

Oyster Basics

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

Song to Oysters
by Roy Blount, Jr.

*I like to eat an uncooked oyster.
Nothing's slicker, nothing's moister.
Nothing's easier on your gorge
Or, when the time comes, to discharge.*

*But not to let it too long rest
Within your mouth is always best.
For if your mind dwells on an oyster...
Nothing's slicker. Nothing's moister.*

*I prefer my oyster fried.
Then I'm sure my oyster's died.*

On Christmas Eve my older daughter and I walked the shore at low tide and talked of many things. We were encouraged to see a good strike of native oysters scattered along the upper tidal zone and up into the marsh grass. It has been a long time since I have seen that many young oysters along the shore. For some reason they survive better now in the intertidal zone than in deeper water. We opened a few on the spot to savor the earthy, sensual goodness of an honest oyster. They taste better when you gather them yourself. Then we picked up a good mess to take home and roast in the *Ethyl A. Pigg Memorial Cooker* for appetizers. They tasted like the creek.

When I was coming along and oysters were easy to find, I liked to go “nipping” on crisp winter days when the water was clear and calm. I would drift along the shallows at low tide in a skiff (somewhat upstream of the yellow “condemned” sign) and “nip” the big oysters that grew individually in the mud. I could see the bottom clearly in several feet of water and would look for the subtle indications of an oyster buried in the mud. All that was visible was a slight disturbance on the bottom and maybe a sliver of an oyster lip. When I found one, I would carefully scoop under it with the tines of a hoe-fork and lift it into the boat. Some of these were huge – eight to ten inches long – and shucked out an oyster the size of my palm. The largest grew off of the hog lot. They were so fat they were yellow. These were reserved for frying.



Photos: oysters nipped in Lagrange Creek, Christmas 1979

No seafood conveys the experience of *merroir* like an oyster. *Merroir*? Well, if *terroir* is the essence of land or place, then *merroir* is the essence of sea – specifically the waters where the oyster grew. You can actually taste the “smell” of the sea. It is easy to tell the difference between a seaside oyster and a river oyster just by the saltiness, but the complex flavor differences go far beyond salt and include mineral, nutritional and micronutrient components specific to different areas. In general though, the saltier the waters, the more intense the flavor. Molluscs maintain internal salinity balance or homeostasis in salty environments by producing savory and flavor-rich amino acids, thus increasing *umami* taste sensations. (See *The Magic of Umami*, PL Jan.-Feb. '06)

Back before the oyster industry was decimated by diseases (MSX and Dermo), Rappahannock River oysters were world-renowned and Urbanna was a major oyster port. On winter afternoons, oyster boats would be rafted halfway across the creek at each dock waiting to unload the day's catch. Randolph Ashburn ran one of the oyster houses, and he knew his oysters. Watermen would often bring him an oyster and say, “Arright Cap’n, where’d this one come from?”. Randolph would shuck and eat it, then tell him not only whether it was a Rappahannock or Potomac, but also which rock in the river it came from. He was seldom fooled.

The trick to eating oysters and enjoying the unique flavors is to keep preparation as simple as possible. Randolph was able to pinpoint the oyster's *merroir* because he ate it raw and naked (the oyster that is). No condiments to confuse the palate. Popular accompaniments such as vinegar, melted butter, hot sauce or cocktail sauce may complement dominant oyster flavors and taste good, but blur nuances.

Cooking changes texture considerably and taste somewhat. Some think for the better on both counts. Again, simple is best. Oysters may be roasted, steamed, fried or stewed. Regardless of method, however, the rule is to heat only until the edges of the mantle curl. The meat should be firm but remain moist and tender. Overcooking results in shrunken, rubbery and tasteless pencil erasers. When roasting or steaming oysters in the shell, remove from the heat when most open their shells and lose water. They can simply be roasted or steamed in the oven or on the stovetop in a roasting pan with a little water in the bottom or on a grill or pit - covered or uncovered. The objective is to subject them to even and indirect heat and let them “stew in their own juices”.

An old-time oyster roast was a major social event centered on a large piece of metal, usually an old saw mill blade, elevated above a hardwood fire by cinder blocks. Oysters were shoveled one layer deep onto the hot steel one half bushel at a time, then covered with wet burlap sacks and allowed to steam until they opened. Then they were shoveled onto a wooden table furnished with oyster knives, left-handed shucking gloves, saltine crackers, melted butter, hot sauce and cocktail sauce.

If you buy oysters in the shell, they will stay alive for a week or two if kept cold but not allowed to freeze. During cold weather, we just keep them in the garage. If it gets too warm, we cover them with ice but don't let water accumulate. I like to go through and select the largest for frying. Small oysters are best raw or roasted. To make sure they are still in good shape, tap the shell with the handle of your oyster knife – if it sounds dull or thuds, toss it out – it is either dead or a “clucker” (a closed shell usually filled with mud).

When shucking raw or roasted oysters you will occasionally encounter a small red “oyster crab”. Eat it! It is salty-sweet and slightly crunchy. Better yet, give it to a child to eat and watch the reaction. It is usually even better than watching them eat their first raw oyster.

Though oysters are marketed and can be eaten all year, they are best after the water cools in the fall and the flesh gets firm and fat. During warm months (those without an “R”) oysters are busy breeding and the meat is thin and watery because so much effort goes into producing sperm and eggs. In cold months, the oyster is sexually neutral, but as water warms in the spring, they each decide which way they want to go for the summer.



In the words of Ogden Nash (1931):

*"The oyster's a confusing suitor
It's masc., and fem., and even neuter.
But whether husband, pal or wife
It leads a painless sort of life.
I'd like to be an oyster, say,
In August, June, July or May"*

Cocktail sauce is made up to taste and never measured. Start with ketchup, let's say about a cup. Throw in a good dollop of horseradish – maybe two tablespoons. Add some lemon juice – about one tablespoon. Adjust heat with hot sauce then tweak to taste.

To fry oysters: Drain oysters, dip in beaten egg and roll in seasoned cracker crumbs, bread crumbs or panko and put aside for a few minutes to dry and set. Heat about ½ inch of frying oil or shortening (preferably lard) in a cast iron skillet to just below the smoke point or about 350°F. Fry until nicely browned, turning once. They may also be cooked in a deep fat fryer. If the oysters are small, two or three may be put together before coating with breading.

Oyster stew: Drain oysters and retain liquor. Heat a little butter (about 2 tablespoons per pint of oysters) in a saucepan over medium heat or in a double boiler. Add liquor and bring to a simmer, then add the oysters and cook gently until they are firm and the edges curl. Season sparingly with salt and pepper (we use our KA Table Seasoning). Add warm or hot whole milk (avoid cream as it absorbs or masks the oyster flavor) and heat thoroughly but do not boil. Garnish with a little parsley and serve immediately. There should be a lacy, yellow fringe of butter on top. Some people sauté a little onion in the butter and some start with a light roux flavored with onion and celery. Remember, you are trying to retain the subtle highlights of the oyster flavor, so be careful what you add.