

The Wine & Food Feature

The Perpetual Oyster

Charles Dubow



He was a bold man that first eat an oyster. --Jonathan Swift

Much imagination and invention has gone into the gradual evolution of what humans regard as food. Our furry ancestors ate pretty much whatever was at hand--if it didn't eat them first. How we first decided to boil water or make bread is anyone's guess. But what turn of events could possibly have induced someone to eat an oyster? For all intentions, an oyster in its shell looks like a rock, and surely even early humans must have known that rocks were inedible. What's more, once the shell was opened the naked oyster itself, all translucent and slimy, must have looked singularly unappetizing.

So, yes, Swift is right to commend that first hearty gastronome who, throwing caution to the wind, slurped down the first oyster, savoring that exhilarating salt taste of the sea as it burst upon the tongue. Perhaps he had seen gulls drop the shells from a great height to the rocks below and perceived that there was something tasty inside. (What inspired the gull to figure this out remains a mystery but apparently chickens are particularly fond of the shell itself.) Since that day, oysters have occupied a unique position in our culinary history. Few comestibles have been as celebrated and scorned, relished and rejected as this humble bivalve. For every person who swears that oysters are the perfect food (or aphrodisiac), there is someone else with his nose wrinkled in disgust at the very thought of ingesting one of the slippery little rascals.

On a visit to our shores, William Makepeace Thackeray, the English author of *Vanity Fair*, commented, rather vividly, that eating one was like "swallowing a baby."

Few places have embraced oysters with quite as much Epicurean gusto as New York City in the 19th century. Red-and-white-striped muslin balloons illuminated by candlelight were suspended on nearly every corner advertising oyster cellars. Locals like the Rabelaisian financier "**Diamond Jim**" Brady thought nothing of consuming three or four dozen oysters as an appetizer or light snack (see "[Oysters Present No Bulk](#)"). By 1877 the Fulton Fish Market was selling approximately 50,000 oysters per day. The great oyster beds of Long Island and the Chesapeake produced mammoth mollusks up to a foot in length. On a visit to our shores, **William Makepeace Thackeray**, the English author of *Vanity Fair*, commented, rather vividly, that eating one was like "swallowing a baby."

On America's East Coast the annual harvest was so plentiful that oysters could abundantly grace the tables of rich and poor alike. They were so inexpensive that they were used in everything from soups to stuffing and appeared, in various recipes, almost nightly on many New York tables. Even the city's rougher neighborhoods offered the popular "Canal Street plan," promising customers all the oysters they could eat for only 6 cents.

The Oyster, Reconsidered

The delightful American culinary essayist **M.F.K. Fisher** wrote memorably in her paean to the humble bivalve *Consider the Oyster*, the following observation: "There are three kinds of oyster-eaters: those loose-minded sports who will eat anything, hot, cold, thin, thick, dead or alive, as long as it is oyster; those who will eat them raw and only raw; and those who with equal severity will eat them cooked and no way other." Of course, there is much arguing and cajoling back and forth between the second and third groups but both of them are at least half right. The oyster is meant to be enjoyed raw or cooked and demonstrating the superiority of one over the other would be as difficult, though as much fun to research, as determining whether red wine was superior to white.

Few comestibles have been as celebrated and scorned, relished and rejected as this humble bivalve.

However, that being said, there is one practical rather than gustatory advantage that cooked oysters have over their raw cousins, it is very difficult to become ill from eating one. Although it is fairly easy to spot a "bad" oyster--not only do they look dry and shriveled but usually smell something like rotten eggs--too many people over time have wished they had paid just a little more attention to what they were eating. Bad oysters are full of bacteria (*Vibrio Vulnificus* for those who care) and eating oysters from unpolluted waters or in a restaurant that has a high turnover won't protect you. Nor will using hot sauce or drinking help. There are few things more disagreeable than ingesting a bad oyster. You will know immediately that you just swallowed one but the full effects will not kick in for several hours. Chills, nausea, vomiting, cramps and diarrhea are only some of what you have to look forward to. And if at that point you start wishing you were dead, you actually might be. Forty percent of *Vibrio Vulnificus* infections, if left untreated, are fatal.

