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Spread of Slack Tide's best, clockwise from top left: beef tartare with fried shallots, mushroom conserva, capers, and trout aoili with crostini; Arctic char with sunchoke, mushroom, lime, walnut, and beurre noisette; The Broken Egg with soubise, trout roe, and tobiko with Jamón Ibérico potato chips; and Fishermen's Stew with monkfish, PEI mussels, smoked Virginia oysters, lacinato kale, pistachio, and fumet.

Finding Balance at Ballast

Slack Tide Fish Co. in Richmond curates equilibrium in a lush, seafood-forward menu.

By STEPHANIE GANZ | *Photography by* FRED + ELLIOTT

From your perch on the patio at Slack Tide Fish Co. in Richmond's Scott's Addition, you would be forgiven for thinking you were nestled in an old-world nook somewhere in Italy or Spain. But in reality, you are smack dab in the middle of Ballast, a new multi-use development tucked in a location with a long history. It's a catbird seat for people-watchers, aglow with lights and overlooking a quaint cobblestone courtyard. Here, at this seafood-focused restaurant helmed by Executive Chef Caleb Shriver and owned by the operators of the popular market, fish monger, and butchery, Yellow Umbrella, the bustle of the rapidly expanding neighborhood falls away, and you're left with a peaceful calm.

Slack Tides offers a rotating selection of oysters paired with toppings like mignonette and a house-made spicey sauce.

A busy evening at Slack Tide.

Chef Caleb Shriver

THAT FEELING OF TRANQUILITY extends to the dining room inside, where you'll find the whisper of subtle nautical touches—the tile below the wraparound bar mimics the sea spray of crashing waves, while directly overhead, the curved wood details suggest a ship's hull. The space, designed by 510 Architects, features a garage door that seamlessly connects the indoor and climate-controlled outdoor spaces. Behind the bar, frame TVs, usually set to an artistic tableau, help establish a more casual vibe. You can easily imagine watching the World Cup, cocktail in hand, from a seat at the bar.

Plucked from the history of the property, the name Ballast refers to the stones used in these buildings that once housed the city's stables—that were once placed in the bottom of a ship to provide stability on the transatlantic trade routes of the 1700s. In many ways, Ballast is a steadying presence in Scott's Addition, with a space that includes retail grocery and seafood shop Yellow Umbrella, a Cirrus Vodka tasting room, and anchoring restaurant Slack Tide Fish Company and its offshoots: the casual counter-style spot, Fish Camp, and cozy cocktail bar, Fuss and Feathers.

Slack Tide itself is a study in balance. The design and menu are elevated, drawing on global coastal influences, but the service and energy feel effortlessly warm, welcoming, and surprisingly unstuffy. This, co-owner Thomas Brown explains, is by design. "We really wanted it to be something that was approachable and enjoyable, something that was unique, not only from the food offering and drinks, but also just from the space in Scott's Addition," he tells me.

> "We aim for **every dish** to stand on its own **sensorially,** while still contributing to a **unified** and **thoughtful** collection.
>
> *—Executive Chef Caleb Shriver, Slack Tide Fish Co.*

Slack Tide's menu is composed of shareable plates that increase in size as you work your way down the list. "That's how I like to eat when I go out," says Shriver. "I want to order a bunch of things and share them with the people I'm with."

A selection of raw seafood headlines the menu, as you would hope for a restaurant connected to a seafood retailer with such serious bona fides. The opening menu was a testament to the raw bar's quality from day one, featuring ruby red tuna crudo in a sunshiny aji amarillo, topped with hazelnuts for earthiness and crunch.

If you're looking for oysters, you'll discover a selection of roughly a half dozen of the best bivalves from around the world, available by the shuck or by the dozen, at your table, or better yet, in one of the four seats (nine when the garage doors are open) that cozy up to Slack Tide's oyster bar. There you'll find Tyler Yates, Slack Tide's oyster lead and a certified Level 2 Oyster Specialist (think Oyster Sommelier). Yates sees his role as part educator, part hype man, and part party maestro: "I get the opportunity to try and either turn someone's day around or take someone who wants to have a good night

> I get the opportunity to try and either **turn someone's day around** or take someone who wants to have a **good night** and ask them if they want to have a **great night** while flashing them a **tin of caviar.**
>
> *—Tyler Yates, Oyster Lead, Slack Tide Fish Co.*

Featured at Slack Tide's raw bar are oysters topped with caviar.

Oyster lead Tyler Yates commands the raw bar.

The Tsukiji cocktail marries matcha and Scotch.

Snapper ceviche with fuyu persimmon, coconut milk, almonds, basil, and anise chili oil.

and ask them if they want to have a great night while flashing them a tin of caviar," says Yates. "I've also been lucky to have the opportunity to properly curate a menu that showcases a delicious product as well as to help educate the public on the important role oysters play environmentally."

And while the seafood is undoubtedly the star of the show, Shriver gives guests a peek at his Midwest roots in dishes like the umami-packed beef tartare, with Roseda Farms beef blended with capers and mushrooms and topped with a smoked trout aioli that ties the dish together like a silk scarf. Shriver's fingerprints can also be found in The Broken Egg, a nod to the beloved Perfect Egg from his lauded Church Hill restaurant, Dutch & Co., which Shriver owned from 2012–2020. It's a fun presentation of eggs on eggs—delicately cooked hen eggs and an onion-scented soubise crowned with jewel-like trout roe and tobiko under a sprinkle of soft herbs. If Shriver's original meticulously composed egg dish was a stab at perfection, this dish signals something wiser—the idea that it's okay to relax, to embrace ease over rigidity.

A beef dish and an egg dish may be less obvious choices for a seafood-forward menu, but Shriver explains that the little touches, like the trout aioli or the trout roe and tobiko, are what give them continuity. "As a seafood-focused restaurant, we look to incorporate seafood items into most of the dishes, and that doesn't just mean as a center-of-the-plate fillet of fish but as a foundation for building flavors in unique ways," Shriver says. "These seafood condiments in our larder help us to enhance flavor in dishes and showcase seafood in unique ways."

Headed by bar manager Madelyn Gleeson, Slack Tide's bar program is a lighthouse beacon of conviviality. Classic cocktails are inspired by and named after fish markets around the world, from Japan's Tsukiji, reimagined as a matcha and Scotch take on an Old Fashioned, to the Billinsgate, which tips its hat to London with a combination of gin and vodka, plus the quinine-forward aperitif, quinquina blanc, and a hint of the ocean via recycled oyster shells and kombu.

To end the meal, you'll find a small selection of desserts in which there are no wrong answers. In warmer months, look for the refreshing and whimsical Tiger's Blood shave ice, with watermelon and strawberry granita and cool, creamy coconut. Or, if your sweet tooth craves chocolate, a combination of an airy, chilled banana diplomat cream and a palate-gripping cocoa nib ice cream will, no doubt, hit the spot.

"We strive to make every dish tasty, interesting, and different from the other dishes on the menu while also being cohesive," Shriver explains. "While not an easy task, this approach is fundamental to our menu development. We aim for every dish to stand on its own sensorially, while still contributing to a unified and thoughtful collection."

And in that intentionally mixed collection, each dish becomes a ballast of its own.

Stephanie Ganz is a lifelong food connoisseur. As a Richmond-based recipe developer and former professional cook, her work has appeared in The Local Palate, Eater, *and* Bon Appétit.

Pistachio ice cream tops candied sweet potato, dates, tahini, cremeux, sweet potato crumble, and pomegranate seeds.

Yellowtail crudo with avocado, cucumber, shiso, yuzu, and umbeoshi.