

OYSTERS

LOVE 'EM OR LEAVE 'EM, THESE MOLLUSK DELICACIES DON'T ALL TASTE THE SAME, AND OYSTERS ARE ALSO RICH IN RARE AMINO ACIDS THAT MAY EVEN TRIGGER INCREASED LEVELS OF SEX HORMONES

BY LESLIE A. WESTBROOK

People either love or hate oysters. There's no middle ground. I happen to belong among those who devour these delicacies with great delight. It's not just about the oyster, it's how one savors them, either slowly and quickly, but always deliberately. And inevitably one always feels a bit sad — *la mélancolie* — when it's time for the last one.

Many people have written about oysters over the ages. As Jonathon Swift is oft quoted: "He was a bold man who ate the first oyster," but it's a smart man or woman who eats as many as they can get their hands on, for a number of reasons.

Researching oyster history is about as easy as trying to grasp one of these slippery devils (best slurped from their shells). There are salty appreciations and books with recipes, and many covering the history from colonial times to the oyster wars. My research tells me that oysters have been enjoyed over the centuries, first by the wealthy and privileged classes of ancient Rome and Greece, as well as during the Renaissance. It wasn't until the mid-1800s that oysters became available to the working class in the U.S. and Europe.

Various dates are cited regarding the roots of the famous "r" rule, urging no oyster consumption during any month without an "r" in it. One 2019 study insists it's 4,000 years old. Wherever and whenever it was hatched, the idea was to protect oysters during reproduction season and to protect humans against bacteria. But oysters can now be enjoyed year-round.

Since the election is upon us, I found it interesting to learn that oyster shells may have been used for voting during the Greek Empire. And although Aphrodite, goddess

of beauty and love, is most famously depicted on a scallop shell, some prefer to believe it was an oyster. The idea that oysters are an aphrodisiac somehow linked to Aphrodite is also, alas, based on myth.

All that aside, they do offer a ton of health benefits. In addition to being an excellent source of protein, vitamin D, iron, and copper, oysters also contain high levels of vitamin C, phosphorus, niacin, and riboflavin. And, by golly, oysters are extremely rich in zinc, which is essential for testosterone production and maintenance of healthy sperm. Although women have much less testosterone than men, it also plays a key part in the female libido. Oysters also boost dopamine, a hormone that increases libido in both men and women.

I've come to appreciate this delicacy more and more over the years and have enjoyed learning to differentiate between the species and their size and taste at various venues.

I like my oysters served raw on the half shell, preferably with an ocean view. I've savored many varieties up and down the West Coast and even on the other side at Manhattan's iconic Grand Central Oyster Bar. From The Fish Market overlooking San Diego Bay to two spots without views (Seattle's terrific The Walrus and The Carpenter and San Francisco's Swan Oyster Depot, one of our nation's top spots for fresh oysters), all have excelled.

The most scenic place for these culinary treats in our area is Caruso's at Rosewood Miramar Beach hotel in Montecito. A plate of Kumamoto oysters and shrimp is served with three dipping sauces: a SoCal sauce (the chef's version of Tabasco), mignonette, and a superb cocktail sauce. More casually, head down the Santa Barbara Harbor for fresh oysters at the Santa Barbara Fish Market, best en-

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Classic Oysters Rockefeller.



ON THE COVER

joyed with their excellent homemade cocktail sauce (recipe shared at the end of this story). They will shuck and serve on a bed of ice with lots of lemon wedges to enjoy at the harbor or at home, or you can take them with you unopened and prepare to your own specifications. In Carpinteria, Little Dom's Seafood opened this summer with a highly anticipated fresh oyster bar. Lure also has an oyster bar.

Over 150 varieties of oysters are harvested and sold in North America, yet they comprise a total of only five species: Pacific or *Crassostrea gigas*; Kumamoto oysters or *Crassostrea sikamea*; Atlantic Oysters or *Crassostrea virginica*; European flat oysters or *Ostrea edulis*; and Olympia oysters or *Ostrea lurida/Ostrea conchaphila*.

Some large oysters are almost gag-worthy, and while consumers may feel they're getting more bang for their bucks with those, I prefer the tiny, sweet, and more delicate variety, like the Kumamoto, which take three to four years to reach maturity. It can take four years for an Olympic oyster to grow to the size of a quarter.

Kumamoto and Pacific oysters are sweeter and easy to pair with wine. East coast, European and Olympia oysters are more minerally and more difficult to pair.

Most often, dry white wines are recommended for oyster-pairing, but in these free-form modern times, some sommeliers say anything goes.

Santa Barbara Fish Market sells a variety of fresh oysters depending on what's available and freshest. I went down on a weekday afternoon for a stroll on the breakwater followed by a delicious sampling of four varieties available that day.

