

1941

# *Consider The Oyster*

FOR DILLWYN PARRISH



*He was a bold man that first eat  
an oyster.*

*—Polite Conversation  
Jonathan Swift*

## *Love and Death Among the Molluscs*

*. . . Secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.*

—*A Christmas Carol*, CHARLES DICKENS

AN OYSTER leads a dreadful but exciting life.

Indeed, his chance to live at all is slim, and if he should survive the arrows of his own outrageous fortune and in the two weeks of his carefree youth find a clean smooth place to fix on, the years afterwards are full of stress, passion, and danger.

He—but why make him a he, except for clarity? Almost any normal oyster never knows from one year to the next whether he is he or she, and may start at any moment, after the first year, to lay eggs where before he spent his sexual energies in being exceptionally masculine. If he is a she, her energies are equally feminine, so that in a single summer, if all goes well, and the temperature of the water is somewhere around or above seventy degrees, she may spawn several hundred million eggs, fifteen to one hundred million at a time, with commendable pride.

American oysters differ as much as American people, so that the Atlantic Coast inhabitants spend their childhood and adolescence floating free and unprotected with the tides, conceived far from their mothers and their fathers too by milt let loose in the water near the eggs, while the Western oysters lie within special brood-chambers of the maternal shell, inseminated and secure, until they are some two weeks old. The Easterners seem more daring.

A little oyster is born, then, in the water. At first, about five to ten hours after he and at least a few hundred thousand of his

mother's eggs have been fertilized by his potent and unknown sire, he is merely a larva. He is small, but he is free-swimming . . . and he swims thus freely for about two weeks, wherever the tides and his peculiar whims may lead him. He is called a spat.

It is to be hoped, sentimentally at least, that the spat—*our* spat—enjoys himself. Those two weeks are his one taste of vagabondage, of devil-may-care free roaming. And even they are not quite free, for during all his youth he is busy growing a strong foot and a large supply of sticky cement-like stuff. If he thought, he might wonder why.

The two weeks up, he suddenly attaches himself to the first clean hard object he bumps into. His fifty million brothers who have not been eaten by fish may or may not bump into anything clean and hard, and those who do not, die. But our spat has been lucky, and in great good spirits he clamps himself firmly to his home, probably forever. He is by now about one-seventy-fifth of an inch long, whatever that may be . . . and he is an oyster.

Since he is an Easterner, a Chincoteague or a Lynnhaven maybe, he has found a pleasant, moderately salty bottom, where the tides wash regularly and there is no filth to pollute him and no sand to choke him.

There he rests, tied firmly by his left foot, which seems to have become a valve in the immutable way of all oyster feet. He devotes himself to drinking, and rapidly develops an envious capacity, so that in good weather, when the temperature stays near seventy-eight degrees, he can easily handle twenty-six or -seven quarts an hour. He manages better than most creatures to combine business with pleasure, and from this stream of water that passes through his gills he strains out all the delicious little diatoms and peridia that are his food.

His home—we are speaking now of domesticated oysters—is a wire bag full of old shells, or perhaps a cement-coated pole planted by a wily oyster-farmer. Or perhaps it is what the government describes winningly as “a particularly efficient collector,” which is made from an egg-crate partition coated with a mixture of lime and cement.

Whatever the anchorage (and I hope, sentimentally again, that it is at least another shell, since because he is an Easterner our little spat can never know the esthetic pleasure of finding a bamboo stick

in Japan, nor a hollow tile laid out especially for him in France or Portugal), whatever the anchorage, spat-dom is over and done with. The two fine free-swimming weeks are forever gone, maturity with all its cares has come, and an oyster, according to Richard Sheridan's *Critic*, may be crossed in love.

For about a year this oyster—*our* oyster—is a male, fertilizing a few hundred thousand eggs as best he can without ever knowing whether they swim by or not. Then one day, maternal longings surge between his two valves in his cold guts and gills and all his crinkly fringes. Necessity, that well-known mother, makes him one. He is a she.

From then on she, with occasional vacations of being masculine just to keep her hand in, bears her millions yearly. She is in the full bloom of womanhood when she is about seven.

She is a fine plump figure of an oyster, plumper still in the summer when the season and her instincts get the better of her. She has traveled some, thanks to cupidinous farmers who have subjected her to this tide and that, this bed and that, for their own mean ends. She has grown into a gray-white oval shape, with shades of green or ocher or black in her gills and a rudimentary brain in the forepart of her blind deaf body. She can feel shadows as well as the urgency of milt, and her delicate muscles know danger and pull shut her shells with firmness.

Danger is everywhere for her, and extermination lurks. (How do we know with what pains? How can we tell or not tell the sufferings of an oyster? There is a brain . . .) She is the prey of many enemies, and must lie immobile as a fungus while the starfish sucks her and the worm bores.

She has eight enemies, not counting man who is the greatest, since he protects her from the others only to eat her himself.

The first enemy is the starfish, which floats hungrily in all the Eastern tides and at last wraps arms about the oyster like a hideous lover and forces its shells apart steadily and then thrusts his stomach into it and digests it. The picture is ugly. The oyster is left bare as any empty shell, and the starfish floats on, hungry still. (Men try to catch it with things called star-mops.)

The second enemy, almost as dangerous, is a kind of snail called a screw-borer, or an oyster drill. It bores wee round holes in the shells, and apparently worries the poor mollusc enough to make

men invent traps for it: wire bags baited with seed-oysters catch it, but none too efficiently, since it remains a menace.

Then there is a boring sponge. It makes tiny tunnels all through the shell like honeycomb, until an oyster becomes thin and weak from trying to stop up all the holes, and then is often smothered by the sponge from the outside, so that you know what Louisa May Alcott meant when she wrote, "Now I am beginning to live a little, and feel less like a sick oyster at low tide."

There are wafers, or leeches, and "Black Drums." And mussels too will smother oysters or starve them by coming to stay on their shells and eating all their food. Out on the Pacific Coast, slipper shells, which are somewhat fancily called *Crepidula fornicata*, will go the mussels one better. And even ducks, flying here and there as ducks must, land long enough to make themselves a disastrously good meal occasionally on an oyster-bed.

