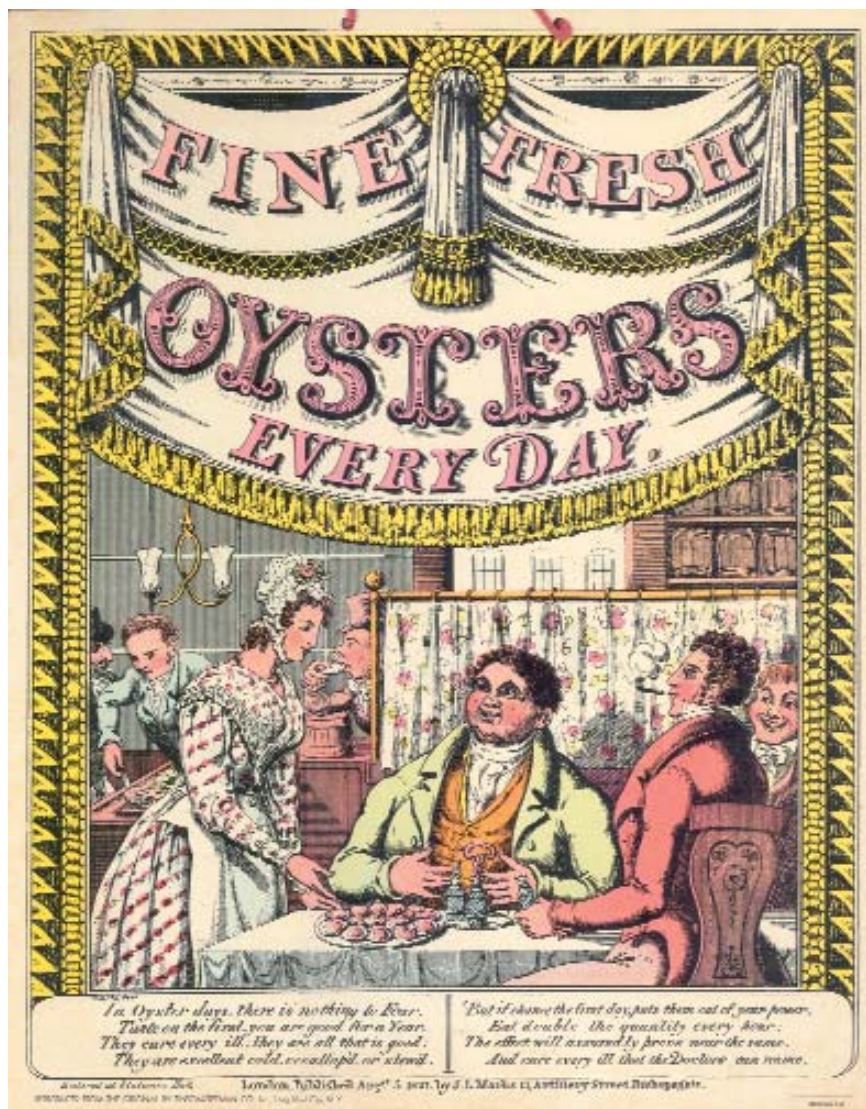


BORO FOODSHED

BY RACHEL WHARTON

OYSTER TOWN

History on the half shell



Real Brooklyn oysters—the ones that still live, forgotten, off our bays and curvy coastlines—must be a lonely bunch these days. Thanks to state rules forbidding us to eat them—ignored, it’s rumored, by the occasional rugged, iron-bellied soul—they’re largely left untouched. But they’re still out there in the chilly waters off Canarsie, in the brackish inlets of Jamaica Bay, and even in the Gowanus Canal, where the city’s tiny “oyster gardening program” tries to coax a few *Crassostrea virginica* to maturity, checking their growth once a month. So far, it’s been slow going—190 died in October, according to their most recent report—but they do have history on their side.

Those who read *The Big Oyster*, Mark Kurlansky’s 2006 book on the

considerable role bivalves played in building the Big Apple, might recall that in 1679 the Gowanus Bay was a prime site for what was then New York’s most lauded natural resource. It’s hard to shake one of Kurlansky’s particularly descriptive passages, in which a Dutch visitor describes oysters from Gowanus Bay—the canal came much later—as the country’s best: “They are large and full, some not less than a foot in length.”