However, don't let that deter you from eating raw oysters. It would be like not taking up sailing because you were afraid you might drown. Sure, it could happen but, then again, it also could not happen. In the old days before the invention of refrigeration there was a general rule of thumb which decreed that only those months that contained an 'r' in their names produced oysters worth eating. There was something to that. Most oyster beds were near to shore and the heat of the summer sun would warm the waters too much, resulting in oysters that would spoil faster once exposed to air. Well, these days that is no longer a problem and one can eat oysters with impunity twelve months a year--but just be sure to smell them first.

Now, for those people who like their oysters fresh and raw, there are various schools of thought on the proper method for their enjoyment. One group likes to smother their oysters in all sorts of different sauces, oils, unguents and condiments. The only problem with this method is that it totally destroys the flavor of the oyster itself and is not unlike pouring catsup on caviar. But some people are still uncomfortable with idea of eating raw fish, particularly one that looks as unappetizing as an oyster, and need to disguise it as completely as possible. Other people pour all sorts of goop on their oyster in the mistaken belief that it will actually protect them from eating a bad oyster. To the contrary, with all that junk on top it's impossible to tell a bad one from a good one.

The classic method of enjoying oysters in the buff is slurped straight off the shell, juice and all, a momentary pause to tingle the palette before sliding down unmastered to the stomach. Some people opt for a slight squeeze of lemon on the oyster, believing that it somehow tickles the creature and makes it more palatable. I'm not sure about this but the extra tartness does taste rather nice. M.F.K. Fisher makes the point that the further north one travels in the U.S., the more honest people prefer their oysters: "They like them cold, straightforward, simple, capable of spirit but unadorned, like a Low Church service maybe or a Boston romance."

Stew, Glorious Stew

With the exception of a freshly shucked peck of the choicest Belons, Wellfleets, Kumamotos or Malpeques, straight off the boat with brine still dripping from their shells, no oyster dish has captured the American heart and stomach as much as the humble, delicious oyster stew (see "[The Well-Made Cooked Oyster](#)"). Served hot, oyster stew was originally a poor man's meal, a glorious creation born from the simplest ingredients: oysters, cream, butter.

By the turn of the century, oyster stews had become a traditional American Sunday night meal. Quick and easy for a skillful cook to prepare, a stew--unlike soup--can be made in a matter of minutes. Fisher pondered why American lexicographers had never seen fit to give "oyster stew" its own definition in the dictionary: "Is it possible that they never knew, when they were children, the cozy pleasures of Sunday night supper in wintertime, when crackers and the biggest tureen of steaming, buttery, creamy oyster stew stood on the table, and was plenty?"



Oyster shuckers at Grand Central Oyster Bar preparing a light snack.

Sadly, this paragon of the dinner table seems, with a few notable exception such as the famous Oyster Bar in New York's Grand Central Station, to have gone the way of the buggy whip. Two different factors have contributed to the steady disappearance of oyster stew from our nation's gastronomic consciousness. The first is basic expense: it has been a long time since poor men could dine regularly on oysters.

The other is that today, in our calorie-conscious age, "buttery, creamy," meals like oyster stew conjure up horrible images of hardening arteries and sagging bellies. This is a shame. On cold winter afternoons, there is no greater pleasure than a soothing, aromatic bowl to nurture the insides and lift the spirits. Few other meals have the near-magical power of oyster stew to be, in the evocative words of Fisher, "mildly potent, quietly sustaining, warm as love and welcomer in winter."

More From Forbes

[Amour De L'Oyster](#)

It was a rainy day in Paris. A lonely, hungry man and 24 coquettish oysters. It was fate that they should run into one another.

[The Well-Cooked Oyster](#)

Some people only take their oysters raw. For those of you who are a little more broad-minded there are many ways to cook an oyster that can be just as delicious.

Oysters Present No Bulk

Oysters were always the preliminary to any good meal--and no self-respecting gourmand would dream of stopping at only a dozen.

An Oyster By Any Other Name

There are many different kinds of oysters: Eastern, Western, Japanese and French. Each one has its own unique flavor but almost of them are delicious.

