

## The lore and lure of shellfish

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Hidden in their shells, concealing riches, meals, myths and mysteries, oysters and clams have inspired artists and writers, politicians and common folk, jewelers and scientists, as well as gluttons, throughout history.

The humble oyster is a favorite subject in Flemish and Dutch paintings of the 17th century. Golden Age painters such as Jan Davidsz de Heem in his Still Life with a Glass and Oysters, and Jan van de Velde in Still Life: A Goblet of Wine, Oysters and Lemons subtly connote the intimacy and pleasure associated with the delicacy of this mysterious edible creature. Jan Steen painted Girl Eating Oysters, showing a coquettish young woman sprinkling salt on an oyster. A picture within a picture, there is also a still life painting of oysters on the table in the foreground and more oysters being prepared in the kitchen.

In the late 1800's when shellfishing was at its peak, artists from Claude Manet to Paul Gaughan painted shellfish in a more practical fashion. American artists Winslow Homer in A Basket of Clams and John Singer Sargent in Oyster Gatherers of Cancale turned to everyday depictions.

Musicians, too, have conveyed the mystery and desirability of shellfish, whether used as a metaphor or as a way to earn a living. In Jimmy Buffet's song Oysters and Pearls and in Matt Duke's Oysters, the pearl represents the exceptional and beautiful woman. However, the popular Irish folksong tells of the commoner Molly Malone "selling cockles and mussels alive, alive, o!" along Dublin's streets.

In literature the oyster is mentioned by scribes ranging from William Shakespeare to Charles Dickens. Shakespeare offers one of the most famous references in Merry Wives of Windsor when Pistol tells Falstaff, "Why, then/the world's mine oyster/Which I with sword will open." Shakespeare also used an oyster-pearl analogy in As You Like It: "Rich honesty dwells like a miser, sir, in a poor house, as your Pearl in your fouled Oyster."

In The Pickwick Papers, Dickens reflects the 19th century view that lower classes ate

oysters because they were so abundant and inexpensive. Sam says to Mr. Pickwick: "the poorer a place is, the greater the call there seems to be for oysters. Look here, sir; here's a oyster stall to every half-dozen houses. The streets are lined with 'em."

Yet, this gastronomic delight has appealed to both the common man and to royalty. The oyster's importance was glorified in ancient Rome. Pliny the Elder reported that as early as the first century B.C., Roman soldiers brought back oysters from England to cultivate an abundant supply for Caesarean banquets.

When William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066, the Normans seized the shellfish grounds in Kent and in Essex. King William's guests would gorge themselves with oysters to such an extent that that they would go to a nearby room to empty their stomachs by artificial means, and then return to feast start all over again.

The oyster was also the central focus of the appetites of French kings. King Louis XIV was purported to eat at least 100 at each sitting and King Louis XVI stocked the oyster beds in Etretat to assure a plentiful supply for his regal fetes.

Eating 100 oysters in one sitting was not solely reserved for the kings of France. In the 18th and 19th centuries in America, abundance and low cost made the oyster available to the American working class. Gluttonous contests evolved and became a part of the Boston and New York City tavern scene. The tradition of oyster-eating contests has continued, in modified form, at Oyster Festivals, including the one in Norwalk.

Clams and oysters were sometimes served in quantities for U.S. politicians. More than 10,000 supporters attended a clambake as a political rally for General William Henry Harrison on July 4th, 1840, in Rhode Island. Abraham Lincoln served oysters at his campaign events and the menu for his Inauguration Ball on March 6, 1861, included oyster stew and pickled oysters.

In Norwalk, some of the early oystermen held political office and one, Captain Isaac Stevens, owner of the largest oyster company in Rowayton at the time with beds near Goose Island, was knick-named the "Goose Island Senator" during his run for the state senate.

The Eastern Oyster became so central to Connecticut's life style and economy that the legislature named it the state shellfish in 1989.

During the oyster industry's heyday, some local oystermen became prosperous and built lavish homes. A few months ago, a major section of the Rowayton neighborhood known as Oysterman's Row was named to the National Register of Historic Places, underscoring its importance and significance to the region's heritage.

Somehow through the ages, the oyster acquired the reputation of being an aphrodisiac. The word 'aphrodisiac' comes from Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, born from the foam of the sea and mother of Eros. No one is sure how this association

came about. Perhaps the connotation of the oyster as being an aphrodisiac arose from its history of being served at sensuous banquets. Perhaps it was derived from various ancient suppositions. The Romans believed that longevity and a better love life resulted from eating oysters. The Greek physician Galen suggested eating oysters as a remedy for a waning sexual appetite. Cleopatra served them in great numbers to Marc Anthony.

Many oyster stories surround the legendary seducer Jacques Casanova. He reportedly ate 50 oysters before embarking on an amorous escapade. Describing an erotic moment in his memoirs, he wrote, "I placed the shell on the edge of her lips and after a good deal of laughing, she sucked in the oyster, which she held between her lips. I instantly recovered it by placing my lips on hers."

In the 18th century, Don Juan ate oysters to strengthen his romantic endeavors.

Though many have doubted the power of the oyster as a love food, nutrition research has been investigating the possible effects of eating oysters on the male libido. Early researchers thought that oysters were rich in the cholesterol that aids in the manufacture of testosterone. However, subsequent studies have shown that oysters, an excellent source of protein and vitamins A, B1 and B2, B12, C, D and Omega-3 fatty acids, help keep cholesterol in check. Oysters are now included in low-cholesterol diets recommended by the National Heart and Lung Institute.

In fact, oysters have been found to be nutritious in many ways. Five or six oysters supply the daily recommendation for iron, copper, iodine, magnesium, calcium, manganese, selenium, phosphorous and zinc.