Life is hard, we say. An oyster's life is worse. She lives motionless, soundless, her own cold ugly shape her only dissipation, and if she escapes the menace of duck-slipper-mussel-Black-Drum-leech-sponge-borer-starfish, it is for man to eat, because of man's own hunger.

Men have enjoyed eating oysters since they were not much more than monkeys, according to the kitchen middens they have left behind them. And thus, in their own one-minded way, they have spent time and thought and money on the problems of how to protect oysters from the suckers and the borers and the starvers, until now it is comparatively easy to eat this two-valved mollusc anywhere, without thought of the dangers it has run in its few years. Its chilly, delicate gray body slips into a stew-pan or under a broiler or alive down a red throat, and it is done. Its life has been thoughtless but no less full of danger, and now that it is over we are perhaps the better for it.

## A Supper to Sleep On

*Oysters are very unsatisfactory food for labouring men, but will do for the sedentary, and for a supper to sleep on.*

—*The Philosophy of Eating*, A. J. BELLOWS, 1870

THERE are several different kinds of stews. A stew can be a sweat or a welter in hot close atmosphere or, according to the English dictionaries, a swot. It can be a tank or pond for storing live fish. It can be a brothel.

It can be something cooked by long simmering in a closed vessel with little liquid in it. And there are probably several other things a stew can be, but even the American lexicographers seem ignorant of one of the best; have they never heard of an oyster stew?

Is it possible that they never knew, when they were children, the cozy pleasure of Sunday night supper in wintertime, when crackers and the biggest tureen of steaming buttery creamy oyster stew stood on the table, and were plenty?

Is it possible that when they grew somewhat older, those benighted men never went to Doylestown in Pennsylvania to get married or something, and thus never sat voluptuously at the Inn's dim oyster bar while their stew was flicked together before them in two or three little copper pans?

Is it possible that, sometime after the first joys of maturity and before they grew old enough to write dictionaries, those men never sat with a few friends and compared, solemnly and delightfully, their various methods of making oyster stews themselves?

It is possible, poor souls, and it is even probable, for how else could they print their sweeping statements about "long simmering in a closed vessel with little liquid" and not at least add "*except oyster stew*"?

Even a child knows as much if he has ever watched, a few times in his early winters, the simple making of his Sunday supper. He remembers the recipe too, partly because it is so simple and partly because no matter how long he lives afterwards, its recollection will add to what well-being he has or perhaps may once have had.

In spite of its simplicity, oyster stew has several formulae, or rather methods of putting together, since the ingredients are almost constant. Rich milk, butter, salt, pepper, and of course, oysters, make up every recipe I ever heard . . . except one . . . but the way these things are blended is the cause for long arguments and comparisons and even amicable differences among old friends.

Some insist that the oysters should be sizzled in the butter until they are curled, and then added to the hot milk. Others say they should be heated to boiling in their own juice, and that the boiling milk and the butter should be poured over them. Others say . . . But here is a sample of the variety of recipes which families and cookbooks have produced:

### OYSTER STEW<sup>1</sup>

1 quart oysters	4 tablespoons butter
2 cups oyster liquor	celery salt
2 cups heavy cream	pepper

Bring one cup of the oyster liquor to a boil and when it has cooked for 5 minutes skim off the top, which will be foamy. Add the cream, butter, and seasoning to taste. Cook the oysters in the other cup of liquor until the edges curl (about 5 minutes), strain and add to the cream. Serve immediately.

The use of celery salt in this recipe is probably less a regional custom than a trick used by one enthusiastic family for so long that it can almost be called "New England" now. It is like the odd but excellent amount of paprika slapped into the next rule by the energetic Browns in their *Country Cook Book*:

<sup>1</sup> New England Cook Book, Culinary Arts Press, Reading, Pennsylvania, 1936. 15¢.

### OYSTER STEW<sup>2</sup>

Rinse a stewpan and put it on the fire without drying, so the milk won't stick. Dump in one quart of milk and 1 dozen oysters with their liquor and plenty of salt. Cook very slowly, without boiling of course, and give an occasional light stir to see how the oysters are plumping out. Just before their edges begin to curl, dump in  $\frac{1}{8}$  pound of sweet butter and at least 2 tablespoons of paprika. More paprika won't hurt, but will give a richer hue to the stew, and make you wish you'd made twice as much. Swirl the paprika and melted butter around to make an attractive, mottled, topping and dish it out the second the edges begin to curl. If cooked any longer, the oysters will be hard.

The only stew I ever heard of made without either cream or milk, was from three gentle sisters. They spoke sadly at first, and then with that kind of quiet inner mirth that rises always in members of a family who have lived together for several decades, when they begin unexpectedly to remember things. These three sisters sat in the hot California light under a eucalyptus tree, and laughed at last in spite of all the things in between, as they recalled the way they always ate oyster stew when they were children in New Hampshire.

It was a strange stew, and could not have been as handsome as one made with cream, but it was even better, the sisters murmured with politeness but a kind of stubborn sensuality. It had a stronger, finer smell, they said . . . and it tasted purer, more completely oyster.

Their mother melted a good nubbin of fresh butter in a pan. In another pan she put the oysters, a dozen or so for everyone, with all their juices and about a cupful more of water for each dozen. She brought the water with the oysters in it just to the boil, so that the oysters began to think of curling without really getting at it, and then quickly skimmed them off and into a hot tureen. She brought the water to the boil again, and threw in pepper and salt. Then she poured the hot butter over the oysters, and the hot broth over all, and the three sisters and their other sisters and brothers and grandparents ate it steaming from the tureen, with butter crackers.

(And here is a recipe for butter crackers, probably much like the

<sup>2</sup> Brown's Country Cook Book, Farrar and Rinehart, New York, 1937.

ones eaten, those Sunday nights long ago, by the three gentle sisters. It is from *Common Sense in the Household*,<sup>3</sup> and is as far from packaged U-No-Snaps and all our cellophane conformity as 1870 is from blitzkriegs:

### BUTTER CRACKERS

1 quart of flour	1 saltspoonful salt
3 tablespoonfuls butter	
½ teaspoon soda, dissolved in hot water	2 cups sweet milk

Rub the butter into the flour, or, what is better, cut it up with a knife or chopper, as you do in pastry; add the salt, milk, soda, mixing well. Work into a ball, lay upon a floured board, and beat with the rolling-pin half an hour, turning and shifting the mass often. Roll into an even sheet, a quarter of an inch thick, or less, prick deeply with a fork, and bake hard in a moderate oven. Hang them up in a muslin bag in the kitchen for two days to dry.