That might not fit the definition of “delicious”—Kurlansky argues foot-long Brooklyn oysters really never did—but those of slurpable size were a certain delicacy. Back then, huge piles of shells, called “middens,” were still scattered throughout the city, left by the Lenape

Those were the days when oysters were a penny apiece in basement cellars along Flatbush Avenue, free like peanuts at the downtown bars, passed on silver platters in Clinton Avenue brownstones, and eaten on toast with cream at Gage and Tollner.

Indians who had since moved upstate. And new New Yorkers rich and poor wrote home lovingly about life on the half shell. Those 17th-century oysters were no doubt as bracingly, wonderfully briny as our Peconic Bays are today.

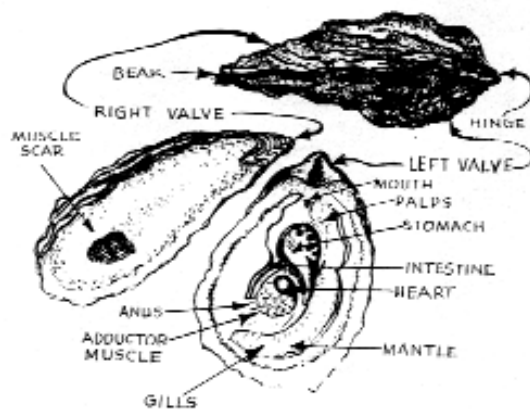
Now some folks love creamy Japanese Cumamotos or minerally French Belons, but New York oysters—those *Crassostrea virginica*—taste, well, like the briny, salty sea. And for pure oyster enjoyment, we'd argue that's exactly what you're looking for. Pry them open with an oyster knife (in a pinch try a flathead screwdriver) inserted just to the right of the hinge in an oyster laid flat-side-up and cup-side-down, then use a bit of torque to pop open the shell, cut it free and slide it back. The experience is like nothing else.

(And let's not overlook oysters' whoppingly high levels of zinc, the testosterone-pumping mineral said to be part of the lore of oysters' aphrodisiacal powers, along with its resemblance to labia—yum!—and the fact that unless you're cooking them, you're eating them alive.)

Actually, all East Coast oysters, whether from Long Island, Oyster Bay, Florida or Louisiana, are *Crassostrea virginica*, and variations in appearance and taste are just a function of local living conditions. Gulf oysters, for example, grow fatter faster and slightly sweeter thanks to warmer climes. This taste of place is what vintners and slow foodists have come to call “terroir,” or in this case, perhaps, “mer-oir,” and oysters are usually named for their home waters, too, although the much-banded-about moniker Blue Point, from Long Island, is hardly ever the real deal.¹

Speaking of myths, the one about months ending in R was likely spread because oysters may have spoiled in summer's heat, and because that's their spawning season. Back before modern oyster management, summer harvest prevented new oysters from forming, plus a spawning oyster is a little flabby and milder—which some people actually prefer.

Back in the 17th century, anyone could pluck plenty of fat, flavorful oysters from pretty much any waterway—back then still easily accessible—anytime they wanted. And that was still centuries before the city's real golden oyster empire era, roughly the 100 years between 1850 and 1950. Those were the days—think Diamond Jim, gilded lilies and



Horace Greeley, at least at the beginning—when oysters were everywhere: a penny apiece in basement cellars along Flatbush Avenue, free like today's peanuts at the downtown Brooklyn bars, passed on silver oyster platters in Clinton Avenue brownstones, and eaten by the rich on toast with cream at Gage and Tollner, Fulton Street's landmarked, gas-lamped, white-tableclothed restaurant famous for platters of Blue Points until just a few years back.

Indeed it was oyster madness everywhere. “The country was in the throes of an oyster cult,” wrote Waverly Root in his 1976 book *Food*.

“Oysters were eaten raw, baked, fried, fricasseed, in soup, in pies, in stuffings, and riding triumphantly on top of grilled steaks. Every coastal city had its specialized oyster houses, and peddlers hawked oysters in the street. Oyster houses in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore were plastered with signs reading ‘all the oysters you can eat for six cents.’”

“It was like having a hot dog,” Gregg Rivara, a Long Island oyster aquaculture specialist once told me. What he means is, everybody ate them. And millions each week, according to West Sayville's Maritime Museum, were transported by train from Long Island to the

Left: Shoveling fresh cultch onto oyster grounds on Long Island's Great South Bay.



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triple-decker oyster barges floating off the city, if not destined for London or Paris (European oysters were wiped out by around this time) or landlocked St. Louis.

