

## INTRODUCTION

**I WAS TWELVE** years old when I discovered that raw oysters were the best food on earth and not, as I had assumed, the most disgusting. After a day spent bodysurfing the big breakers out beyond the sandbar at New Smyrna Beach, Florida, my family ducked, sunburned and salt-encrusted, into Stormy's—a real bar. While my mother sidled away toward the safety of some mozzarella sticks, and my younger brothers stared at me with “You're going to put *what* in your mouth?” faces, I climbed onto a barstool next to my father, lifted to my mouth an oyster on the half-shell, slurped it in, gave a few halfhearted chews, and left childhood behind.

I matched my dad, oyster for oyster, through a couple of dozen that day. The first had been a dare, no question, and the second was to prove that the first wasn't a fluke, but I ate the third because there was something vital about the experience that I didn't quite understand but wanted to experience again, and I ate the fourth one because I couldn't stop.

Dad and I killed a lot of oysters back then. They were a dime apiece during happy hour at Stormy's. They weren't even especially good oysters, I know now—likely bought on the cheap from some fetid Gulf Coast backwater—but they were my initiation into another way of eating. In an America where we rarely ate recognizable creatures, oysters were the real deal, unadorned and *live*. This food didn't come to you prepped, cooked, and otherwise altered to make it as pleasing and unthreatening as possible. You had to leave your familiar surroundings, cross the cultural bridge, and risk the wild world.

Then there was the taste. Oysters taste like the sea. This fundamental truth has been pointed out enough times that it is easy to forget

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how extraordinary it is. *Oysters taste like the sea*. No other food does. Not lobsters, not saltwater fish, not scallops or clams or even kelp. Beef tastes meaty, milk tastes creamy, but the comparison for oysters is not a taste or another food but always a place. And a place—the seacoast—for which many of us have romantic associations. From oysters I learned that what’s important about good food is not just what it gives you, but where it can take you.

The next step in my oyster odyssey was easy. South of New Smyrna Beach is Canaveral National Seashore, 220 square miles of wilderness surrounding the Kennedy Space Center. The Atlantic flows through Ponce Inlet and into Mosquito Lagoon, an immense estuary protected by Canaveral’s mass. I used to canoe there a lot, amid miles of flat green water and egrets and palm trees and marsh—and the occasional column of fire from a NASA launch. And it was there that I noticed the “rocks” sticking just above the water surface at low tide. Florida has no rocks—it’s sand, sand, sand—so these were worth investigating. They were beds of oysters, piled on top of each other, revealed at low tide and hidden again at high. I might as well have come across Spanish doubloons.

Soon I was bringing hammers and a plastic bucket, and returning in my canoe with more oysters than I could eat. Some I would whack off with a hammer and open on the spot, returning the empty shells to the lagoon. This was a revelation. No raw bar required! Those oysters took me out of the suburbs and into a relationship unchanged since prehistory. Was I a Florida eighth-grader in an Ocean Pacific T-shirt or a Timucuan Indian boy cruising the coast? You couldn’t have told from my meal.

When I think back on those oysters, I’m first and foremost pleased that I’m not dead. Those were risky oysters. *Vibrio vulnificus*, a parasite that infects oysters and is responsible for a few deaths a year, lives only in warm water. Stick to coldwater northern oysters and your risk is virtually nonexistent. I’ll bet the water in my lagoon was 80 degrees Fahrenheit.

I didn’t harvest another oyster myself for twenty-five years. That one was in Maine, about as far from my warm Florida oysters as I could get. On the frigid shore of the Damariscotta River, I pulled up a thick-

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shelled oyster, held it awkwardly against my thigh, pried it open with a knife, cut its adductor muscle, and dumped it into my mouth. The meat was cool, briny, and brimming with life. I felt full of well-being and deeply connected to the earth—as well I should have. A mile up the river inlet, a two-thousand-year-old shell midden bore testament that humans had been connecting to the earth in just this spot, in just this way, for a long, long time.

My Damariscotta oyster belonged to the exact same species—Eastern (*Crassostrea virginica*)—as the Mosquito Lagoon oyster I'd eaten a quarter-century earlier in Florida, but it couldn't have tasted more different. Where the Florida oyster tasted a bit muddy and soft, the Maine oyster was fresh, firm, and briny as all get-out. It tasted like, well, Maine. And it drove home a point that is central to this book: More than any other food, oysters taste like the place they come from. Oysters are creatures of bays and tidal pools and river inlets, of places where marine and terrestrial communities collide. While they are creatures of the sea, they draw their uniqueness from the land and how it affects their home waters. They have a *somewhereness* to them, like great wines, and in a mass-produced society where most foods don't seem to be from *anywhere*, this makes them special. You can't look at a grape and tell that it's from northern Chile. You can't taste a supermarket rib-eye and say, "Ah, yes, the grasslands of Wyoming." But with an oyster, you can sometimes pinpoint its home simply by looking at it. With a little practice, you can often tell by tasting it. Think of an oyster as a lens, its concave shell focusing everything that is unique about a particular body of water into a morsel of flesh. That's why not only do Florida oysters and Maine oysters taste different, but oysters in one Maine bay taste different from oysters in the next.

