

Food

RITA DEMONTIS,
Lifestyle Editor
416-947-2247
rita.demontis@tor.sunpub.com

By VENA EATON
Toronto Sun

An oyster is a French kiss that goes all the way," says master shucker Chris Field. Long-hailed as an aphrodisiac, these bountiful bivalves have always been a diet staple of noblemen and commoners alike.

Field spoke on the history of aquaculture and its impact on oyster farming in the Pacific Northwest at Cornucopia, an annual food and wine festival held in Whistler, B.C.

"The Japanese pioneered oyster farming as we know it today, even though oysters have been cultivated since 2000 BC," says Field, who shucks oysters at The Crab Shack in Whistler.

When the West opened up during the Gold Rush of the mid-1800s, just as many people laid claim to oyster beds as gold mines. Today, it's a \$70-million industry, according to David Gordon, Nancy Blanton and Terry Nosh, authors of *Heaven on a Half Shell* (Whitecap Books).

The hard-shelled mollusks are harvested on both coasts of North America with British Columbia supplementing the Atlantic provinces' production, adds Jay Harlow, author of *West Coast Seafood* (Raincoast Books).

For those who like their oysters the way nature presented them, the Malpek is the most popular fresh oyster on a half shell in Toronto and is harvested out East, while Westerners consume the Pacific or Japanese oyster.

"The west coast oyster has a richer taste, with a seaweed, cucumber and melon aftertaste, while the east coast oyster has a salty start and sweet finish," says Bil, who manages an oyster packing plant in P.E.I.

"The old rule of eating raw oysters only in months with an 'r' in them doesn't apply to the East Coast oyster," says John Petcoff, co-owner of Oyster Boy. Oysters spawn during the summer months when the water warms up, but the oysters harvested off the coast of P.E.I. are perfectly safe to eat year-round because of cooler waters.

However or whenever you eat them, the oyster's sexy reputation doesn't outweigh the fact they are nutritious, low in calories and a good source of calcium.

So try one of these recipes or eat them raw with a dash of hot sauce and wedge of lemon.

vena.eaton@tor.sunpub.com

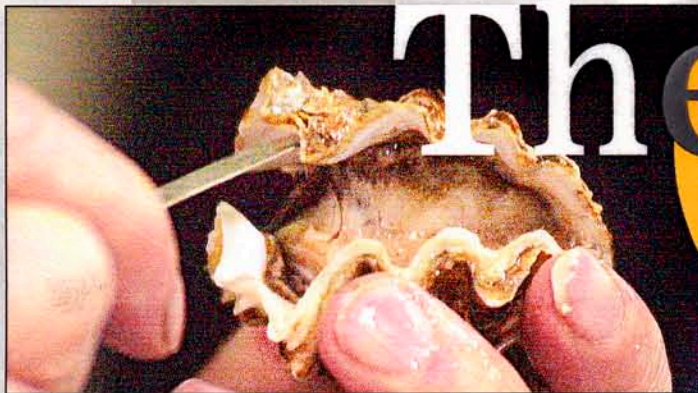


JOHN PETCOFF, left, Robert Pendergast and Adam Colquhoun of Oyster Boy.

— AP photo

— Stan Behal, SUN

The big



"It was the food of the common folk until the 1920s, when meat producers were able to preserve and sell their product to the masses," says Adam Colquhoun, master shucker and co-owner of Oyster Boy on Queen St. W. in Toronto.

During the 1950s and '60s, Colquhoun says oyster shuckers held low-status positions. "Today, they are a specialized breed, a cross between a sous chef and a bartender."

Master shuckers showed off their skills at a recent Oyster Bowl at Big Daddy's Crabshack and Oyster Bar in Toronto.

"The oyster world is tight," says Paul Petcoff, bar manager of Big Daddy's. "We're all friends."

Some compete in the Oyster Olympics in Seattle, Washington, and the world championships in Galway, Ireland. Others head east to Tyne Valley, P.E.I., for a chance to become the Canadian champ. "Shuckers seek out competitions to hone skills — vying for the quickest time and cleanest plate," says John Bil, who is the two-time defending Canadian champ.

Amazing mollusk packs nutritious punch



CHRIS FIELD, working the oyster bar in Whistler, B.C.

Oysters Rockefeller

Invented at Antoine's in New Orleans around the turn of the century, this recipe has been adapted by the chef at The Crab Shack in Whistler, B.C.

- 24 small to medium oysters
- 1/4 cup celery leaves
- 1/2 cup parsley leaves (loosely packed)
- 1 cup spinach leaves (loosely packed)

- 1 large bunch of watercress, large stems removed (about 1 cup)
- 4 green onions
- 4 tbsps. butter
- 1 1/2 oz. Pernod or other anise flavoured liqueur
- 1/4 tsp. white pepper
- Dash of Tabasco or other hot pepper sauce
- Salt to taste
- Rock salt for lining the pan

1. Shuck the oysters, reserving the deeper bottom shells. Wash the shells inside and out and set aside.
2. Drain the oysters and strain the oyster liquor, keep both cold until ready to cook.
3. Blanch the celery leaves, parsley, spinach and watercress separately in boiling water just until wilted, refresh with cold water and

drain. Chop greens together including green onions by hand or in a food processor.