Recent attention has been focused on the amount of zinc found in oysters. The Office of Dietary Supplements, an agency of the National Institute of Health, asserts that oysters have a higher level of zinc per serving than any other food. Zinc has been deemed important for metabolizing testosterone and for a healthy prostate gland. However, a clear-cut causal connection between the zinc in oysters and the enhancement of one's amorous relationships has yet to be affirmed.

Eating oysters any time is good for you. A common misbelief is that oysters should not be eaten in months that have an "r" in them. This notion may have arisen from the long-ago regulation that prohibited oyster harvesting from May through August (the months without an "r"). This law was a conservation measure aimed at protecting oysters during the summer months when they are spawning. This myth may also have arisen before the days of refrigeration and speedy transport.

Despite the apparent benefits, some religious traditions forbid eating shellfish. Strict adherents to Jewish custom avoid shellfish, a stricture that dates back to the Old Testament.

But even before Biblical times, men have been eating oysters and discarding the shells into huge garbage piles. Archaeologists have unearthed heaps of shells, called kitchen

middens, that attest to the oyster's popularity with ancient civilizations throughout the world.

Along the coast of North America, mounds of shell fragments testify that the area provided bountiful shellfish for early humans. Carbon dating shows that some of the shells date back to 4,000 B.C. and core samples indicate that oysters eight to ten inches long were the norm.

One such heap of discarded shells was found in Norwalk. Oyster Shell Park, a recently redeveloped strip of land along the Norwalk River, was named in honor of the midden found across the river which had been called Oyster Shell Point by early colonists. The Native Americans who inhabited the area discarded their shells there.

Not all shells were discarded. One man's garbage is another man's treasure.

Native Americans made beads from shells, strung in strands about a fathom, or six feet long. Called wampum, it was used to honor treaties, historical events, and marriages, and also became a form of currency. In fact, Norwalk was bought in part by clamshells. In 1640, an agreement between the Native Americans of 'Norwalke' and Roger Ludlowe to sell the area to the colonists included eight fathoms of wampum in addition to coats, hatchets and other tools, tobacco and 'jewse-harpes'. In 1661, the Dutch bought Long Island for 60 fathoms of wampum plus flour, tobacco, beer, guns and hatchets.

Shells have long been used for jewelry. Archaeologists have found skeletons of Paleolithic man with jewelry and headdresses made from shells.

In more modern times, shells have also been carved into decorative cameos. During the Renaissance, mussels were used for cameo art. In 1902, the Spanish master cameo carver Francesco Bruno carved a shell cameo containing lines from Victor Hugo's classic *Les Misérables*.

In addition to art and currency, shells have been made into other products. Oyster shells have been used as cultch by the oyster industry. Crushed shells have been used in place of gravel for driveways and walkways. Shells have been powdered and added to cement and mortar, or used in aquaria and gardens to increase alkalinity. Mussel shells used as mulch have been found to hasten the ripening of grapes and citrus fruits. Crushed shells are sometimes added to chicken feed to aid in digestion of grains and seeds. Oyster shells are burned at high temperatures and reduced to an ash which is used in manufacturing steel, plaster wallboard, and to increase the elasticity of rubber.

One form of waste that starts as an irritating foreign substance in shellfish might end up as a prized jewel, a pearl. The pearl is the only gem produced by a living organism. Though a pearl may be created by any bivalve, it is usually found in an oyster. The oyster secretes a slick substance called nacre to coat the invasive obstacle over and over again for six to eight years. The end result -- a strand of natural pearls -- may be worth as much as one million dollars, according to certified gemologist appraiser Alan Kasson of Kasson

Jewelers in Southport. Due to the salinity and temperature of Long Island Sound waters, pearls in our local oysters are often unsymmetrical and commercially worthless. The most valuable natural pearls are from Pacific warm waters or from the Persian Gulf.

Man has attempted to help nature along in creating pearls. Long ago, in the 12th century, the Chinese would put tiny Buddha figures inside mussels, and within a few years the figures would be coated with an iridescent sheen. For the last hundred years, Kokichi Mikimoto in Japan has been credited with consistently and artificially stimulating the creation of marketable round pearls.

Today, cultured pearls have surpassed natural pearl production and have made a strand of pearls more affordable than a natural pearl necklace. A strand of fine cultured pearls might sell for \$10,000-20,000, Kasson asserts. These pearls are cultivated by inserting 6-8 mm beads made of shells into oysters or fresh water mussels which are then grown in bins hung off of docks for several years. "Cultured pearls look nearly identical to natural pearls; they need to be x-rayed or the strand holes examined by an expert to determine the difference," says Kasson.

Pearls have long been revered and have been mentioned in literature as well as in the Bible, Talmud and Koran. They have been found in Egyptian, Greek, Roman archaeological sites. At one point in history, pearls were only meant for royalty; the Romans forbade commoners from wearing them. Some cultures found them worthless. Aboriginal Australians hated biting into them and so they gave them to their children to play as marbles.

All in all, the oyster, the mussel and the clam like those found in our waters are fascinating creatures.

In The Hour's ten-part series on Shellfishing, we have explored culture and history, licensing and legalities, biology and conservation, commercial and sport harvesting, festivals, and dining. What's become clear from all this is that we have a wonderful resource in our "garden under the sea" that must be nurtured and protected in order to be enjoyed. It is amazing to know that our local area has been ... and remains ... an integral part of such a grand story.

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*Her "Raking It In" series discusses the benefits and challenges, techniques, ecology, and cultural heritage of shellfishing in Westport waters.*