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EATING & DRINKING

Shuck And Awe

Nothing goes down easier with bubbly, but oysters are so varied and complex these days, a half-shell menu can be downright daunting. Two new books help facilitate a better bivalve experience

BY KATHLEEN SQUIRES

I STARED at the list, stumped. Should I order the one that had a “mild balanced finish?” Or should I go for the one with the notes of “butter, celery, copper and salt?” What about the option that offered a “blast of minerality?” I hadn’t felt this overwhelmed by a choice since I first laid eyes on a wine list at a Michelin-starred restaurant in Paris. Only I wasn’t ordering wine: All this to-do was over a round of oysters.

Not too many years ago, I would have just ordered a half-dozen East Coast oysters and a half-dozen West Coast. Now, I was faced with parsing dozens of obscure points of origin and even the names of different growers. Never in my life had I seen such a dizzying variety of oysters on offer.

As M.F.K. Fisher pointed out in her 1941 book “Consider the Oyster,” “Men have enjoyed eating oysters since they were not much more than monkeys.” But for much of my lifetime the world’s oyster supply was in serious trouble. The U.S. became the world’s leading purveyor between 1880 and 1910, producing 2 billion oysters a year. And then we ate them all—or very nearly. Overharvesting brought disease to oyster beds around the globe. Add increasingly polluted waters, and by the mid-20th century, 90% of the world’s oyster beds had been wiped out.

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Measures such as the Clean Water Act of 1971 and advancements in aquaculture ensured that all was not lost. Today, organizations devoted to the restoration of oyster beds, including the Billion Oyster Project in New York Harbor and the Puget Sound Restoration Fund in Washington state, have encouraged the growth of oyster farming throughout the country. East Coast oyster production has doubled in the last five years, according to Robert Rheault, executive director of the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association. On the West Coast, Margaret Pilaro Barrette, executive director of the Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers

Association, measures the rebound via “increased availability, an uptick in the opening of oyster bars and the establishment of oyster festivals across the country.” Even Gulf Coast production is slowly recovering from the 2010 BP oil spill, due to efforts from groups such as the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana.

Two recent books chart the oyster’s resounding comeback and provide guidance to diners facing down an embarrassment of bivalves. In “Oysters: A Celebration in the Raw” (Abbeville Press), chef Jeremy Sewall and journalist Marion Lear Swaybill present historical anecdotes and plenty of quotable factoids, plus information on growing cycles and growers, and tasting notes on 54 varieties.

“When I moved back to Boston 12 years ago from the Bay Area, a handful of places served raw oysters,” said Mr. Sewall, who is chef and co-owner of the grower-run Island Creek Oyster Bars in Boston and Burlington, Mass. “Now you can find oysters everywhere from a humble pub to the finest dining establishment. It’s as much a menu fixture as the Caesar salad.”

In “The Essential Oyster: A Salty Appreciation of Taste and Temptation” (Bloomsbury), author Rowan Jacobsen focuses on “the romance and personalities of oysters and oyster farmers.” Mr. Jacobsen, who first tackled the topic nearly a decade ago in “A Geography of Oysters,” said the evolving culture surrounding the oyster propelled him to write a second book. In this one he tells the stories of nearly 150 oyster varieties with a focus on regions and growers.

He attributes the oyster’s comeback in part to a generation of diners who are not only interested in what he calls “the good food movement” but also crave tactile experiences in an increasingly digitized world. “The comeback of the oyster screams authenticity and non-digitality,” he said. “They are real and natural, and nothing brings the wild world to your plate like an oyster.”

Poring over the books was a little like belying up to the oyster bar with the two writers. So, I thought, why not make that happen in real time? At Manhattan’s Grand Central Oyster Bar and Brooklyn’s Maison Premiere, Mr. Sewall and Mr. Jacobsen, respectively, showed me how it’s done, selecting some favorites from two of the country’s best (and most detailed) lists. Their erudite annotations are included at right—just a taste of what their books offer the would-be oyster aficionado.

Hama Hama
WASHINGTON STATE
Clean, crisp, herbaceous. “In the spring, Hama Hama tend to be sweeter; in the winter, brinier. In both seasons, the oysters have a light cucumber/melon finish.” —J.S.

Belon Wild
MAINE
Powerfully savory and metallic. “I get excited about anything wild, as most of the oysters we eat are farmed. I always go for the wild oyster on a menu, if there is one.” —J.S.

Kumamoto
BRITISH COLUMBIA
Sweet, melony, firm, meaty. “In general, West Coast oysters have a meatier quality because of their deep, round cup.” —J.S.

GCOB Blue Point XL
CONNECTICUT
Mild, medium briny; from Grand Central Oyster Bar’s own beds. “When you get over 4 inches on an East Coast oyster, that’s considered extra large.” —J.S.

Malpeque
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND
Tender meat, balance of briny and sweet. “There should be red sand in the crevices of the shell. That’s how you know it’s a true Malpeque.” —R.J.

Barnstable
MASSACHUSETTS
Fat, sweet, complex, clean-tasting. “Wellfleets get all the attention, but I think Barnstable is the best-kept secret in Massachusetts.” —R.J.

Sunken Meadow Gem
MASSACHUSETTS
Boldly oceanic, quite briny, with seaweed notes. “Oysters from the Northeast Cape are becoming more and more consistent [in quality].” —R.J.

Shooting Point Salt
VIRGINIA
Plump and succulent, sweet and buttery, with a bracing blast of brine. “Virginia has more state support and more new growers than anywhere else.” —R.J.

Pemaquid
MAINE
Big, briny, briny. “We’re seeing oyster farms pop up in Maine like crazy. These Pemaquids tend to be plump, crisp and salty with an earthy finish.” —J.S.

Moonstone
RHODE ISLAND
Rich, beefy, flinty, with a deep and distinctive striped shell. “Beautiful oyster from a major fishing town in the bay. They tend to be very salty, like a broth.” —R.J.

Copps Island
CONNECTICUT
Meaty and bold, with a mineral finish. “One of the best out of Connecticut. Usually available year round, they change in flavor slightly with the seasons.” —J.S.

SLURP’S UP // TASTING NOTES FROM OYSTER EXPERTS JEREMY SEWALL AND ROWAN JACOBSEN

Just as wines have terroir, oysters have “merroir”—the word for the ways environment shapes flavor. Variables such as water temperature, salinity and tides determine if an oyster is plump, for instance, or firm, or salty. Busy raw bars like the ones at Grand Central and Maison Premiere have direct relationships with growers and distributors; high turnover tends to equate with freshness. And the closer to the source, the better. According to Mr. Sewall, “When you’re sitting at an oyster bar on the water and it’s pulled out and shucked right in front of you, that is the best oyster you’re ever going to have.”

BRIAN HARRING FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL