

# Hank's Oyster Bar of Alexandria

Written by Charles Oppman

---



## Hank's Oyster Bar of Alexandria

Written by Charles Oppman

---

Chef Jamie Leeds' eponymous restaurant (named after Leeds' father, a passionate fisherman) dropped anchor in Old Town Alexandria in September 2007. Leeds also owns a popular seafood joint of the same name at Dupont Circle. I've never been to D.C. Hank's, but Alexandria Hank's is not some grimy seafood scupper where you go to slurp bivalves bathed in cocktail sauce and knock back oyster shooters. It's a comfy sort of place that radiates friendliness. Wall treatments are exposed brick with pipes and layers of stone coming through the cracked walls leaving the original imperfections for a real look. Although small in size—nearly the dimensions of a bowling alley lane—Alexandria Hank's menu is big on quality for the most part. And don't let the name fool you into thinking that Hank's is just another oyster bar. It isn't. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that there are menu alternatives for land lubbers—daily specials of braised short ribs and pork shanks, blue cheese-encrusted sirloin, flat iron steak, chicken schnitzel... Just like D.C. Hank's, Alexandria Hank's offers a quirky snack of Pepperidge Farm Goldfish served for munching on while you peruse the laminated, one-page menu.



Hank's 2.0 offers more types of oysters than the ubiquitous Chesapeake oysters (scientific name is *Crassostrea virginica*) commonly found along the Mid Atlantic seaboard. We started out with a combo dozen of Pungoteague Creek, Malpeque and Dragon Creek oysters on the

## Hank's Oyster Bar of Alexandria

Written by Charles Oppman

---

half shell. Each was a buck a piece and had a distinct, slightly briny flavor; all were plump and succulent. These are better than raw oysters at Maine Avenue seafood market. The popcorn shrimp and calamari appetizer (\$10) had the potential to be a remarkable opening salvo to what I hoped would be a memorable culinary experience. My optimism was slightly tempered by the arrival of a cup full of soggy tiny shrimp and calamari rings that were ineptly breaded. The coating sloughed off and found its way to the bottom of the paper-lined cup in which they were served. Perhaps if cooks ever road test their dishes this sort of thing could be avoided.

You couldn't hit an oyster bar without trying its fried oysters (\$11). If an oyster bar can't nail fried oysters there isn't much hope—and many seafood houses in the region just can't seem to get this right. (As a former New Orleans' chef and self-appointed fried oyster aficionado, I've easily consumed my weight in these deep-fried delights.) I have to admit I was blown away by Hank's version of these magnificent mollusks. Leeds opts for hama hama oysters imported from Washington state. This dish was an eye-popping thing of beauty. The plate was piled high with oysters the size of a child's fist. They were crispy, juicy, tender and expertly breaded. The generous portion makes a meal in itself. Inexplicably, the accompanying tartar sauce was almost pure mayo, lacking a hint of complementary flavor. (What I don't get is why the oysters were perfectly breaded, but the popcorn shrimp and calamari weren't. It's the same breading procedure.)



## Hank's Oyster Bar of Alexandria

Written by Charles Oppman

---

When it comes to lobster rolls, New England chefs have nothing on Leeds. A bit dear at \$23, her version is a buttered and grilled soft roll heaped with chunks of tail meat bound together with mayo and chopped celery. The griddled crab cake was fabulous, tasty and cooked to perfection. It was made with an ample amount of lump crab and served with a light slaw of julienned cabbage, but a tad pricey at \$14 for a smallish portion. The fish tacos were other-worldly. A trio of house-fried corn tortillas was packed with shredded and seasoned tilapia, lettuce, tomato and avocado. They were warm and crispy and absolutely scrumptious. The subtle flavors and opposing textures melded together to create a perfect flavor combo and mouth feel. At \$15, the tacos are one of the best values on the menu. Chef de Cuisine, Nicolas Flores, deserves kudos for this dish. His fish tacos are as good as I've had in ocean-side seafood shacks in Oaxaca, Mexico.



The “Meats & Two” nightly special entrées include a couple of side dishes. I can vouch for the tenderness of Tuesday’s molasses-sweetened braised beef short ribs (\$20). It’s a large portion

## Hank's Oyster Bar of Alexandria

Written by Charles Oppman

---

of fork-tender, lean meat rib meat. The best of the side dishes tend to be the most unhealthful; macaroni and cheese made luscious with aged cheddar and smoked gouda. If my cardiologist allowed it, I'd order an entrée-sized portion of Leeds' "mac and cheesy." Yes, it's that good. The other side we ordered was caramelized Brussels sprouts. While flavorful, they were overcooked, evoking unpleasant memories of my high school cafeteria. Lastly, we ordered the poached pear, blue cheese and mixed greens salad. The fresh (as in not canned) sliced pears are served with crispy greens and a scant amount of blue cheese. For what you receive, \$12 is a little on the high side for this menu item. Our salad was absolutely swimming in vinaigrette that was a tad short on vinegar.



Although reasonably priced, dessert is not a strong suit at Alexandria Hank's. The choices are limited to three, each is \$6. We ordered chocolate mousse and key lime pie. The mousse was swirled into a ramekin and that was it—no garnish; not a strawberry, chocolate shaving or mint leaf. Even a hint of garnish elevates the most uninspired desserts. The lime pie, however, was excellent, better than I've had in the Florida Keys. Whether or not you order dessert you are given chunks of semi-sweet dark chocolate to nibble on. I guess this gesture is no more peculiar than the gold fish crackers.

## Hank's Oyster Bar of Alexandria

Written by Charles Oppman

---

Our service at Hank's was flawless. Our waiter was knowledgeable and attentive without draping himself over our table. He seemed to materialize right on cue. He was able to describe the flavor characteristics of each of the species of oysters we tried and their indigenous habitats. Clearly, he takes pride in his profession and customer satisfaction. Leeds should clone this guy.

The bartender at Hank's makes a mean margarita, which is reasonably priced at \$6. The wine selection is limited, but the crisp whites match well with the fare. I had a deliciously oaky California chard for \$8 per glass and it was a generous pour. I like that.

Alexandria Hank's doesn't take reservations, but you can call 20 minutes ahead of your anticipated arrival time and put your name on a waiting list. This helps because the small place fills quickly, especially toward the end of the week. Calling in advance doesn't guarantee a table when you show up, but it does give you preference over those who don't possess your foresight.

This was my first visit to Hanks' 2.0 and I live near Old Town. Again, I'm late to the party. Not to worry, it won't be long before I return to Hank's Oyster Bar and eat my way through Leeds' entire menu.