Hands down my favorites were the kusshi oysters from Deep Bay, British Columbia. They get their accurate name from the Japanese word for "ultimate" or "precious." Tiny, plump, with a nice salty brine. I'd also call these heavenly.

Blue Point oysters from Virginia: For those who like their oysters big and meaty. This less flavorful variety is greatly improved with the kick of the Fish Market's dynamite cocktail sauce.

Sanctuary oysters: Full flavored with firm, plump meat, these oysters are farmed in Baja, California, Mexico, in a lagoon at the heart of the El Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The saltiest of all, they had a nice ocean/earthy taste that worked nicely with a dash of lemon.

Fanny Bay oysters: Also from British Columbia, these are another of the larger oysters that I found less chewy than others.

RECIPES

Raw or Cooked?

I believe oysters are best served fresh, raw and simply. Just split them open (an oyster shucking knife makes this task manageable for even the klutziest), savor the salty seawater brine and slurp them down, preferably accompanied by a fresh baguette and a crisp white sauvignon blanc or bone-dry muscadet from France's Loire Valley. There are many locally made artisanal wines to accompany oysters, but one standout is the 2019 Melon de Bourgogne from Lieu Dit Winery (www.lieuditwin-

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You can top raw oysters with a pinch of mignonette sauce (see the recipe in "Cooking with Cannabis" on page 36) or a horseradish sauce that adds a kick.

But...

If you're baking oysters in their shells (they're lovely with butter, panko bread crumbs, and some lemon) you'll need to balance them on rock salt or rice in your baking dish. You can also grill them — easiest with the big fat ones — with herbed butter. Just balance them on the grill or use the rock salt or rice in a pan set atop the grill to keep them upright.

Barrie Lynn's Saki Poached and Broiled Oysters

Balance opened oysters in the shell on a bed of rock salt in a baking pan. Place a pinch of butter under each oyster and poach in a dry, young, cold sake that's under nine months old. Top each oyster with freshly grated Parmesan cheese. Bake or broil in the oven (be sure not to overcook) until the cheese has melted.

Santa Barbara Fish Market Cocktail Sauce

Santa Barbara Fish Market sells its dynamite cocktail sauce, but you can also make it at home from this recipe they shared with us.

- One 14 oz. bottle ketchup
- 1.5 tablespoons of Worcestershire sauce
- Tabasco (or favorite hot sauce) to taste
- 2 teaspoons of black pepper
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1/4 cup of parsley
- 1/4 cup of chopped green onion (tops only)
- 1 tablespoon of horseradish

Combine all ingredients and refrigerate.

Oysters Rockefeller are most commonly known as being named for the richest man in the world at the time, due to the richness of the dish. Another theory cites the green stuff found on some bivalves (actually phytoplankton the oyster dines on) as resembling Rockefeller's green wealth. Either, way, we know the original broiled oyster recipe was created in 1889, due to a shortage of escargot at Antoine's restaurant, and remains a secret to this day. Perhaps it's time for a new oyster recipe named after a present-day billionaire: Oysters Zuckerberg, Bezos or Gates, anyone? Or maybe Oysters Oprah?

INGREDIENTS

- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 c. tightly packed fresh spinach
- 1/2 c. roughly chopped green onions
- 1/2 c. roughly chopped parsley, leaves and stems
- 2 tsp. lemon juice
- 1/2 c. (1 stick) butter, softened
- 2 tbsp. Pernod or other anise-flavored liqueur
- 3/4 c. panko bread crumbs
- 1/4 c. freshly grated Parmesan
- 1 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 lb. coarse salt, for baking
- 24 fresh oysters, shucked, shells reserved
- Lemon wedges, for serving



DIRECTIONS

1. Position rack in top third of oven and preheat to 450°. Add garlic, spinach, green onions, parsley, lemon juice, butter, and Pernod to a food processor and pulse until finely chopped.
2. In a medium bowl combine, panko, Parmesan, and oil.
3. Sprinkle coarse salt over large baking sheet to depth of 1/2". Arrange oysters in half shells in salt. Divide spinach mixture among oysters and sprinkle with Parmesan mixture.
4. Bake until spinach mixture is bubbling and panko is deeply golden, about 8 minutes.
5. Serve with lemon wedges alongside.

In the event you're not up for shucking your own oysters, here are some tasty local options. Upper left: Yuzu Granita oysters from Oku. Upper right: Oysters Casino from Petit Valentien. Lower: Spicy oyster shooters from Fishhouse.

Fishhouse and Petit Valentien photos by Corina Sylvia. Oku courtesy Oku.