(This is something you will probably never taste in your life, unless you are stubborn or have a crazy cook, but it is nice to know that there still live people who have eaten something other than the light dead things we call oyster crackers with their stews.)

Probably the best stew I ever ate was at the Doylestown Inn. It may have been so good because I was escaped from a long ride, cold enough to make my eyeballs hurt. Maybe it was because I was pleased by the narrow dark room and the Dutch farmers sitting quietly at the bar and the smell of the place, clean and masculine. I was happy to be there for those reasons and because I had long waited for the day, eager from tales I had heard. So the stew tasted better than any I had ever eaten, because of all that and because it was so good anyway.

It was made in three copper saucpans, as I remember, by a thin young-old man who said nonchalantly that oyster stews in Dublin were pretty good too, but couldn't touch his, of course. He strolled up and down the narrow gangplank behind the counter, and talked and put a platter of crackers and a hideous glass shaker of dark sherry in front of me, and all the time kept his eyes on the three pans, shaking them and pouring as he went.

<sup>3</sup> By Marion Harland, Scribner Armstrong and Company, New York, 1873.

In the smallest he put some butter from a big cool pat, and let it froth up once and then rest at the back of the stove. In the next he put oysters, fresh from their shells which he tossed into a bin under the counter. In the third, which was deeper and more a real saucpan than a kind of skillet, like the others, he put about a pint of milk and let it heat until it shivered on top. He kept his eye sharply on all three, so that the butter and the oysters and the milk never got beyond him.

As soon as the butter had frothed and settled he poured it quickly over the oysters and started skimming them around and around in the pan, like an old woman making an omelette at Mont Saint-Michel. In about one minute, not three or even five as so many recipes will say, he whiffed them past his questioning nose and then into the hot milk, which was just on the point of steaming. He put in red pepper and salt in a flash, and before I realized it the oyster stew I had so long talked about and waited for was under my own nose, and the young-old man stood watching me.

I sat for a minute, letting my eyeballs come into focus again and smelling the fine straightforward smell of the stew, and he got impatient and flicked a few drops of sherry into my plate, hinting that I get down to business. I did. It was as good as he had said, the best in the world, and as all the other people had told me . . . mildly potent, quietly sustaining, warm as love and welcomer in winter.

Like most people, though, who have ever tasted oyster stew in their first years, I still think the kind we used to make on Sunday nights when I was little was the kind I might make myself if I wanted one again . . . which I often do.

Now I am older, and I know that good stews can be made as we made them then, but with tinned Willapoint oysters and store butter and bought milk. In spite of this knowledge, less my choice than a compromise with progress, I like to think of those first stews as the perfect ones, the dream stews.

The oysters were Chincoteagues . . . or would be if I were little again and in my dream at the same time . . . Chincoteagues alive and fluttering their gills minutely as they felt the air about them. They were dropped, clean and fat, into the heating milk . . . and the milk was not pasteurized and flat, nor was it homogenized and thick and "good for you," but it was whole milk from a cow half-Jersey and

half-Guernsey. Just before the milk with the oysters in it began to steam, a few chunks of sweet saltless butter were put on the top, and salt and pepper, so that as the stew was poured into the hot tureen (a sturdy oval pot of white bone-china with a fat gold band around it) the butter and the condiments poured too, and mixed themselves evenly with the milk.

By then the oysters had grown even plumper, and were heated through but still tender. It was a fine stew, and we ate hot buttered toast with it. The toast is perhaps easier to duplicate now, but my memory of both is fine and reassuring, and "will do . . . for a supper to sleep on."

## R is for Oyster

C. PEARL SWALLOW

*He died of a bad oyster.*

THAT is carved on a tombstone in a graveyard in Maine—Paris Hill, I think the place is called. The man's name was good for such an end, but probably the end was not.

If Mr. Swallow really died of a bad oyster he was a most miserable man for some hours, certainly. The bad oyster itself was rotten to his taste, so that he knew as soon as he had eaten it that he was wrong. Perhaps he worried a little about it, and then forgot and ate other things to rub the coppery taste from his tongue. He may, even in Maine, have washed it down with drink.

In two or five or six hours, though, he remembered. He felt faint, and cold fingers whuddled over his skin, so that he reeled and shivered. Then he was sick, violently and often. He could barely lift his head, for the weakness and the dreadful cramps in his belly. His bowels surged, so that he felt they would drain his very heart out of him. And, God, he was thirsty, thirsty. . . . I'm dying, he thought, and even in his woe he regretted it, and did not believe it. But he died.

Perhaps he died of a bad oyster. Oysters can be bad, all right, if they are stale and full of bacteria that make for putrefaction. Mushrooms can be deadly, too. But mushrooms and oysters are alike in that they take the blame, because of superstition and something innately mysterious about their way of life, for countless pains that never are their fault.

It is true that people have died from eating mushrooms, because there are at least two deadly ones and innocently or not, men have been fed them. It is true, too, that some men have eaten rotten oysters and died, hideously, racked with vomiting.

But quite often, I feel sure, mushrooms and oysters too are blamed for sickness that could equally be caused by many things like piggishness or nerves or even other poisons.

What man knowingly would eat a bad oyster, anyway? A bad oyster looks old and disagreeable in its shell, and it smells somewhat of copper and somewhat of rotten eggs. Of course, it might be hidden in a pie or a patty or under a coating of rich spiced sauce in a restaurant. But even so, a man's tongue would warn him that something was very wrong, I think, unless he was half under the table he sat at.

(In this, the oyster is kinder than the mushroom, which can taste most delicious when it is most deadly. And that is seldom, I insist.)

And in case a man's tongue warns him that he has at last swallowed that gastronomical rarity, a bad 'un, he should leave the board at once and do what men have always known how to do, even the dainty ones, and get rid of it.

There would be no mistaking it, once on the tongue. When people say, "I must have eaten a bad oyster yesterday . . . I've felt a bit dauncy ever since!" you can be sure that they have eaten a great many other things, and have perhaps drunk over-well, but that they certainly have not swallowed what is so easy to blame. If so, they would have known the unpleasant truth immediately, because it would taste so thoroughly nasty . . . and of course within six hours or less they would have been sick as hell, or even dead.

