"

Of course, running a small business in this sector these days – all days – has its series of challenges. But just like in marriage, the husband-and-wife team endure together. "If anyone owns a home," Donnelly stated, "you know things break all the time or need tending to. In a restaurant, things are constantly breaking or needing to be updated. The constant attention of the actual space can sometimes be a lot! You can let some things go at home, but not at the business."

