

OYSTERS: HEAVEN ON A HALF SHELL

By CLAUDIA ALARCON
Photography by CLAUDIA ALARCON

Have you ever wondered who the first person was to eat an oyster? While this question will likely remain unanswered, archeological evidence of oyster middens — piles of discarded shells — found worldwide shows that oyster consumption dates back to prehistory. Oysters were a crucial food source in coastal areas since the dawn of man, and oyster fisheries became an important industry in places where they were plentiful.

The largest oyster-producing body of water in the United States is Chesapeake Bay, and Willapa Bay in Washington produces more oysters than any other estuary in the US. Other important oyster farming areas in North America include the bays and estuaries along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and the rocky shores of the West Coast.

Oysters have complex flavors that depend on the variety and region, from salty, briny, buttery and mineral, to almost sweet and fruity. Although there are over a hundred varieties, all belong to only five species: Pacific (or Japanese), Kumamoto, European Flat, Atlantic and Olympia. Aside from the environment in which they grow, they differ from each other by the shape of their shells. The European Flat has a large, straight shell with fine ridges, while the Atlantic species is teardrop-shaped. Pacific oysters are smaller and wavy. Kumamotos are also small, with a round and pale shell similar to the Olympias, although these have a smoother shell with a bit of iridescent coloring. Popular North American varieties include Yaquina Bay from Oregon; Duxbury and Wellfleet from Cape Cod; Malpeque from Prince Edward Island; Blue Point from Long Island; Pemaquid from Maine; and Cape May from New Jersey.

Oysters’ reputation as an aphrodisiac is not altogether a myth — researchers have found they are rich in amino acids that trigger increased levels of sex hormones, and their high zinc content aids the production of testosterone.



They are also an excellent source of iron, calcium and selenium, as well as vitamin A, vitamin B12 and protein. Another popular belief is that oysters are only safe to eat in months that contain the letter ‘r’ in their names. This is based in truth, since oysters are more likely to spoil in our warmer months. But another reason is that oysters spawn in the summer, which causes a weak, watery flavor. During the winter months, when the water is nice and cold, these bivalves are at their best.

Home cooks in our area wishing to purchase fresh oysters should look to Groomer’s Seafood in San Antonio, a family-owned purveyor selling wholesale, retail and now shipping directly to people’s homes from their new online store. When it comes to oysters, Groomer’s specializes in Gulf Coast and East Coast (due to environmental concerns, selling West Coast oysters in Texas is illegal.) “Our favorites are the oysters from the Gulf,” says Plant Manager Robert Kelly. “They have a sweet, clean taste which is great for a variety of uses. We also sell a kind of Gulf oysters called “Blue Band” which are washed by a high pressure process that ensures cleanliness and makes them easier to shuck as the system separates the shell somewhat. This process eliminates food borne pathogens, and extends the shelf life as well.”

Today, overfishing and distress from diseases and pollution have sharply reduced oyster supplies, but efforts from dedicated farmers have yielded new and improved methods for growing them sustainably. “Sustainability is important

to us in the realest sense,” says Kelly. “We source our oysters from farmers and processors along the coast that stem from lifelong relationships. My family had a shrimp and oyster business down in Rockport, which has been sold now, but is a registered historical site thanks to all the history of processing and relationships that occurred there. The seafood business is based on relationships and trust, and with Groomer’s Seafood going back 100 or more years, we have a lot of those great relationships. Taking care of the environment where our products grow and thrive is what will [let us] provide these products in the future. Sustainability will keep our business, along with that of who we source from, successful for years to come. Our business must be treated with respect, and with the mind set of sustainability, to keep the great treasures from the sea in stores and on your table.”

Oysters are a versatile food that can be eaten raw on the half shell, grilled, smoked, boiled, baked, fried, roasted, stewed, canned, pickled, steamed or broiled. Purists prefer them raw, with nothing other than fresh lemon juice or a dab of spicy cocktail sauce, but some chefs chose to enhance them with mignonette, a vinegar-based sauce flavored with fresh shallots and peppercorns, with additional ingredients depending on the chef’s inspiration.

San Antonio’s SILO Terrace Oyster Bar features at least nine types of raw East Coast oysters daily, available individually or by the half-dozen in both the dining room and at the oyster bar on the ample covered terrace. Here, they are served accompanied by the classic cocktail sauce, lemons, mignonette, fresh grated horseradish and Saltines. If you want to try a variety, visit during happy hour for half-price oysters from 4 to 7pm daily and build your own “flight.” SILO also prides itself on their signature chicken fried oysters, served atop sautéed spinach with crispy chunks of braised pork belly, cubes of tart apple and mustard Hollandaise to tie the ingredients together. Chef Gary Boatman also grills them Rockefeller-style with fennel cream, garlic bread crumbs, Parmesan cheese and applewood smoked bacon. The flavor



of fennel marries perfectly with oysters, and anise-flavored liqueurs like absinthe are often used in oyster recipes as well.

Celebrated Austin chef Jack Gilmore has been eating oysters since he was five years old, growing up in the Texas coast near South Padre Island and Brownsville. “I learned [to eat them] the traditional way — Saltines, ketchup and lime. I liked the texture of the oysters with crackers. But by my teens I realized I didn’t need them, and it was best to eat the oysters by themselves. In the 1980s I discovered East Coast oysters and fell in love. They are harder to shuck, but have more flavor and

salinity than Gulf oysters.” At his new restaurant Salt Traders Coastal Cooking in Round Rock, he serves both Gulf and seasonal cold water oysters on the half shell accompanied by mignonette, cocktail sauce, fresh horseradish and house-made bull red sauce.

“I prefer Gulf oysters the majority of the time, but if they are too big, I go for the cold water ones. They are sweeter and brinier.” Gilmore has two favorite ways to eat oysters: “One is to shuck and slurp — keep it simple. When cooking, I like to fry them crispy with masa and eat them with a nice tartar sauce.” At Salt Traders, he serves these inside lettuce wraps with a crunchy fennel slaw. Chef’s creativity also comes into play with a variety of toppings for their succulent oak-grilled oysters.

No matter how you shuck them, oysters are a healthy,

delicious and versatile food. Whether at home or at your favorite seafood spot, now is the time to enjoy them at the peak of the season. Consider oysters and Champagne to grace your holiday table this year. ❖

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