Probably more people eat oysters now than ever before, because it is easier than ever to ship them from their beds and bottoms to the dining-tables of this nation and any other nation whose people still have time for such things.

The old-fashioned habit of sniffing each oyster more or less delicately before swallowing it is as nearly extinct as its contemporary trick of gulping, with an all but visible holding of the nose, which was considered genteel . . . and so much safer.

Restaurants, even air-cooled perfuse in the midst of hot sand, like Palm Springs, or as far from the sea as Oskaloosa in Iowa, can serve oysters without fear these days. Tycoons with inlets in Maryland have their highfalutin molluscs flown for supper that night to a penthouse in Fort Worth, or to a simple log-cabin Away from It All in the Michigan woods, and know that Space and Time and even the development of putrescent bacteria stand still for dollars. Bindlestiffs

on a rare bender in Los Angeles (Ell-ay, you say) gulp down three swollen "on the half's" with a rot-gut whiskey chaser in any of a dozen joints on Main Street, and are more than moderately sure that if they die that night, it won't be from the oysters.

Men's ideas, though, continue to run in the old channels about oysters as well as God and war and women. Even when they know better they insist that months with R in them are all right, but that oysters in June or July or May or August will kill you or make you wish they had. This is wrong, of course, except that all oysters, like all men, are somewhat weaker after they have done their best at reproducing.

Several decades ago, a jolly man wrote:

*"Let's sing a song of glory to Themistocles O'Shea  
Who ate a dozen oysters on the second  
Day of May . . ."*

And even the government tells us R's are silly. "A clean fat oyster may be eaten with impunity at any time of the year," the officials say in folder after folder.

Doctors tell us so. "Hell, if it smells good, it's okay," they say, with modifications dictated by their practices and their positions in the Association.

Men who write pamphlets called *Hypochlorite process of oyster purification, report on experimental purification of polluted oysters, on commercial scale, by floating them in sea water treated with hyperchloride of calcium.* (*Public Health Reprint 652.*) . . . 5 . . . T27 . 6/a: 652 say so, as do earnest Japanese who deliver papers before the Kokusai Yorei Kabushiki Kaisha called *Kaki no banasi*, which means *Talks on Oysters*, with surprisingly un-Oriental bluntness.

They all say that oysters are all right any time as long as they are healthy . . . all, that is, except the oyster-farmers.

The farmers' actions are understandable, after all. Their main interest is in growing as many good crops as they can, and it stands to reason that if a healthy female, round with some twenty million eggs, is taken from the water before she has a chance to birth them, the farmers lose.

May and June and July, and of course August, are the months when the waters are warmest almost everywhere along the coasts,

and it is remarkably convenient that oysters can only breed their spawn when the temperature is around seventy degrees and in months with no R's in them. How easy it has been to build a catchy gastronomic rule on the farmers' interest in better crops!

People who have broken the rule and been able to buy oysters in the forbidden months say that they are most delicious then, full and flavorsome. They should be served colder than in winter, and eaten at the far end of a stifling day, in an almost empty chop-house, with a thin cold Alsatian wine to float them down . . . and with them disappear the taste of carbon dioxide and sweaty clerks from the streets outside, so that even July in a big city seems for a time to be a most beautiful month, and C. Pearl Swallow's ghost well-laid.

## The Well-dressed Oyster

*Any man may be in good spirits and good temper when he's well dressed. There ain't much credit in that.*

—Martin Chuzzlewit, CHARLES DICKENS

THERE are three kinds of oyster-eaters: those loose-minded sports who will eat anything, hot, cold, thin, thick, dead or alive, as long as it is *oyster*; those who will eat them raw and only raw; and those who with equal severity will eat them cooked and no way other.

The first group may perhaps have the most fun, although there is a white fire about the others' bigotry that can never warm the broad-minded.

There is a great deal to be said in favor of the second group, for almost every oyster-eater who does not belong whole-heartedly to the third and last division, would die before denying 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. On the other hand, a flaccid, moping, debauched mollusc, tired from too much love and loose-nerved from general world conditions, can be a shameful thing served raw upon its shell.

It is then that the third group, the fanatical believers in the power of heat and sauces to hide a multitude of real or imagined evils, comes triumphantly into its own. Any oyster, even a tinned steamed Japanese bastard from the coast of Oregon can be in good spirits and good temper when he's well dressed, they say. And they are right.

That is unfortunate, if you distrust the saw that what you don't know can't hurt you, for in that case any cooked oyster is suspect, and good old-fashioned ptomaine leers behind every casserole and chafing dish.

It is fortunate, in that the inventing of disguises has brought forth

# A Lusty Bit of Nourishment

*Cook, white, must understand oysters. Apply aft. 1 P.M.  
Iliffe, 847 E. Allegheny.*

—Adv. in *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 1941

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 like oyster.

Then, it will taste like a Chincoteague or a blue point or a mild oyster from the Louisiana bayous or perhaps a metallic tiny Olympia from the Western coast. Or it may have a clear harsh flavor, straight from a stall in a wintry French town, a stall piled herring-bone style with Portugaises and Garennes, green as death to the uninitiated and twice as toothsome. Or it may taste firm and yet fat, like the English oysters from around Plymouth.

Then an oyster will taste like what the taster expects, which of course depends entirely on the taster. Myself, since I was seventeen I have expected all oysters to be delicious, and with few exceptions they have been. In the same way, some people wait, if they manage to swallow these shell-fish at all, to gag more or less violently. And they gag.

Oysters can be eaten for themselves, as on the half shell or even in cooked dishes; they can be eaten primarily for the sauce that coats them, as in Oysters à la Rockefeller and all their offspring; and they can be eaten as a flavoring . . . oyster stuffing, for example.

Oyster stuffing, for turkeys naturally, is as American as corn-on-the-cob or steamed coot, as far as Americans know or care. To many families it is a necessary part of Christmas dinner, so that its omission would at once connote a sure sign of internal disintegration, as if Ma came to church in her corset-cover or Uncle Jim brought his light-o'-love to the children's picnic.

It would mean financial failure too, to leave out those oysters which not so long ago were brought carefully a thousand miles for the fortunate moneybags in Iowa and Missouri who could boast of them in their holiday stuffings. Not every man could buy them, God knows, even if he wanted to, and a Middle Westerner was even prouder than a man from Down East to have these shell-fish on his feast-day.