By as early as the 1800s, factors like boat traffic (which kicks up too much mud and silt); oyster predators (like the aptly named oyster drill); overharvesting; and closures of beds thanks to

pollution or cholera² had driven the industry—though still booming—out to Long Island, east of the city’s limits. Even then, most oystermen had also given up the hunt for wild oysters, instead buying tiny babies, called “seed,”³ and “sowing” them in plots of ocean leased from the state. This technique goes back at least as far as ancient Rome.

But the process has come a long way since then—and by necessity. Even out off Long Island, oystermen still took too many from the waters, and diseases, dredging and weather patterns again sunk oyster populations to new lows. The industry was nearly decimated by 1950, when Frank M. Flower and Sons in Oyster Bay started raising the tiny mollusks in floating barges till they were old enough to resist disease. (The only extant company from the hundreds that operated in the 1800s, they still provide seed to modern oyster farmers.)

Today the Flowers’ oysters are dredged—which scoops up bivalves from the muddy bottoms, disturbing their home along the way—but now, thanks to Japanese techniques and state-supported research by people like Rivara, others are planting seed oysters in mesh bags or nets hanging from racks or long floating lines attached to the shore in safe brackish waters where they’re fed naturally by ocean water. In two to

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- Marlow & Sons: 81 Broadway, Williamsburg; 718-384-1441
- Blue Ribbon Bistro: 280 Fifth Avenue, Park Slope; 718-840-0408
- Brooklyn Fish Camp: 162 Fifth Avenue, Park Slope; 718-783-3264
- The Pearl Room: 8203 Third Avenue, Bay Ridge; 718-833-6666
- Flatbush Farm: 76-78 St. Marks Avenue, Park Slope; 718-622-3276

three years, when it’s time to eat these oysters, the oystermen (and women) just reel them in and ship them worldwide—or to, say, Marlow & Sons in Williamsburg. In fact, nearly all the Long Island oysters Brooklynites eat now are farmed—with the exception of the \$1 beauties proudly raked by Blue Moon Fish, on offer at the Grand Army Plaza Greenmarket.

And despite what you might think, oyster farming’s not a bad thing. Farmed oysters taste the same as those growing wild in the same waters, Steve Malinowski, a Long Island oyster grower who owns Fishers Island Oyster Farm with his wife, Sarah, told me. But they end up with a cleaner shell and a bigger cup, and the best can be selected for propagation, the way a tomato farmer saves seeds of prized heirlooms for next year’s planting.

In fact, while oyster harvests had dropped to less than 10,000 bushels in recent decades, New York landed just under 63,000 bushels in 2003, according to the State’s Department of Environmental Conservation, and the numbers are growing. And all this means cleaner water, too. Oysters have two gills that filter water for plankton and single-cell algae, which are passed to its stomach. They can filter nearly 50 gallons of water a day, Kurlansky says, boosting water quality wherever they’re found. In fact, that’s exactly why the oyster gardeners are out raising *Crassostrea* babies in city bays.

For eating, however, I recommend sticking with the ones from Long Island. □

FOOTNOTES

1. The real Blue Point oysters are named after a town on Long Island’s Great South Bay, where dozens of oyster companies made a living at the turn of the last century. But a hurricane in 1938 so increased the water’s salinity that real Blue Point oysters (by an old state law, bivalves designated as such must spend at least three months growing in the Great South Bay) haven’t been harvested in any numbers for nearly 80 years. Still the name is so valuable that oyster companies up and down the East Coast will fudge, calling their oysters bluepoints or Blue-Points. A recent state bill has sponsored in-depth research into shellfish aquaculture in the Great South Bay area, so Blue Points may one day return.

2. Because shellfish are filter feeders, they can contain poisonous elements or even human diseases from the waters they grow in. The key

way the National Shellfish Sanitation Program prevents this, according to the Long Island Sound Study (a collaborative group of state, federal and other organizations), is by testing and tracking shellfish waters across the state. If high levels of toxins (or things like fecal matter) are found, the beds are shut to harvesting until the water quality improves. The government also prevents harvesting shellfish for several days after local rainfall, which can dump contaminated runoff into their waters. After a few days, the rainfall in theory has been diluted and swept out to sea. Needless to say, all the shellfish beds in New York City are permanently closed.

3. Oyster seed is also called “spat,” as old oystermen referred to oysters “spitting it out.” Seed can swim (mature oysters can’t, once they attach to a surface and start to grow) and amazingly have a little shell, so each looks just like what it is: a microscopic, baby oyster.