

ALL ABOUT OYSTERS



Oysters During the R-less Months

The old adage (only eat oysters in months with an R) was good advice in the days when refrigeration was unreliable, but is not as relevant today.

It still applies, however, with respect to oysters that spawn in the shell, which tend to be thin and tasteless in the months in which they spawn (directing their energies, as is wont, to reproduction rather than self), and to situations in which warm waters prevail and encourage the growth of bacteria which make oysters not good to eat raw.

At the Embarcadero, we only serve oyster varieties from the cooler waters of the northern Atlantic and Pacific, with California oysters available in the wintertime and southern Pacific varieties available in the summertime. Canadian regulations strictly limit potentially unsafe shellfish with frequent testing, and Pacific varieties are unavailable in unusually warm summers. In these infrequent situations, only Atlantic varieties and cooked oysters are served.

Oysters have long been a favourite among connoisseurs of fine food, reputed to have health-giving and aphrodisiac qualities. Oysters were so prized by the Romans that they brought them from England, packing them in snow-covered barrels.

The nutritional value of oysters is well-known, with high levels vitamins and minerals, including calcium, iodine, iron, potassium, copper, and zinc. Modern science has credited the high levels of zinc in oysters with the aphrodisiac qualities that have been attributed to them, finding zinc to be a contributor to male fertility. More recent research identified amino acids in oysters that may contribute to the historical allure of oyster consumption for libido. The link with love has long been an integral part of oyster lore, from the birth of Aphrodite (i.e. Venus, from the sea on an oyster shell as depicted by Botticelli), observations on its resemblance to female parts, to the reputed daily fare of five dozen oysters consumed by Casanova to sustain virility.

The high mineral content in oysters is derived from the quantity of water that is filtered through an oyster as it feeds, which also imparts the unique regional flavours that oysters achieve from the specific areas in which they grow, apart from the differences due to the species. There are two major species of oysters readily available in Canada: the native Atlantic oyster (*Crassostrea Virginica*) and the Pacific oyster (*C. Gigas*), originally from Japan. Oysters from the two major species generally come from the respective coasts and are generally named for the area in which they have been harvested.

Other oysters, such as the Olympia (*Ostrea Lurida*), native to the North American west coast, and harvested to virtual extinction (now being cultivated but only infrequently available in Canada), the Belon (the European flat oyster, *O. Edulis*, named for its native French river of origin) and the Kumamoto (*C. Sikamea*, named for the Japanese prefecture in which it was first cultivated), are marketed as species and are generally not referred to by locale. We sometimes bring in a fifth species, the Rock Oyster (*Saccostrea Glomerata*), native to Australia and New Zealand, in the summertime.

The Taste of an Oyster

The subtle nuances in the taste of different oyster varieties can really only be discerned au naturel - raw with a squirt of lemon. Our Embarcadero relish has Asian roots of minced radish, soy sauce, sesame oil, garlic and lemon juice that is ideal for the oyster novice, as it provides a crunchy textured condiment to encourage fully savouring the flavour of the oyster, which cannot be enjoyed by simply swallowing the oyster as many first-timers may do. Hot sauce, horseradish and seafood cocktail sauce are also available to suit individual preferences and are supplied on request.

The dry, acidic nature of champagne and traditional method bubbly are the perfect accompaniment to oysters, as are crisp, dry whites - Sauvignon blancs from northern climates such as Canada, and New Zealand or the Loire Valley in France. Lager beers with a bitter character are also good complements to oysters, although some prefer the heavier taste of Guinness which has long been associated with European oysters.

Atlantic Oyster Varieties

Typical selection of oysters we bring in regularly, not all varieties are available at all times.

BeauSoleil

Neguac, New Brunswick

Suspension grown Atlantic oysters, plump, lightly salty, clean finish

St Simon

Shippagan, New Brunswick

Briny with a clean finish

Caraquet

Acadian Peninsula, New Brunswick

Wild oyster, sweet bitter aftertaste

Fire River

Richibucto, New Brunswick

Suspension grown, lightly salty, clean finish

Village Bay

Richibucto, New Brunswick

Suspension grown, lightly salty, clean finish

Malpeque

Malpeque Bay, PEI

The world famous Canadian oyster, salty with a slightly bitter lettuce-like flavour

Pacific Oyster Varieties

Typical selection of oysters we bring in regularly, not all varieties are available at all times.

Chef Creek

Baynes Sound, Vancouver Island
Salty-sweet flavour

Denman Island

Georgia Straight, BC

Effingham

Effingham Inlet, Barkley Sound, BC
Plump meat, briny with lettuce-like finish

Fanny Bay

Baynes Sound, British Columbia
Plump meat with clean salty finish

Gorge Inlet

Cortes Island, BC
Plump meat, mild metallic flavour

Kusshi

Baynes Sound, BC
Smooth round shell, sweet finish

Malaspina

Malaspina Bay, BC

Okeover Arm

Desolation Sound, BC
Sweet, fruity cucumber finish

Royal Miyagi

Cortes Island, BC
Mild, smooth texture, kiwi-like finish

Sinku

Sunshine Coast, BC
Sweet, fruity cucumber finish

Stellar Bay

Baynes Sound, British Columbia
Plump meat, lightly sweet finish

Summer Breeze

Baynes Sound south of Fanny Bay, BC
Plump meat, lightly salty with a clean finish

Summer Ice

Sunshine Coast, BC
Cultured in deep cold waters; sweet, firm texture, with a hint of cucumber

Penrose Bay

Desolation Sound, BC
Sweet, fruity cucumber finish

Westcoast Belon

Barkley Sound, Vancouver Island
This west coast version of the European flat oyster displays the typical robust and strong salt character, with a dry and metallic aftertaste.

Golden Mantle

Jervis Inlet, Sunshine Coast, BC
Sweet melon-like finish

Gigamoto

Baynes Sound, BC
A cross between the Kumamoto and the Pacific oyster, plump and firm, salty

Evening Cove

Nanaimo, BC
Sweet, fruity cucumber finish

Skookum

Puget Sound, Washington

Plump, firm meat with a sweet flavour and a mild, fruity finish

Rock Oyster

New Zealand

A distinct species native to Australia and New Zealand, this mild, sweet oyster has plump meat and firm texture.

Luna

Carlsbad, California

Delicate meat and crisp melon, with a salty cold finish

Olympia

Puget Sound, Washington

Native oyster, small deep cup, plump meat with a distinctive flavour

Hama Hama

Hood Canal, Washington State

Salty and mild with a fruity aftertaste

Kumamoto

Various locations on the US Pacific coast

Small deep-cupped, sweet plump meat, originally from the natural beds near the Japanese prefecture of Kumamoto, distinctly different from the typical west coast flavour

Hog Island

Tomales Bay, California