Perhaps it is because they were somewhat lacking in their first freshness by the time they reached Peoria; perhaps it was because the people of this land so far from seashores were abashed by shells: whatever the reason, oysters in the Middle West were always cooked . . . and still are, mostly. And in spite of evidence, turkey stuffing seems primarily a part of that cookery. In it, oysters are used for their flavor, quite simply.

There are many recipes, from New England cookbooks as well as those spotted brown pamphlets issued yearly by the Ladies' Aids and Guild Societies of small towns beyond the Mississippi. All of them agree that it is almost impossible to put too many oysters in a turkey dressing if you are going to put in any at all.

The method of using them differs, of course, so that one rule will say, "Mince  $\frac{1}{2}$  dozen thoroughly and sprinkle throughout the crumbs," and another will command more generously, "Fill cavity of bird with large plump blue points." A fair medium, however, is the following recipe from Mrs. William Vaughn Moody's *Cook Book*:<sup>1</sup>

## DRESSING FOR TURKEY OR OTHER FOWL WITH OYSTERS

$1\frac{1}{2}$ qts. of fine counts	$1$ qt. of oyster juice
1 qt. of lightly fried crumbs	salt, pepper, celery salt, and paprika

Wing the oysters. Add the bread crumbs, oyster juice, and seasoning.

I would add, with the Browns in their *Country Cook Book*, that "Perhaps Oyster stuffing is one of the best, but the crumbs, which are mixed with the oysters and oyster liquor, should be literally soaked in melted butter, as should all crumbs that go into a turkey."

<sup>1</sup> Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1931.

For myself, I also like a cup or more of finely chopped celery stirred in with the crumbs, rather than Mrs. Moody's celery salt.

There is a recipe in the book Merle Armitage and his wife cooked up called *Fit for a King* which is less conventional, but very good for those who don't want any nonsense about hiding the oysters. It is called, simply enough,

### OYSTER STUFFING

*Toast some thin slices of bread until brown and butter them. Lay 2 slices flat inside the turkey and over them put a good layer of raw oysters seasoned with salt and pepper, lemon juice, and a few pieces of butter. Over this lay two more slices of toast and then a layer of oysters as before. The resulting flavor is delicious.*

Between these two recipes there are ten thousand variations, probably, but the general idea of using oysters as a flavoring is no new one to us, any more than it has been for some several thousand years to the Chinese.

They probably are the longest users of these molluscs in such fashion. It has been going on for centuries, like so many other quaint Oriental customs, so that the oldest cookbooks give practically the same recipes used today in Hongkong and the kitchens of bewildered blonde brides in other outposts-of-Empire.

There are two kinds of oysters used in Chinese cooking for their flavor. There is *ho tsee*, the dried oyster, and then there is *ho yeou*, which is so much like our old-fashioned oyster catsup that I wonder if it was not brought back to us by one of those doughty old sea captains whose spirits still search for the Northwest Passage far past Java Head.

Marion Harland's 1873 edition of *Common Sense in the Household* gives a recipe that is probably as good as any outside a Chinese grocery, although other more modern cookbooks are less bound by tee-totalitarianism than she, and more willing to forego vinegar altogether and put in a full quart of sherry for each quart of shellfish. Here is Mrs. Harland's recipe:

### OYSTER CATSUP

- |                           |                                |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 quart oysters           | 1 tablespoon salt              |
| 1 teacupful cider vinegar | 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper, and |
| 1 teacupful sherry        | same of mace                   |

*Chop the oysters and boil in their own liquor with a teacupful vinegar, skimming the scum as it rises. (It is here that such devil-may-care moderns as the Browns in their *Country Cook Book* say, "To each pint of oysters add a pint of sherry, let come to a boil . . .") Boil three minutes, strain through a hair-cloth, return the liquor to the fire, add the wine, pepper, salt, and mace. Boil fifteen minutes, and when cold, bottle for use, sealing the corks.*

Mr. Henry Low, who is an authority on Chinese food, says of a *ho yeou* which might as well be Mrs. Harland's, for all the difference we could know, "Very delicious to serve with cold boiled chicken." In spite of the somewhat Charlie Chan-ish swing to this sentence, the opinion is a good one.

So is his inclusion, in *Cook at Home in Chinese*,<sup>2</sup> of at least one recipe using dried oysters, which can be bought at almost any Oriental grocery store in this country and are very much like the smoked oysters people give you now at cocktail parties, excellent little shriveled things on toothpicks which make your mouth taste hideous unless you drink a lot, which may also make your mouth taste hideous. Probably our smoked oysters could be used as well as *ho tsee*, but I doubt if they should be soaked. Or perhaps I am mistaken.

Anyway, here is Mr. Low's recipe for

### DRIED OYSTERS WITH VEGETABLES

(*Ho Tsee Soong*)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| ½ lb. dried oysters ( <i>ho tsee</i> )                    | 2 tablespoons oyster sauce<br>( <i>ho yeou</i> ) |
| 1 cup chopped bamboo shoots<br>( <i>jook tsun</i> )       | ½ teaspoon sugar                                 |
| 1 cup chopped Chinese cabbage<br>( <i>bok choy</i> )      | ½ cup water                                      |
| 1 cup peeled chopped water<br>chestnuts ( <i>ma tai</i> ) | a pinch of salt                                  |
| ½ cup chopped raw lean pork                               | a dash of pepper                                 |
| 1 clove crushed garlic                                    | ½ head shredded Boston lettuce                   |
| 1 piece crushed green ginger                              | 1 teaspoon gourmet powder<br>( <i>mei jing</i> ) |
|   | 2 teaspoons cornstarch                           |

*Soak oysters five hours and cut off hard parts. Chop fine. Mix together all chopped ingredients, add ginger, garlic, gourmet powder,*

<sup>2</sup> The Macmillan Company, New York, 1938.

salt, pepper and sugar. Put in a hot, well-greased skillet and cook four minutes. Add oyster sauce and water and cook four minutes more. Add cornstarch, which has been made into a smooth paste. Stir, and cook one minute. Arrange lettuce leaves on platter and pour cooked mixture over them.