Amour De L'Oyster

I remember the first time I ever realized how different one oyster could be from another. This is an important step in one's gastronomic development, much like that lightning bolt of clarity that hits you the first time you drink a great wine and recognize it for what it is. It is a kind of cumulative recognition that only comes with experience, of a thousand memorable or indifferent moments that shape our tastes and actions, whether we are talking about a golf swing, parallel parking or making love.

My epiphany was in Paris, as so many of the best kind often are, during the late fall. The restaurant at my hotel was depressing me with its grand sauces and extravagant prices. In search of more honest sustenance, I walked out on the rain-gray, slick streets, the trees standing shivering and leafless against the November sky, and turned down the broad boulevard of the Rue de l'Opera. I wasn't sure what I was looking for. I didn't want the quasi-fast-food, the croque monsieurs and poulet frites, of the cafes but, as it is an expensive part of town, I feared my options would be limited.

In Paris, more than most cities, you can tell more about the quality of the restaurant by its clientele than by its menu. It seemed that every window I peered in told me the same story. They were all full of Japanese tourists, a sure sign that the management has sold out to the exigencies of the market and that the food will be workmanlike at best and inedible at worst.

The rain was coming down harder and I was becoming increasingly doubtful of my chances for success. But there was one more restaurant just ahead of me on this block of equally unimpressive choices. I was not optimistic when I ducked under the awning to survey the interior and then a line from **A.J. Liebling's** classic memoir of a life spent eating in Paris, *Between Meals*, came into my head: "If you run across a restaurant where you often see priests eating with priests, or sporting girls with sporting girls, you may be confident that it is good. Those are two classes of people who like to eat well and get their money's worth." Sure enough, seated at a table just inside the door were two priests obviously enjoying what looked to be a substantial lunch.

I entered and, although I did not see anyone resembling a sporting girl, there was a table of at least a dozen elderly French women doing the honors to their own lunch. If one could add a coda to Liebling's observation, it would be to add elderly French ladies. That was good enough for me. I nodded to the maitre d' and was shown to a good table in the front. In the back I spotted a table of very unhappy-looking Japanese who seemed as though they had been taken back there and promptly forgotten.

I proceeded to order a dozen Belons, the first I had ever ordered in France. (A grievous oversight, I know, but I had never before visited France when there was an *r* in the month.) I then requested roasted sea bass and *haricots verts* followed by a salad. From the wine list I selected a Sancerre. But here is the point to the story: When the waiter brought the oysters, I had never seen anything like them before. They were enormous and smelled so strongly of the sea I almost had to look out the window to verify that I was not indeed on the Breton coast or even Cape Cod.

Applying a gentle squeeze of lemon to the first one, I lifted it up and it gently slid down my throat,

lubricated by its own salty, robust juice. It was the greatest single oyster I had ever eaten in my life. I could not believe it. Was it just a fluke? I ate the second, the third, and eventually the whole dozen and decided that it was not. Every single oyster exploded against my taste buds, coldly, cleanly, crisply. It was incredible. Greedily, I asked for a second dozen, for the first time understanding the Rabelaisian excesses of the great trenchermen of old who would consume hundreds of oysters in one sitting. The waiter, a good sport, brought out the second dozen, refilled my glass, and I set to work once again. These were as good and I was so happy I nearly wept.

It was only monetary constrictions that prevented me from plowing ahead--but I was tempted. Three dozen oysters, that would have been quite a story to tell! But I had my entree instead, a first-rate piece of fish to be sure, but it was lost on me, unfortunately. I wanted more of those oysters. The next day I had plans elsewhere and then I had to return to America. But I have been back since and I am happy to report that each time was as pleasurable as the first. The only problem, and I am not being coy about this, is that I cannot remember the name of the restaurant. If you are feeling lucky and would like to find it, I urge you to do so. It is, as I said, on the Rue d'Opera. Just look for the restaurant with the priests in the window.