The wine term for this is *terroir*, and you'll see it a lot in this book. On one hand, it makes perfect sense to speak of *terroir* with oysters, which exhibit their provenance so precisely. Yet, taken literally, it makes no sense at all. *Terroir*, after all, refers to terra firma, and oysters' terra isn't very firma. But it's a term already familiar to most readers, and speaking of *meroir* would get you laughed out of most restaurants, so *terroir* it is.

So closely is an oyster's flavor tied to its location that oysters are

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traditionally named for the place they come from. The East and Gulf Coasts, for example, have only one native species of oyster, Eastern, but it goes by many monikers: Pemaquid, Wellfleet, Chincoteague, Malpeque, and Cape Breton, to name just a few. On the West Coast, California's Tomales Bays, Washington State's Hama Hamas, and British Columbia's Fanny Bays are all Pacific oysters (*Crassostrea gigas*), yet all look and taste different.

This emphasis on provenance is similar to that for European wines. Almost all white Burgundies, for example, are made from the Chardonnay grape, yet a Meursault tastes nothing like a Chablis or a Pouilly-Fuissé. Place is paramount, and the names of both wines and oysters reflect that. Five species of oysters are found in North America, but there are hundreds of appellations. Each appellation produces oysters with distinct characteristics, due to the bay's temperature, salinity, algae, tides, minerals, and many other factors, including the genetics of each bay's population, the age of the oysters at harvest, and the techniques used to cultivate them. Some oysters are insipid, while others dazzle. Learning the geography of all these appellations takes a while, but that's part of the fun. With a little experience, and, I hope, the help of this book, you will soon be navigating oyster lists like an old pro.

It takes great habitat to make great oysters, so when you taste a really superb one, you can take pleasure in knowing that you are tasting the untamed health and beauty of nature. An oyster doesn't taste good because of a food scientist's lecithin; it doesn't taste good because of a winemaker's oak chips; it doesn't taste good because of the chef's sauce. An oyster tastes good because at one spot in the natural world, something went right. A great oyster is an estuary flashing a thumbs-up sign.

Oysters are not mere avatars of their environment, either. They help create it. Scientists refer to oysters as *ecosystem engineers* because they are the key to maintaining estuaries with stable bottomland, clear water, and a flourishing web of life. Supporting sustainable oyster production helps ensure the continuation of that community.

If you only recently started thinking seriously about oysters, you are not alone. We are entering an oyster renaissance in North America. From

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Canada to Mexico, from Boston to San Francisco, and even places far from any coast, people are rediscovering that nothing sets the tone for a splendid evening better than a dozen oysters.

It's startling how fast this has happened. Consider Taylor Shellfish, one of the oldest and largest oyster growers on the West Coast. A mere twenty years ago, Taylor sold virtually no oysters in the shell. The entire market was shucked meats. Oysters were something you bought in a can and then fried or stewed. Today, about 75 percent of the oysters Taylor grows are sold live. People no longer want generic oysters in a tub. They want oysters with somewhere-ness.

With oyster bars springing up on every corner of every metropolis, it's hard to remember that there was a time when most self-respecting chefs couldn't speak knowledgeably about the relative merits of Malpeques and Moonstones. When Tom Madsen of Snow Creek Oysters in Discovery Bay, Washington, started growing oysters in the mid-1980s, he was one of the first to concentrate on the half-shell trade. He went knocking on restaurant doors to try to convince restaurants to try serving oysters on the half-shell. The chef of the local fancy restaurant wasn't swayed. "I think it would look cool," he said, "but it seems like too much trouble." Why? "Well, because first I'd have to take some shells and wash them, then I'd have to take the oysters out of the bucket and put them in the shells." No, no, Madsen explained, he would deliver the oysters *in their own shells*. The chef looked at him, stunned.

Things have changed. Hundreds of varieties of oysters can be had in North America, *in their own shells*. Some are geographical neighbors and taste like it; others are stunningly individual. You may never get to know them all, but there are good reasons to try.

## WHY EAT OYSTERS?

Everybody has a first oyster, and it involves gathering courage, overruling one's instincts, and taking a point-of-no-return leap, like jumping into cold water. You psych yourself up, take the plunge, and afterward you pull yourself out and dry your prickly skin and feel sharp and clean

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and satisfied. Have you ever heard anyone wade out of the ocean and say, “Boy, I wish I hadn’t done that”? So it is with oysters. Once you start, you’ll be hooked. I can’t make you do it, but I can at least anticipate some of your objections:

**Oysters don’t have much taste.** They don’t taste like most of our food, it’s true. Much contemporary cooking pushes the envelope of sweeter, richer, spicier. Steak with blue cheese on top. Honey in the salad dressing. Wine concentrated to the edge of chewability. If you get used to food that is so desperately eager to please, your palate can become deadened for anything else. Most food is as obvious as a Vegas nightshow: lots of sparkle, lots of jiggle, requiring nothing from us but that we sit back and let it perform. A raw oyster was not designed for our pleasure. Appreciating it is more like catching a glimpse of a fox in the woods: The experience lasts only a moment but leaves us in a fleeting state of grace. Oysters are not easy or obvious, but few foods so exquisitely balance sweet, salty, savory, and mineral. Few foods so reward our efforts.