It is not such a far cry as it seems from the exotic blendings of this Ho Tsee Soong to the pungency of Oysters à la Rockefeller. Both dishes depend almost more upon the herbs that make up their body than they do upon the oysters that are the *raison d'être*, and whether they are "dry and putrid" in a dark kitchen in Chungking or San Francisco, or fresh in New Orleans, the herbs must be prepared with finicky attention.

There are too many legends, really, about Oysters Rockefeller for any one to dare say what he thinks is the true one. It is equally foolish to say what is the true recipe since every gourmet who has ever dined in that nostalgically agreeable room of Antoine's on St. Louis Street figures, after the third or fourth sampling if not the first, that he has at last discovered the secret.

It is true that Mr. Alciatore, like his father and grandfather, has managed to keep his Rockefellers consistently delicious. That is perhaps the reason they are so justly famous, rather than any special secret formula. Other restaurants serve their own versions, which may be a little cheaper or even a little more expensive, and may look almost like Antoine's. But they are undependable, so that sometimes the rock-salt they rest on is half an inch thick and sometimes an inch; sometimes the covering, that little soft green blanket over each oyster, is dark, and sometimes it is lightly mottled, with logical differences in the flavor of the dish itself.

(This simple, apparently difficult secret for success has also been copied by the bar-men in the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans, too: unchanging excellence. According to their publicity, they are the only makers of the Original Ramos Gin Fizz, that subtle smooth-like drink which has nourished reporters and politicians and other humans through many a long food-less summer near the simmering bayous.

(Once, for reasons of research, I drank two Ramos fizzes away from the hallowed Roosevelt. They were truly bad. I went back to the hotel, and watched eagerly while the old bar-man put little

dashes of this and that together and then handed it all to the strong young stevedore who was chief shaker. I decided that infinite care, unhurried patience, and a never-varying formula were more the secret than any magic element such as dried nectar-crumbs or drops from a Ramos philter.

(I proved this theory, at least to my pleasure, when with infinite care and a certain amount of unhurried patience I too made a Ramos, after a recipe I found which was printed in 1900 for Solari's Grocery. It was easy to assemble, once I located some orange-flower water . . . and it was, Heaven protect me for this blasphemy!, as good as any ever shook up at the Roosevelt.)

Oysters Rockefeller, then, surrounded as they are by pomp and legend, are not impossible to copy. Their miracle is that *chez* Antoine, where the last two Alciatores have served them ever since 1889, they have always been delicious. Probably it is safe to say that they have not varied one jot or tittle in all these years, so that Mr. Roy could feel quite safe in sitting down to the millionth order, complete with photographers and head-waiter-with-wine-basket, to dip into the first succulent shell with only a faint sign of suspicion on his small intelligent face.

The postcards resulting from this occasion are given to every person who eats Oyster à la Rockefeller at Antoine's, and on each one, like the number of your duck in the old days at the Tour d'Argent in Paris (Where else?), is stamped the number of your plate of these famous morsels. It is an endearing bit of *chi-chi*, which is barely marred by the italics under the picture: *The recipe is a sacred family secret.*

That is rather more than *chi-chi*, although equally endearing in its solemnity. It is what could be called an exaggeration of the truth, since, although the Alciatores may use  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a teaspoon of this or that rather than  $\frac{1}{2}$ , there are many private cooks who have a recipe which is as good, Louisiana gourmets say, as Antoine's own.

This is it, reprinted from *A Book of Famous Old New Orleans Recipes Used in the South for More Than Two Hundred Years:*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For sale at Solari's and other New Orleans stores.

### OYSTERS ROCKEFELLER

Procure oysters on the half shell, wash them and drain them, and put them back on the shells. Place ice cream salt to the thickness of about one half inch on a platter and preheat, placing the oysters that are on the half shells on the hot salt and run them in the broiler for five minutes. Then cover with the following sauce and bread crumbs and bake in the hot oven until brown. Serve hot.

### SAUCE FOR OYSTERS ROCKEFELLER

1 cup oyster water	1 oz. herbsaint
1 cup plain water	1 cup best butter
1/4 bunch shallots	1/4 bunch spinach
1 small sprig thyme	1 tablespoon Worcestershire
1/2 cup ground bread crumbs toasted and sifted	sauce 2 small stalks green celery

Grind all the vegetables in the chopper. Put the water and the oyster liquor together, and let boil vigorously for about five minutes then add the ground vegetables and cook about twenty minutes or until it's to the consistency of a thick sauce.

Stir in the butter until melted and remove from fire, add the herbsaint, pour sauce over oysters on the shells, sprinkle with bread crumbs return to hot oven for five minutes and serve piping hot on the platter in which you cooked them.

(Herbsaint is a cordial made in the deep South from various herbs but mostly anise, so that it tastes very much like that clear Anis Mono that used to be served in Spanish pubs, or even like Pernod. Some people say that Antoine's spurns it in Oysters Rockefeller, but I wouldn't know. Myself, I think not.)

It is more than likely that if Mr. Alciatore, to say nothing of his Head Chef Camille Averna, should see this recipe he would toss his head slightly, or perhaps even sneer. However, sacred family secret or no, I still believe that any good cook with skill and, above all, unfailing patience can make Oysters à la Rockefeller that are as like Antoine's as one angel can be like another.

The question is, Who wants to? Perhaps you are an habitué or perhaps you have been to Antoine's once or twice. The inescapable charm of that simple, almost austere room, with mirrors for

walls; with the blue gas lamps flickering through all the evening while the electric lights snap on and off for the blazings of *crêpes Suzette* and *cafés brûlots au diable*; with its high cashier's seat at the back and its deft impersonal waiters who let the pantry doors swing wide open now and then to show the ordered shimmer of the wine-glass cupboard: all that makes a family secret much more precious than any recipe, and one that means untellable pleasure to untold amateur gourmets.

Whether they are men like "The Grand Duke Alexis, brother of the Czar of Russia," or Sinclair Lewis, or "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere," they find at Antoine's something remembered, something perhaps never known but recognized, so that dining there is full of ease and mellowness. *Huitres en Coquilles à la Rockefeller* appear magically, prepared with loving patience for each eager diner as if he were the first and only *gastronome*, and their tedious preparation is something that can best be left to Camille Averna's direction.

