



The flavor of an oyster depends upon several things. First, if it is fresh and sweet and healthy it will taste good, quite simply... good, that is, if the taster likes oysters. —M. F. K. Fisher, *Consider the Oyster*

A Lusty Bit of Nourishment

Oysters Are Good for You

Oysters are high in protein, low in fat, contain Omega-3 fatty acids, and offer essential minerals, especially iron, zinc, and copper, plus vitamin B12. There are many stories but no scientific papers asserting that oysters are an aphrodisiac. Maybe it's the zinc that led to the idea that they heighten sex appeal: zinc is linked to healing, fetal development, and a healthy sperm count.

Some people are afraid of eating raw shellfish, and health authorities advise people with compromised immune systems to be especially careful about eating any raw food. In general, however, an oyster grown in clean waters and properly handled after harvest is *not* a risky food to eat. Regulations help ensure the safety of oysters—the Department of Marine Fisheries and Wellfleet's Shellfish Constable check the waters regularly for bacteria, and shellfish cultivation is carefully monitored, as are the harvested shellfish. Make sure you buy your oysters from a reputable source, and make sure they are alive when you buy them: good oysters are heavy, never gaping open, and full of their delicious "liquor."

Handling Fresh Oysters

Oysters must be kept alive until they are ready to be prepared. Store them in the refrigerator, tightly packed in a breathable burlap bag, or stacked (curved side down so they rest in their liquor) under a damp towel or on a bed of seaweed in the refrigerator drawer. Do not immerse oysters in water: fresh water will kill them, and even in a bucket of sea water, they'll eventually use up all the available oxygen and die.

It is okay to rinse your oysters off in running water before you open them. Jasper White, a great New England chef and shellfish lover, recommends scrubbing the oysters at least an hour before you open them, then putting them back in the fridge (cup side down) for an hour or so to allow them to relax. He swears it makes the oysters easier to shuck.

The Best Way to Eat an Oyster

"There are three kinds of oyster-eaters," says food writer M. F. K. Fisher. The "loose-minded sports," who enjoy them either raw or cooked, she notes, probably have the most fun. "The fanatical believers in the power of heat," she says, may be trying to cover up "a flaccid, moping, debauched mollusk...for even a tinned steamed Japanese bastard from the coast of Oregon can be in good spirits when he's well dressed." She seems to admire those who believe that "a perfect oyster, healthy, of fine flavor, plucked from its chill bed and brought to the plate unwatered and unseasoned, is more delicious than any of its modifications."

Wellfleet SPAT (Shellfish Promotion and Tasting) has produced its first cookbook, *The Joy of Shucking*, with recipes contributed by great Wellfleet cooks, shellfishermen, and oyster- and clam-lovers bound to satisfy all kinds of oyster-eaters. Limited numbers of this cookbook are still available. To order a copy or reprint Wellfleet oyster and clam recipes, please contact Michele Insley at 508.360.7227 or michele@wellfleetoysterfest.org

Sources: "The Nutritional Value of Shellfish," by Dr. Faye M. Dong, School of Aquatic and Fishery Science, University of Washington, Seattle, for the Aquaculture Network Information Center (aquanic.org); Massachusetts Aquaculture Association (massaqua.org); *Jasper White's Cooking from New England* (Biscuit Books, Copyright 1998 by Jasper White), and *Consider the Oyster*, by M. F. K. Fisher (North Point Press, 1988; original edition, 1941).