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The Well-Cooked Oyster

There are few places left on the East Coast where you can still find the traditional oyster stew. One of the great restaurants in New York City and a monument to the fading cult of the oyster, the venerable Grand Central Oyster Bar and Restaurant still makes hundreds of oyster stews by hand every day, each one "warm as love."

Grand Central Oyster Bar's Oyster Stew

8 freshly shucked oysters
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
2 tablespoons (1/4 stick) butter
1 ounce sherry
1/4 cup oyster liquor
1/2 teaspoon sweet Hungarian paprika
Dash celery salt
1 cup half-and-half

Place all ingredients except half-and-half and 1 tablespoon of the butter in the top part of a double boiler over boiling water. Don't let the top pan touch the water. Whisk or stir briskly and constantly for about 1 minute, until oysters are just beginning to curl. Add half-and-half and continue stirring briskly, just to a boil. Do not boil. Pour stew into a soup plate. Serve piping hot topped with the remaining tablespoon of butter and sprinkled with paprika. (Don't forget the oyster crackers!) One serving.

The following recipe for proper old-fashioned crackers is from M.F.K. Fisher's 1941 book *Consider the Oyster*. Fisher writes that "this is something you will probably never taste in your life, unless you are stubborn or have a crazy cook, but it is nice to know that there still live people who have eaten something other than the light dead things we call oyster crackers with their stews.)"

Butter Crackers

(from Marion Harland's *Common Sense in the Household*, Scribner Armstrong and Co., 1873)

1 quart flour
3 tablespoons butter
1/2 teaspoon soda, dissolved in hot water
1 spoonful salt
2 cups sweet milk

Rub the butter into the flour, or, what is better, cut it up with a knife or chopper, as you do in pastry; add the salt, milk, soda, mixing well. Work into a ball, lay upon a floured board, and beat with the rolling-pin half an hour, turning and shifting the mass often. Roll into an even sheet, a quarter of an inch thick, or less, prick deeply with a fork, and bake hard in a moderate oven. Hang them up in a muslin bag in the kitchen for two days to dry.

Fisher recommends many other recipes for preparing oysters. Among the best are the following:

Baked Oysters

Into a shallow baking dish, well buttered, spread a light layer of bread or cracker crumbs. Then put in a layer of oysters, and season well with salt and fresh-ground pepper and bits of sweet butter. Then put more crumbs and alternate in this fashion until the dish is almost full, and put crumbs and butter on top. Pour enough oyster juice to moisten things, and bake in a quick oven until brown but not bubbling.

One of the great recipes for oysters is Oysters Rockefeller. Fisher writes: "There are too many legends, really, about Oysters Rockefeller for any one to dare say what he thinks is the true one. It is equally foolish to say what is the true recipe since every gourmet who has ever dined in that nostalgically agreeable room of Antoine's on St. Louis Street [in New Orleans] figures, after the third or fourth sampling if not the first, that he has at last discovered the secret."

Oysters Rockefeller

Procure oysters on the half shell, wash them and drain them, and put them back on the shells. Place ice cream salt to the thickness of about one half inch on a platter and preheat, placing the oysters that are on the half shells on the hot salt and run them in the broiler for five minutes. Then cover with the following sauce and bread crumbs and bake in the hot oven until brown. Serve hot.

Sauce For Oysters Rockefeller

1 cup oyster water
1 cup plain water
1/4 bunch shallots
1 small sprig thyme
1/2 cup ground bread crumbs toasted and sifted
1 ounce herbsaint
1 cup best butter
1/4 bunch spinach
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
2 small stalks green celery

Grind all the vegetables in the chopper. Put the water and the oyster liquor together, and let boil vigorously for about five minutes then add the ground vegetables and cook about twenty minutes or until it's to the consistency of a thick sauce.

Stir in the butter until melted and remove from fire, add the herbsaint, pour sauce over oysters on the shells, sprinkle with bread crumbs, return to hot oven for five minutes and serve piping hot on the platter in which you cooked them.