It should never matter that other people, armed with determination and an almost perfect copy of the Alciatores' recipe, could probably do just as well. Better go once to the little place on St. Louis Street in New Orleans, and eat them as they should be eaten, than struggle doggedly a thousand times with hot salt-beds and spinach-grindings in Connecticut or California. Oysters à la Rockefeller any place but chez Antoine are not quite as delicious, not quite as kosher nor as *comme il faut*.

There are, of course, at least ten other precious recipes for every thousand humans who have ever cooked an oyster. There are fairly complicated ones, like the following rule contributed to the first number of the magazine *Gourmet* by the Hotel Pierre of New York and its Head Chef Georges Gonneau:

### FRENCH CREAMED OYSTERS

Put one cup of butter into the top of a lighted chafing-dish; add one tablespoon English mustard, 1/4 teaspoon anchovy paste; salt, pepper, and a dash of cayenne pepper to taste; stir until mixture is thoroughly blended. Add three cups finely chopped celery and stir almost constantly until celery is nearly cooked. Pour in 1 quart rich, fresh cream slowly, stirring constantly until mixture comes to a boil. Add four dozen oysters, cleaned and free from beard, and cook two minutes. Finally, add 1/4 cup good sherry wine. Serve on freshly made toast

on hot plates, and garnish with quartered lemon and crisp young watercress. Dust each serving with paprika, mixed with a little nutmeg.

This recipe, an excellent way to exercise man's basic fascination for chafing dishes and vice versa, is naturally much simpler than some, even though sautéed ham and mushrooms be added, or truffles; and on the other hand it is a great deal more elaborate than such a one as Marion Harland gave in 1870 and many years before.

She wrote with a passion which was always ladylike in spite of its perhaps ungenteel *gourmandise*, as her period dictated, but she was never squeamish, and her "receipts" are to a large number of *aficionados* as beautifully rounded as the Songs of Solomon. Witness what she said, so long ago and only yesterday, about

### ROAST OYSTERS

*There is no pleasanter frolic for an Autumn evening, in the regions where oysters are plentiful, than an impromptu "roast" in the kitchen. There the oysters are hastily thrown into the fire by the peck. You may consider that your fastidious taste is marvelously respected if they are washed first. A bushel basket is set to receive the empty shells, and the click of the oyster-knives forms a constant accompaniment to the music of laughing voices. Nor are roast oysters amiss upon your own quiet supper-table, when the "good man" comes in on a wet night, tired and hungry, and wants "something heartening." Wash and wipe the shell-oysters, and lay them in the oven, if it is quick; upon the top of the stove, if it is not. When they are open, they are done. Pile in a large dish, and send to table. Remove the upper shells by a dexterous wrench of the knife, season the oyster on the lower, with pepper-sauce and butter, or pepper, salt, and vinegar in lieu of the sauce, and you have the very aroma of this pearl of bivalves, pure and undefiled.*

Or (she adds, rather in anti-climax), *you may open while raw, leaving the oysters upon the lower shells; lay in a large baking-pan, and roast in their own liquor, adding pepper, salt, and butter before serving.*

Probably the "pepper sauce" used by Mrs. Harland's frolicking family was made more or less after this old New England recipe:

### ROAST OYSTER SAUCE

2 tablespoons butter	4 drops tabasco sauce
juice of 1 lemon	juice of $\frac{1}{2}$ onion

Melt the butter, stir in the other ingredients and pour over oysters. Serve hot.

The Harland recipe is not much different from one given in *Plats du Jour*<sup>4</sup> by Paul Reboux, but its style is as much like his as his own flippant punning words are like the silence that comes now from his once garrulous land of wit and gaiety:

### GRILLED OYSTERS

. . . Surely, this recipe would not have the approval of the S.P.C.A. But it is probable that oysters possess a sensitivity analogous to that of the French tax-payer, so that they are incapable of very characteristic reactions. That, then, is why there is little reason for weeping tenderly at the idea that these molluscs must be placed on the grill.

As they submit to the same end that overtook Saint Lawrence, the oysters open. It is exactly like the purse of the government pensioner as Income Tax Day rolls around: one does the only possible thing in the presence of bad luck.

Take advantage of their being open to pop in a little melted butter, some pepper, and some bread crumbs. Then close them up again: at this moment they will be too weak to resist you. Let them cook a little. And serve them very hot.

Some people like this very much.

All oysters cooked in sauce, whether their own or manufactured, are necessarily of a certain complexity. They may be as simple as Marion Harland's or Reboux's; they may be coated with the intricacies of *roux* and white-wine sauces. They may even be surrounded by the strange legends of Antoine's, so that their consumption becomes more a rite than the simple manifestation of a hunger.

According to the little black-and-gold booklet published for Antoine's centennial, *Oysters à la Rockefeller* contain "such rich

<sup>4</sup> Flammarion, Paris, 1936.

ingredients that the name of the Multi-Millionaire was borrowed to indicate their value." Some gourmets say that any oyster worthy of its species should not be toyed with and adulterated by such skullduggeries as this sauce of herbs and strange liqueurs. Others, more lenient, say that Southern oysters like Mr. Alciatore's need some such refinement, being as they are languid and soft-tasting to the tongue.

They are, you might say, more like the Southern ladies than the brisk New Englanders. They are delicate and listless . . . and ice is scarce, or used to be . . . and the weather's no good for saving; best cover the bayou-molluscs with a fine New Orleans sauce, or at least a dash or two of red Evangeline. . . .

But further north, men choose their oysters without sauce. They like them cold, straightforward, simple, capable of spirit but unadorned, like a Low Church service maybe or a Boston romance.

And oysters of the North Atlantic Coast are worthy of this more or less unquestioning trust. They are firm and flavorful, and eaten chilled from their own lower shell with a bit of lemon juice squeezed over them they are among men's true delights.

There are, oddly enough, almost as many ways to eat such a simple dish as there are men to eat it.

First, several millennia ago, men cracked the shells and sucked out the tender gray bodies with their attendant juices and their inevitable sharp splinters. Then, when knives came, they pried open the two shells and cupped the lower one in their hands, careful not to spill its colorless elixir. And always, even from the beginning, there have been variations on these two simple processes; there has been invented a series of behavior-rules as complex as the recipes to prevent sea-sickness or how to arrange three tulips in a low jade-green bowl for the local garden show.