**Oysters are slimy.** Guilty as charged. But so are mangos. So is yogurt. In fact, some of the greatest pleasures in life are slimy. Most adults learn to thoroughly enjoy them. So it’s simply a question of appropriate slime. A slimy Happy Meal? Very bad. A slippery oyster? Very good. It’s the dry ones that are no fun.

**Oysters are high in cholesterol.** Not so. People used to think all shellfish were high in cholesterol. Now, with better technology for distinguishing cholesterol from other, healthy sterols, we know that only shrimp and squid are high in cholesterol. Oysters, in fact, are astoundingly healthy foods. Nature’s multivitamins, they boast an unmatched suite of minerals, vitamins, and omega-3 fatty acids. They are high in protein but low in saturated fat. And, with only about 10 calories per oyster, you’ll go broke eating them long before you gain a pound. Considering that you burn almost as many calories shucking oysters as you get from consuming them, they may be the perfect diet food.

**Aren’t oysters endangered?** Wild oyster populations were decimated long ago. Those populations bottomed out in the 1970s, are now carefully managed, and today are creeping upward. But almost all the oysters you find on the half-shell are from oyster farms, which are

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environmentally benign. The farms actually improve the water quality of their bays, and take pressure off wild stocks. Most environmental organizations put farmed oysters at the very top of their lists of sustainable seafood. See my chapter “Sustainability and the Environment: The Case for Oyster Aquaculture” for more information about this.

**Raw oysters aren't safe.** Only if you do several stupid things, like eat the wrong kind of oyster from the wrong supplier at the wrong time of year. The microorganisms that hitchhike in oysters and cause people hardship thrive only in warm waters. A Gulf of Mexico oyster consumed in the summer is risky; a Northern oyster from cold fall waters is safe. On top of that, everything from the health of shellfish beds to the temperature at which oysters are shipped and stored (usually around 40 degrees Fahrenheit) is regulated by the FDA.

**Oysters are expensive.** They certainly are—if you get them in restaurants. They are a sensual splurge. But you can also order direct from growers and save considerably. As live animals go, oysters ship really well. Wherever you live, you can have oysters on your doorstep tomorrow. Better still, hit the road and spend a few days at the source, sampling the coast's oysters and chasing them down with cold local beer. A dozen Olympia oysters from the Olympia Oyster Company costs only five dollars, which may be the most fun you can have for five bucks *anywhere*.

**Will they overexcite my libido?** Take your chances.

**What about that whole *live thing*?** We may as well tackle that issue right away. If an oyster's shell is clamped shut, the oyster is the one doing it. (Same goes for other shellfish.) Opening the shell by severing its adductor muscle doesn't always instantly kill it, though the writing is on the wall. Don't fret it. An oyster feels no pain and thinks no thoughts. It has no real brain, just a feeble cluster of ganglia. To an oyster, a housefly is a supergenius.

Pain is a nice evolutionary adaptation that encourages organisms to *get away* from the source of the pain—hot stove, grumpy bear, mother-in-law, whatever. It's a way of differentiating good feelings from bad feelings and acting accordingly. But an oyster can't get away. It has but one muscle and one choice in life: open shell or shut shell? If an oyster feels anything touch its gills other than water and plankton, it

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shuts reflexively. No mulling over the relative pros and cons of the sensation. In any case, oysters go dormant when temperatures drop to around 40 degrees—the temperature they are usually stored and served at. We can feel fairly confident that the short, happy life of a cocktail oyster ends in cold and blissful slumber.

Left in their natural environment, most oysters would be eaten by something; why shouldn't it be you? For all animals, life involves ingesting other life. That should be celebrated, and oysters are the perfect way to do it. You may not be ready to chase down a rabbit and kill it, but you can shuck an oyster, eat it, and get the primal thrill. It's like going native with training wheels.

Of course, you can also eat cooked oysters. You're still killing them, though your teeth aren't delivering the coup de grâce. For the anti-slime crowd, a few minutes of cooking will firm up an oyster's proteins and turn it into a food that acts, well, more like food. But oysters don't always cook well. When exposed to excessive heat, these most delicate and tender of mollusks lose everything that made them special. The vivacity of the living sea becomes brown, chewy, and dead. You certainly won't taste any *terroir* in an overcooked oyster. Many famous oyster dishes have evolved over time, most of them wretched. If you look carefully, you can find good ones in which the oysters are handled gently so their essence survives. A few of those dishes are in my recipe chapter. The rest of this book is concerned with raw oysters on the half-shell. That is where the fascination and the adventure lie.