One of the more colorfully named recipes in Fisher's book is the following:

Hang Town Fry

(from the *Sunset Cook Book*)

Drain and pat 2 dozen medium-sized California Easter [!] oysters, season them with salt and pepper and roll first in flour, then in beaten egg, and then in fine white bread-crumbs. Put them into a hot frying-pan with melted butter, and fry to a golden brown on one side; before turning them over pour over all 4 or 5 whole eggs beaten light. Let cook a minute, then turn over and brown on other side to color them just as desired. The resulting dish will look like an egg pancake with oyster mixed in. Serve two or three links of tiny browned breakfast sausages and shoestring potatoes with Hang Town Fry.

When oysters were more plentiful and cheaper than they are now, one of their most popular usages were for stuffing. So common was oyster stuffing at one point that Fisher made the following observation: "Oyster stuffing, for turkeys naturally, is as American as corn-on-the-cob or steamed coot, as far as Americans know or care. To many families it is a necessary part of Christmas dinner, so that its omission would at once connote a sure sign of internal disintegration, as if Ma came to church in her corset-cover or Uncle Jim brought his light-o'-love to the children's picnic."

Dressing for Turkey or Other Fowl with Oysters

(adapted from Mrs. William Vaughn Moody's *Cook Book*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931)

1 1/2 quarts of fine counts [oysters]
1 quart of lightly fried crumbs
1 quart of oyster juice
Salt, pepper, celery salt, and paprika

Wing the oysters. Add the bread crumbs, oyster juice, and seasoning.

Fisher then goes on to add: "Perhaps Oyster stuffing is one of the best, but the crumbs, which are mixed with the oysters and oyster liquor, should be literally soaked in melted butter, as should all crumbs that go into a turkey...I also like a cup or more of finely chopped celery stirred in with the crumbs, rather than Mrs. Moody's celery salt."

The Well-Cooked Oyster

For a modern variation of this classic, Michael Lomonaco, former chef at New York's '21' restaurant offers the following recipe in *The '21' Cookbook*, Doubleday, 1995:

New England Oyster Stuffing

4 ounces fat-back pork, cut into 1/4-inch cubes, or 1/4 cup vegetable oil
2 large onions, peeled and diced (about 1 1/2 cups)
4 stalks celery, thinly sliced (about 1 cup)
3 cups crumbled, unsalted water biscuits (about 2 pounds)
4 large eggs
3/4 cup whole milk

24 freshly shucked oysters, medium size (preferably Blue Points), with their juice
2 tablespoons crushed dried sage leaves
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
2 tablespoons butter

Preheat the oven to 375°. Heat the cubed fat-back or oil in a large, heavy skillet over medium heat. When the pan is hot, add the diced onions and saute until they become translucent. To the onions, add the sliced celery and continue to cook 2 minutes more.

Remove from the heat and allow to cool completely. In a mixing bowl, crumble the biscuits by hand so that when finished, they measure 3 cups. Do not overcrush the biscuits or make them too fine; leave them large. If available, you can use whole, unsalted oyster crackers.

First beat the eggs separately, then combine the eggs and milk. To the crumbled biscuits add the shucked raw oysters along with their juices, the cooked onion and celery, the sage, the salt and pepper, and the egg/milk mixture. Coat the sides of a baking dish with the butter. Pour the oyster stuffing into the dish, and bake 35 to 40 minutes. Cool several minutes before serving. Serves 10 to 12.

Another delicious recipe from Lomonaco:

Roasted Oysters With Country Bacon

24 fresh oysters, in their shells
2 plum tomatoes
1 tablespoon unsalted butter
3 large shallots, peeled and finely diced (about 1/4 cup)
1/4 cup white wine
1/4 cup heavy cream
1 tablespoon chopped fresh tarragon leaves
2 ounces bacon, cooked and chopped
1/2 cup steamed spinach (optional)

Garnish:

Melba Toast, or toast points of brioche or country bread

Preheat the oven to 350°. Using a towel, grasp an oyster in the palm of your hand. Press the oyster, rounded-side down, on a firm surface, still holding it with the towel. Shuck the oyster by wedging the tip of an oyster knife (regular knives are too thin-bladed) between the halves of the shell, at the shell's narrowest end. When the knife tip is securely wedged, rotate the blade to pry open the shell. Slide the knife blade along the length of the shell to open completely. Remove the oyster from the shell and reserve, along with its juice. From each pair of oyster shells, save the one that is most concave on the inside, and discard the one that is flatter. Place the concave shells in a pan of cold water and scrub inside and out. Place the clean oyster shells on a cookie sheet and set aside.

