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Oysters: how to prepare and eat them

If you've never tried these delicious sea creatures, it's time to get your shuck, lemon and shallots in order...



With the UK's largest oyster festival recently wrapped in Falmouth, Cornwall, the UK oyster season is well underway. Falmouth is one the world's largest natural deep-water ports and is home to the world's only stock of wild oyster beds. It also has one of the last remaining traditional oyster fisheries in the world - its stocks are harvested by the age-old method of dredging using sails and hand-drawn punts.

2012 is the festival's 16th year and oyster-lovers from around the world travelled to Cornwall to celebrate and mark the start of the oyster dredging season. But why is this small mollusc so notable and more importantly, why do people either love or hate them? MSN Food endeavours to find out...

Which oysters are the best for eating?

Roman emperors are said to have paid their weight in gold for them and even today the oyster is associated with luxury and decadence. But it wasn't always so. In the early 19th century, it was a foodstuff associated with the poor, as it was only poorer folks who would scavenge for them in creeks and rivers.

There are two species of oysters eaten in the UK: the native (or flat oyster) and the pacific (or rock oyster). The pacific is the most widely cultured oyster in the world, as it is disease-resistant; it matures quickly (in just two to three years) and can be eaten all year round. However, this species has less substantial flesh than the native oyster.

The native oyster has a better reputation among gourmets and a heftier price. However, it's seasonal (October - March) and out of season it's not as flavoursome. It also takes longer to mature - six or seven years - which makes it more desirable. At one stage both species were overfished nearly to extinction but now they're protected by law and are more readily available.



Les Angel has been an oyster fisherman in Falmouth for over 40 years and believes that the native Fal oysters are the best in the world: "They're naturally sweeter than others due to the water they grow in. As they are like little filters, what goes in the water, goes in them. Their shells are smaller but they are plumper and juicier and of great quality."

If he catches any that are under 5cm, are abnormally shaped or have damaged shells, they're thrown back to protect stocks, making Falmouth oysters sustainable. Les goes on to say: "Oyster fishing is sustainable, we leave half the year for them to reproduce and grow; if we fished all year, there would be none left!"

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Are oysters really an aphrodisiac?

Legendary lover Casanova reputedly devoured 50 oysters every morning in the bath with his lady of the moment. He said they were a "spur to the spirit and to love", by which he may have meant that they boosted his libido. The oyster has long been thought of as an aphrodisiac, but this is not just an old wives' tale - there is some truth to the statement. Oysters contain a lot of zinc; if you have a zinc deficiency it can make sperm lazy, plus zinc aids in the production of testosterone. Recent research has also found that raw oysters contain a rare amino acid that stimulates the production of sex hormones.

Romance aside, oysters are a pretty healthy option - they're a valuable source of other minerals, such as iron, calcium and copper, plus vitamins A and B12, and they're low in cholesterol.

Another adage about oysters is that you're only safe to eat them in the months that contain the letter 'r' in their name. Again, there is some truth to this; native oysters spawn in the warm, summer months (between May and August), making them thin and unpalatably creamy. They're not dangerous to eat, just not very nice. Aficionados don't touch them until October when they've plumped back up again.

How should oysters be eaten?

The ongoing debate about whether one should swallow or chew an oyster has been rumbling on for hundreds of years, but what it comes down to is personal preference. Some say that you should tip them straight down your throat for a more sensory experience, but these days it's popular to chew, because you get to appreciate the flavour more.

They can be eaten in a variety of ways - raw, smoked, baked, fried or steamed. Most purists insist on eating them raw - just as they are or with some lemon juice, shallot vinegar or tabasco. Annie Sibert of My Fish Kitchen cookery school has a soft spot for Falmouth's native oysters. She says: "For me, they must be plain and simple native Falmouth oysters. There is no other way to eat them than by pushing them to the roof of your mouth, followed by one or two chews until the flavour explosion, then swallow with a sip of champagne."

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How do you shuck an oyster?

David Trewin, head chef and owner of Sapphire restaurant in Falmouth, tells us how to shuck an oyster:

1. Lay the oyster in the middle of a tea towel on a flat surface with the flat part of the shell facing upwards. Fold part of the tea towel over to cover the shell and hold it firmly on top.
2. For an aesthetically pleasing oyster, use an oyster knife to open the shell. The blade is blunt to reduce the risk of injury from the erratic shucking movement. Put the point of the oyster knife into the hinge of the shell.
3. Slowly and carefully, move the knife from side-to-side to open the shell.
4. Run the knife along the top of the flat shell, wiggling it slightly, until you reach the muscle that attaches the oyster to the shell.
5. Cut the muscle and lift the top of the shell.
6. Keep the shell and its contents as flat as possible to retain its natural juices. If eating raw, I usually make it easier for the customer and separate the oyster from the shell before serving by sliding the knife underneath.

Mark Puckey, head lecturer at Padstow Seafood School, says that when you open the shell the oyster should be juicy and plump and smell of the sea. He also says: "Do not clingfilm or store oysters in plastic bags while storing in the fridge as they will suffocate; instead place on a tray and cover with a damp tea towel."

If you love oysters then you need to be in Falmouth this October - the only thing you need to do now is decide whether you want to chew or swallow...