

Foodie Freak: The delicious truth about oysters

Contributed by Ross Christensen
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God created the oyster and then disguised it so that it could quietly perfect itself over millennia before man would discover it. How else could anything that looks so much like a rock be so wonderful inside? An ugly, rough, hard exterior containing a soft, smooth, delicious interior, good for so many uses ... it's like a misanthropic Easter egg.

I love oysters and once worked on an oyster farm, so oysters are something of an avocation of mine. I will try to keep this brief although I could talk about oysters for hours and barely take time to breathe.

Oyster farms should be the model for all future aquaculture and could be the savior of our oceans' resources.

On an oyster farm natural baby seed oysters are bred in pens and once they've grown a bit they are put out on farms in the sea using a variety of growing techniques that allow them to mature naturally.

Some growing methods are better than others, but they are all harmless to the ocean and even add to the wild stock naturally through escapees and breeding.

Like the egg, an oyster can be made into almost anything: appetizers, soups, salads, entrees, breads, pasta, sandwiches, stuffing, desserts and there are even oyster beers made with real oysters.

There are many different types of edible oysters, and I could go through and list the many types and flavors, but most of the oysters you will find in our area are Pacific &Miyagi' oysters.

I find that oysters are similar to wine in many ways, in that tastes are subjective: I may like this wine but you won't, and I may like this type of oyster but you won't.

Don't take someone else's opinion on a particular type of oyster; you have to try it for yourself to know if you will like it. Pacific oysters remind me of beef or red wine with their dark colors and full flavor, while Atlantic oysters are more like chicken or white wine with its lighter colored flesh and milder flavors. Don't believe me? Then I guess you have to try them all yourself.

Oysters used to be terribly cheap and were considered poverty food for a long time. During the mid-1800's &Mad William' Windham, &the prince of London's pimps,' fed oysters to his &Butterflies of the Night.' Some Londoners observed this and thought that he did this because they were aphrodisiacs to help keep the girls going, not for the economic factor. Now oysters are eaten by everyone and are especially popular at holiday parties.

You have probably heard the axiom that states &Only eat oysters in months with an R.' This is not necessarily true, but it is not without foundation either. It was a common practice many years ago before the benefit of refrigeration, because not only did oysters go bad quickly in the heat of summer but oysters are naturally at their culinary worst during warm water months.

Oysters breed when the water is warm, and during this time all the oyster's energy is focused on breeding and their body becomes unappetizingly creamy textured and astringently flavored. When the water cools off so do the oysters' libidos and they firm up and become sweet tasting with subtle flavors.

I won't eat oysters during the summer with the one exception being triploid oysters, which are oysters that have three chromosomes. Technology (not using genetic engineering) can now produce a triploid oyster by breeding tetraploid males (which have four chromosomes) with diploid females (two chromosomes) to produce 100 percent triploid oysters. It's like breeding a horse and a donkey to produce a mule, and like a mule the triploid oyster is sterile. They have no way or will to breed so all of their energy goes to increased growth and they maintain year-round palatable taste and texture (the oysters, not the mules).

Triploid demand and production are both growing extremely fast in the U.S., and currently they are the most expensive due to this demand. Despite the expense, if you want oysters in the summertime the triploid is the way to go.

Working on an oyster farm changed my life in many ways. You can only imagine how wonderful it was for a water lover like me to be able to head to the ocean every morning, spend the day in the water caring for thousands of little babies, while wading through the bay and watching the wildlife all around.

I learned how to appreciate the subtleties of oysters and how like wine they even have specific &terroir' that can be distinguished from one area to another. The flavors of cucumber, minerals, brass, lemon, fresh biscuits, copper, musk, melon, clean, crisp, fruity, buttery, are just a few tastes and sensations that you can find in fresh oysters, and these flavors are reflected in the farms in which they grow.

Also like wines, oysters lose these flavors if they aren't stored well or if they are opened too early and then just left to sit waiting for service. Shucking the oyster immediately prior to eating is mandatory.

Some restaurants (even world famous Northern California restaurants) will shuck their oysters in the morning then cover them in plastic wrap and store them in the fridge until ordered. It may be a time saver in prep, but it diminishes the unique subtleties of the oyster.

If you want to give the impression of being a real oyster connoisseur, ask for the top half of the oyster shell to be served with your plate of oysters. This will prove the oysters are freshly shucked, since if the top half of the shell of oysters shucked early in the day will have been discarded hours ago.

Once, a waitress asked why this was important to me. In return I asked the waitress if they uncorked all of the wine they would need for the day first thing in the morning and let it sit until ordered. She understood my point immediately.

Poets and songwriters have spoken of the pearl within the oyster since time immemorial. There seems to be something so artistic in imagining such a beautiful, smooth and luminous stone emerging from something so coarse and rough in appearance.

Unfortunately this is about as accurate as writing about the relationship of eggs to the Easter Bunny. They may both be symbols of fertility, but rabbits just don't deliver eggs. The edible species of oysters don't develop a pearl of any beauty. Pearls used in jewelry are actually produced by a bivalve more accurately related to a variety of mussel. It is however, still romantic to plant a pearl into an oyster just before service to impress someone you love.

In my opinion, people who swallow oysters whole without chewing don't like to eat oysters, they just like to be seen eating oysters. And people who like oysters with heavy condiments like cocktail sauce and tartar sauce are more interested in the flavor of the sauce than the oyster.

To truly enjoy an oyster you need to avoid heavy thick sauces and stick with lighter accompaniments that accent and not overpower the oyster. Mignonette sauce (recipe to follow), fresh lemon juice or just a dash of hot sauce are the best accompaniments.

Oysters from extra-small to medium are best for eating raw, while large, extra large, jumbo and what some oyster farms call "cowboys" (oysters that have outwitted harvest somehow until they've reached a huge size, up to 12 inches long) are best for grilling.

The following recipe is an adaptation of a classic French recipe. It's a simple red wine vinegar, shallot and pepper mixture that I have tweaked to make it my own.

Instead of the red wine vinegar I use raspberry vinegar, which was actually preferred at the oyster farm where I worked, and I switched the standard ground black pepper to a four-color peppercorn mix because the colors accent the look of the sauce on the oyster and give it a more complex flavor. No salt is recommended since the oysters themselves will provide that.

Mignonette sauce for oysters on the half shell

2/3 cup raspberry vinegar 2 to 3 tablespoons finely minced shallots (don't substitute onions, the flavor isn't the same) 1 tablespoon four-color peppercorn mix, freshly and finely ground

Mix the ingredients, refrigerate, and let chill for at least an hour. Serve one teaspoonful on top of each raw oyster.

An upcoming chance to pair oysters, wine

The Moore Family Winery will be having an Oysters and Sauvignon Blanc pairing on at their winery Feb. 21, 2009, from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. The fee is \$20.

They will be serving several types of oysters, raw and barbecued, paired with the Moore family's own Sauvignon Blanc. Visit www.moorefamilywinery.com or call 707-738-0507 for further information.

Me? I'll definitely be there since I have a passion for oysters that will never end.

Ross A. Christensen is an award-winning gardener and gourmet cook. He is the author of "Sushi A to Z, The Ultimate Guide" and is currently working on a new book. He has been a public speaker for many years and enjoys being involved in the community.

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