Dip the tomatoes briefly in boiling water to loosen the skins, then in ice water. Peel, cut in half, remove and discard the seeds, and dice.

Have the remaining ingredients measured and ready beside the stove. When you are ready to begin cooking the oysters, place the cookie sheet containing the oyster shells in the oven. On the top of the stove, melt the butter in a hot saute pan until it begins to foam. Add the shallots, the oysters and their juice, and the white wine. Cook the oysters 30 seconds, then add the heavy cream. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce to a simmer just 1 minute more, or until the oysters'

edges begin to curl. Add the tomato, and bacon. Heat another 30 seconds, then remove promptly from the heat.

Remove the oyster shells from the oven and arrange 6 on each plate. Spoon 1 oyster into each shell and spoon a little of the sauce over each.

A nice variation of this recipe is to place a "nest" of steamed spinach in each oyster shell before adding the oysters and sauce. Serve with Melba Toast, brioche toast points, or toast points of country bread. Serves 4.

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Oysters Present No Bulk

There are few people who have had as direct an impact on modern man's appreciation of food than **Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin**. Born in 1755 and raised in the appropriately named town of Belley, in a region famous for the quality of its foodstuffs, Brillat-Savarin was the author of one of the greatest books ever written about the pleasures of eating, *The Physiology of Taste*. The book is a collection of essays, aphorisms, observations and gastronomical meditations. Among his observations is that all the most healthful and satisfying foods contained osmazome, an element that we now call vitamins. Raw oysters, in his opinion, contained no osmazome and, for this reason, "so many can be eaten immediately before a meal without any harmful effects." The following two passages, one by Brillat-Savarin and the other by A.J. Liebling, his 20th-century disciple and spiritual heir, reveal that the French not only know more about cooking food than we do, they also know more about eating it.

In 1798 I was at Versailles as a commissioner of the Directory, and had fairly frequent dealings with the Monsieur Laperte, who was secretary to the tribunal of the department; he was extremely fond of oysters, and used to complain of never having eaten enough of them, or, as he put it, 'had his bellyful of them.'

I decided to provide him with that satisfaction, and to that end invited him to dinner.

He came; I kept him company as far as the third dozen, after which I let him go on alone. He went up to thirty-two dozen, taking more than an hour over the task, for the servant was not very skillful at opening them.

Meanwhile, I was inactive, and as that is a distressing condition to be in at the table, I stopped my guest when he was still in full career. 'My dear fellow,' I said, 'it is not your fate to eat your bellyful of oyster today; let us have dinner.'

We dined: and he acquitted himself with the vigour and appetite of a man who had been fasting.

The Physiology of Taste
Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin
Penguin Books, 1994

The primary requisite for writing well about food is a good appetite. Without this, it is impossible to accumulate, within the allotted span, enough experience of eating to have anything worth setting down. Each day brings only two opportunities for field work, and they are not to be wasted minimizing the intake of cholesterol. They are indispensable, like a prizefighter's hours on the road...A good appetite gives an eater room to turn around in. For example, a nonprofessional eater I know went to the Restaurant Pierre, in the Place Gaillon, a couple of years ago, his mind set on a sensibly light meal; a dozen, or possibly eighteen, oysters, and a thick chunk of steak

topped with bone marrow, which M. Pierre calls a Delice de la Vilette--the equivalent of a "Stockyards' Delight." But as he arrived, he heard M. Pierre say to his headwaiter, "Here comes Monsieur L. Those two portions of cassoulet that are left--put them aside for him." A cassoulet is a substantial dish, of a complexity precluding its discussion here...M. Pierre is the most amiable of restaurateurs, who prides himself on knowing in advance what his friends will like. A client of limited appetite would be obliged either to forgo his steak or to hurt M. Pierre's feelings. Monsieur L., however, was in no difficulty. He ate the two cassoulets, as was his normal practice; if he had consumed only one, his host would have feared that it wasn't up to standard. He then enjoyed his steak. The oysters offered no problem, since they present no bulk.