4. Melt butter in a small skillet over low heat. Add chopped greens and cook slowly until most of the liquid is gone. Add the Pernod, strained oyster liquor, pepper and Tabasco and cook until reduced by half. Add salt to taste and allow to cool.

5. Preheat oven to 450F. Line one or more shallow baking trays with a 1/2-inch layer of rock salt. Press the oyster shells into the salt to keep them upright, and place an oyster in each. Top with a tablespoon of sauce and bake until sauce is bubbly, about 10 minutes.

6. Serve on plates lined with additional rock salt to keep shells upright.

Serves 4 - 6 as an appetizer.

Oyster Boy's oyster and tomato soup

Robert Pendergast created this piquant soup, which is also used as a salsa topping for grilled oysters, for their summer menu. If you don't want to shuck fresh oysters, Pendergast suggests placing scrubbed raw oysters on a barbecue (with the lid closed) or in an oven at 400F for 6-12 minutes. The oysters will lightly cook and the shells will gap ever so slightly. Run a knife along the inside of the top shell to remove the lid. The oysters can then be served on a half shell with salsa (grill or bake for 1 minute more), or cooked in a stew or soup.

- 3-4 tbsps. olive oil
- 2 hot jalapeno peppers, thinly sliced, include some of the seed if you like it hotter
- 28 oz. tin roma tomatoes (drain and reserve liquid)
- 6 fresh roma tomatoes, chopped
- 1/2 sweet onion
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 shallots, chopped
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1/2 bundle fresh cilantro
- 24 shucked oysters

1. Heat oil, add jalapeno peppers and saute until seeds start to pop.
2. Add remainder of ingredients and

simmer for 12-15 minutes.

3. Add a few tablespoons of the reserved liquid from tinned tomatoes to the mixture if it appears dry. The recipe can be prepared ahead of time to this point.

4. Add 2/3 - 1 cup of reserved liquid from tinned tomatoes.
5. Simmer for 5 minutes.
6. Add shucked oysters and bring back to a simmer for 5 minutes. Serves 4.

Louisiana seafood gumbo

This is one of Big Daddy's Crabshack and Oyster Bar's signature dishes.

- 2/3 cup vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup all purpose flour
- 1 cup onion, chopped
- 1 cup green pepper, chopped
- 1 cup celery, chopped
- 2 tbsps. fish or chicken stock
- 11 litres of water
- 1 tsp. cayenne pepper
- 2 tsp. salt or to taste
- 1 tsp. black pepper
- 3 tsp. gumbo file (a seasoning available in specialty food stores)
- 2 lb. fresh shrimp, peeled and de-veined
- 1 lb. crab meat, fresh, frozen or canned
- 12 oysters with their liquor (freshly shucked or pre-shucked)

1. Add oil to Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add flour and cook, stirring constantly, until a dark brown colour is achieved.

2. Add onions, green peppers and celery. Lower heat to medium and saute vegetables, stirring occasionally, until tender and onions are slightly transparent. Allow vegetables to stick slightly between stirring and scrape the bottom of the pot when stirring.

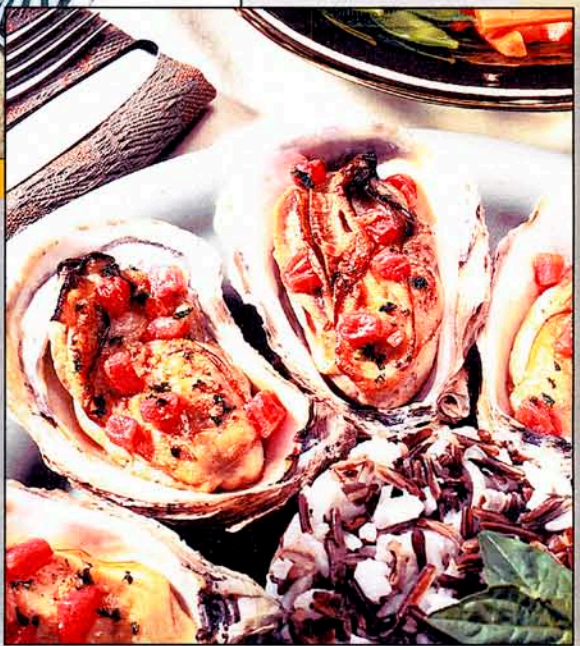
3. Add stock and water. Allow to simmer for about an hour, stirring occasionally. If the gumbo is too thick, add more water.

4. Add cayenne, salt, pepper and gumbo file. Adjust spices to taste.

5. Bring stock to boil and add shrimp, crab and oysters. Continue to cook until shrimp are pink and oysters are plump and firm, about 5 minutes.

Serve in large bowl over steamed rice.

Serves 6 - 8.



DRESS UP grilled oysters with a table-spoon of salsa.

— CP photo