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Oldest U.S. restaurant serves chowder with history



GAP PHOTO

Jim Malinn, general manager of the Union Oyster House, shows the Heritage Room

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- [History a top draw](#)
- [Interior unchanged for decades](#)

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April 17, 2000
Web posted at: 5:15 p.m. EDT (2115 GMT)

BOSTON (AP) -- The history of Ye Olde Union Oyster House is as rich as the clam chowder.

The building that houses the nation's oldest continuously operating restaurant has served seafood for 174 years to customers ranging from statesman Daniel Webster to President John F. Kennedy to the 1999 U.S. Ryder Cup team.

But even before the U-shaped mahogany oyster bar opened there in 1826, the building had a colorful past.

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Exiled Frenchman Louis Philippe taught fashionable young ladies to speak his language in an upstairs room in the late 1790s. Some of the first stirrings of the American Revolution came from the printing press of Isaiah Thomas, who published The Massachusetts Spy, the nation's first newspaper, in the building.

And in 1775, the building on Union Street, known then as Capen's Silk and Dry Goods Store, was a spot where federal troops received their war wages. That's the very same place where today locals and tourists feast on traditional New England fare, such as lobsters, cornbread, steamers, Indian pudding and, of course, clam chowder.

The Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau claims it's the country's oldest continually operating restaurant.

History a top draw

The history is as much a draw as the cuisine.

"That's one of the reasons we come here," says Connie Gray, eating lunch at the bar where Webster drank a tall tumbler of brandy and water with each plate of raw oysters. (History holds he rarely left before finishing six plates.)

"It is a unique experience," Gray continues. "It's history. It's superb seafood. It's being part of another time."

The restaurant is located along Boston's Freedom Trail, a 2 1/2 -mile walking path that links 16 historic sites, including Faneuil Hall, the Old North Church and the Bunker Hill monument. While the restaurant is not a sanctioned site, it's a popular breaking spot for tourists who hike the trail.

No one really knows how old the building is; it was built before such records were kept.

However, it is known it was opened as a restaurant in 1826, and before that was a dry goods business known under two names, Capen's and Atwood & Bacon. In the building's early days, Boston Harbor came up to the back door long before the city was expanded by a landfill.

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Interior unchanged for decades

Much of the interior of the building looks as it would have generations ago.

The windows on the first floor are low to allow children to press their noses to the glass and watch the shuckers at work behind the bar. Inside, a giant lobster tank keeps dinner fresh.

The base of the U-shaped mahogany oyster bar is the same one frequented by Webster, though the stools and the top serving bar have been replaced often over the years.



Image from a calendar cover showing a 1930s view of the Oyster House

Oil paintings on the walls depict important developments in the city and nation's history, including Isaiah Thomas' printing of *The Massachusetts Spy*, and the British confiscation of his printing press. Oyster House owner Joe Milano enjoys sharing the history with guests.

"Often when we tell the story, they think he's the basketball player," he says.

That's not to say athletes aren't a part of the oyster house history.

Before the United States' victory in last year's Ryder Cup, Milano hosted the team to a private reception. Three stools were added to the nine-seat oyster bar to accommodate the entire team and its captains. Tiger Woods and some of his teammates posed with a 10-pound lobster. And a tiny bronze plaque denotes the stool where the late Payne Stewart sat at the bar. It has been dedicated to his memory.

On a busy day at the Oyster House, people at the bar open about 2,000 oysters. And servers dish out at least 40-gallons of clam chowder.

Chef Bill Coyne, who recently joined the restaurant, says he's looking

enough, says In

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for some ways to enhance and update the menu -- but he knows not to mess with success.

"I'm sure if we had a menu from 60, 70 years ago it's the same thing," he says. "The standards sell here."

IF YOU GO: *The Union Oyster House is at 41 Union St., near Faneuil Hall Marketplace along the Freedom Trail. It is open Sunday to Thursday, 11 a.m.-9:30 p.m.; Friday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.*

The price of entrees ranges from \$15 to \$20 and up. Chowder is \$3.50 a cup.

Phone (617) 227-2750 or visit www.unionoysterhouse.com.

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