Between Meals
A.J. Liebling
Modern Library, 1995

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An Oyster By Any Other Name

There are numerous varieties of oyster, many of which are denominated by no more than geography. As a wine from Bordeaux or Burgundy is determined by the particular soil or the direction of the vines that assures one vintage of distinction, another, less favorably placed of mediocrity, so the character of an oyster is determined by its location. Because oysters are filter-feeders, the amount and types of salts and other nutrients in the surrounding waters, as well as local pollution levels, affect the oyster's flavor, shell structure, and flesh color. A Cotuit oyster, for example, is the same kind as a Wellfleet but, although they resemble each other closely, the happy differentiation of one cove from the next, with its particular bounty of algae and rock, gives each its unmistakable uniqueness of flavor.

The oyster is a bivalve, in that it has two shells. These shells are on the right and left side of the oyster, and are called the right and left valves. The one upon which the oyster rests, grows faster, becomes deeper and is known as the left valve. The appendage by which the oyster attaches itself to whatever rock or ledge appeals to it is called a foot. There is little else for the oyster to do so, like any couch potato, it just sits there and drinks; in fact, when the weather is warm, it can consume up to 27 quarts of water per hour.

But what is truly unusual about the oyster is its sexual identity. For the first year of its life the oyster is undeniably masculine, fertilizing hundreds of thousands of eggs. Then, undergoing a form of transexual puberty, the oyster changes and, essentially, stops playing with G.I. Joes and starts playing with Barbies. It is now a female, maternal and fecund. But just to keep things confusing, our oyster will occasionally take its masculine side out for a spin. By the time the oyster is seven, if it actually lives that long, it is wholeheartedly, unabashedly female.

The Eastern, or Atlantic, oyster, which accounts for about 85% of total oyster production in the U.S., is found from the Gulf Coast to Cape Cod. The Pacific oyster, a transplant from Japan which accounts for roughly 15% of production, is farmed along the West Coast from British Columbia to Northern California.

The following list is a selection of some of the most popular varieties of oysters.

Atlantic

Box: A mild, muddy oyster found from North Carolina to Long Island.

Bras D'Or: A sweet, mild oyster from Cape Breton in Nova Scotia.

Chatham: A sweet, delicate, slightly briny oyster from Cape Cod.

Chilmark: A very salty and crisp oyster from Martha's Vineyard.

Chincoteague: Very popular variety of oyster from Chincoteague Bay, Va., of which there are two versions: those from the bay side, which tend to be sweeter, and those from the ocean side which are saltier.

Cotuit: Medium-sized briny variety from Cotuit Harbor, Mass.

Hog Island Sweetwater: From Hog Island, La., this plump, sweet, mildly smoky oyster is more robust than many other Southern varieties.

James River: Sweet, salty oyster from the Virginia side of the Chesapeake Bay.

Long Island: Mildly salty oyster from the Connecticut side of Long Island Sound.

Malpeque: A clean, coppery variety from Prince Edward Island.

Rhode Island Select: Plump, slightly salty oyster from southeast Rhode Island. Very popular.

Wellfleet: A metallic, crisp and sweet variety from Cape Cod.

Pacific

Coromandel: Popular, salty oysters from Coromandel, New Zealand.

Crystal Bay: These West Coast oysters are large and meaty, with a strong clear taste.

Eagle Creek: A mild, small-sized oyster from near Vancouver, Canada.

Fanny Bay: Fatty, blandish oysters from British Columbia.

Kumamoto: Of Japanese origin, these are considered the best variety of oyster on the West Coast and are prized for their plump texture and buttery, slightly sweet taste.

Mad River: A robust, slightly salty oyster from Tomales Bay, Calif.

Pearl Point: These fat, mild oysters are from British Columbia.

Tenass Bay: In the same class as the Kumamoto, these Alaskan oysters are similar in taste but smaller in size.

Westcott Belon: From San Juan Island, Wash., these are large, plump oysters with a lemony metallic taste.