If a man cared, and knew all the rules, he would be really frightened to go into a decent oyster-bar and submit his knowledge to the cold eyes of the counter-man and all the local addicts. He would be so haunted by what was correct in that certain neighborhood and how to hold the shell and whether lemon juice should be used and so on that he would probably go instead to a corner drug store and order a double chocolate banana-split.

Fortunately, though, almost everybody who goes into an oyster-bar or even eats in a restaurant is so pleased with the oysters them-

selves that he eats them in his own fashion without giving a toot or a tinkle about what other people think.

In America, on the East Coast, oysters are usually served on a plate of shaved ice, with small round white crackers in a bowl or vase. Quite often a commendable battery of bottled sauces such as tabasco and horse-radish accompanies the order, and in many restaurants a little cup of red sauce with a tomato base is put in the middle of the plate of ice-and-oysters. Either this little cup of sauce or one of the bottles contains gastronomic heat in one form or another.

In New Orleans' oyster-bars, and all over the Western World in what used to be called "places of the people . . . common places," the procedure is simpler, almost as simple as the English pub-custom of shoving you your oysters, a toothpick to pluck them with, and a shaker of weak vinegar if you're toff enough to want it. Down South there is a long marble or hard wood counter between the customer and the oyster-man, sloping toward the latter. He stands there, opening the shells with a skill undreamed of by an ordinary man and yet always with a few cuts showing on his fingers, putting the open oysters carefully, automatically, on a slab of ice in front of him, while a cat waits with implacable patience at his ankles for a bit of oyster-beard or a caress. He throws the top shells behind him into a barrel, and probably they go into a road or a wall somewhere, later, with cement to bind them.

A man comes into the bare place, which has hard lights, and sawdust on the floor. He mutters "One" or "Two" to the oyster-man, and pulls a handful of square soda-crackers from the tipped glass jar at the end of the counter. If he wants to, he spoons out a cupful of tomato sauce from a big crock.

By then his one or two dozen oysters wait in a line for him upon the cold counter, their shells tipped carefully so that the liquor will lie still in them and not flow down the sloping marble and into the bins of unopened shells underneath. He picks up an oyster on a pointed thin little fork, and holds the shell under his chin while he guides it toward his mouth, having dunked it or not in the garish sauce, and then he swallows it.

If he likes raw oysters he enjoys this ceremony very much. Many do not, and may they long rest happy, if envious. Now, having wasted too many years in shuddering at oysters, I like them. I

thoroughly like them, so that I am willing to forego comfort and at times even safety to savor their strange cold succulence.

I was quite willing, once at the Old Port in Marseille before things changed, to risk their brassy greenness at a quay-side stand. Once I knowingly ate a "bad one" in the Pompeian Room at the Bern-Palace rather than cry them shame. And now, after more than a few years of prejudiced acquaintance, I can still say that oysters please me.

Those years, which have not been quite empty of perception, have made me form a few ideas of my own, since it is impossible to enjoy without thought, in spite of what the sensualists say.

I am still very ignorant, but I know that I used to like *Portugaises vertes* and oysters from Garennes, in the times that seem so far from me now . . . as far as the well-fed French people who once plucked the shells with me from their willow baskets on the Rue de la Gare, when the old man sliced open the rough long shells with his knife there or in front of Crespin's in Dijon in the winter, and the little oyster-stalls stood bravely near the stations in all the province-towns of France. The greenness and the tepid brassiness of those shell-fish were at first a shock, and I also thought I should suspect their unhygienic deaths . . . but none ever hurt me, and my palate always benefited as well as my spirit.

In America I think I like best the oysters from Long Island Sound, although I have eaten Chincoteagues and some others from the Delaware Bay that were very good. Farther south, in spite of my innate enthusiasm, I have had to admit that the oysters grow less interesting served in the shell, and almost cry out for such delicious decadences as horse-radish or even cooking, which would be sacrilege in Boston or Bordeaux.

On the Mexican Gulf they are definitely better cooked, although skilled gourmets have insisted otherwise to me, and one man from Corpus Christi once put his gun on the table while he stated quietly that anybody who said Texas blue points weren't the best anywhere was more than one kind of insulting liar. I still prefer cooked oysters in the South, since for me one of the pleasures of eating a raw oyster is the crispness of its flesh (*crisp* is not quite right, and *flesh* is not right, but in the same way you might say that *oyster* is not right for what I mean) . . . and crispness seems not to exist in the warm waters there.

And on the West Coast, I like the metallic tiny bites of the Olympias, and patriotism or no patriotism, find the Japanese-spawned Willapoints from Oregon tasteless and too bulky to be eaten from the shell. One thing, to my mind, should accompany all such oysters served this way as inevitably as soda-crackers go with soup in a drug store or Gilbert with Sullivan or Happy New Year with Merry Christmas: buttered brown bread and lemon.

In the Good Old Days, those good old days so dull to hear about and so delightful to talk of, thin slices of real pumpernickel-ish brown bread (No machine-sliced beige-colored sponge, for God's sake!) and honest-to-Betsy lumps of juicy lemon used to come automatically with every half-dozen of oysters, whether you sat in the circle at the Café de Paris or stood with one foot in the sawdust down near the third-class restaurant of the Nurnberger-Bahnhof. They picked up the sometimes tired flavor of the oysters, and I soon discovered that a few drops of lemon juice on the buttered bread tasted much better than on the shell-fish themselves.

I have thought seriously about this, while incendiary bombs fell and people I knew were maimed and hungry, and I believe that all American oyster-bars and every self-respecting restaurant in this good land which presumes to serve raw oysters in their shells or even naked in a cup, should at once make it compulsory to serve also a little plate of thin-sliced nicely buttered good dark bread, preferably the heavy fine-grained kind and buttered with sweet butter I should say, and a few quarters of lemon.

I think the oyster-men and the owners of restaurants would find this little persnicket a paying one, and that even if they charged a few cents extra for the lemon or the butter or even the bread, like Lipp's and some of the old places in Europe, they would sell enough more oysters to repay them many times.

And for the person who likes oysters, such a delicate, charming, nostalgic gesture would seem so delicate, so nostalgically charming, so reminiscent of a thousand good mouthfuls here and there in the past . . . in other words, so *sensible* . . . that it would make even nostalgia less a perversion than a lusty bit of nourishment.