

# Food For Thought: A Lust for Oysters --- They're Big in Asia (but Taste Better When Small)

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Elsewhere in Asia, oysters didn't make much of an impression until recently when jet-fresh varieties mostly from Australia and New Zealand began to be served. One small species, *Saccostrea cucullata*, found around Malaysia and Indonesia, it not eaten much except in the Singaporean variant of the Hang Town Fry, the great omelet once popular in the U.S. for breakfast before oysters became prohibitively expensive. The oyster omelet can be found in hawker centers in Singapore or Malaysia and is one of the cheapest way to enjoy oysters in Asia.

It's a hunger not easily sated in Asia, which generally is not a good region in which to eat oysters. The Pacific or Japanese oyster, *Crassostrea gigas*, is the main oyster found in the region but in warm waters it grows to up to 28 centimeters, containing far too much of a mouthful to be eaten raw. Instead, it is normally sun-dried and then added to dishes for its smoky flavor or turned into oyster sauce, a thick mix of caramel, corn flour and dried oysters used in many Chinese dishes. The small and mild kumamoto, *Crassostrea sikamea*, also of Japanese origin, is popular on the Pacific coast of the United States.

To appreciate the differences, taste as many varieties as possible at an establishment like the Oyster Bar and Restaurant at Grand Central Station in New York. Up to 30 different oysters are listed on the blackboard in this wonderfully shabby, subterranean restaurant that dates from an era when oysters were a proletarian food with no pretensions. For those who don't like their oysters raw, there is an excellent oyster stew and delicious fried oysters along with about 300 other dishes.

## FULL TEXT

When New Zealand parliamentarian Sue Kedgley said recently that people should be careful about gorging on Bluff oysters because they had a high level of the toxic heavy metal cadmium, she provoked the sort of outrage you'd expect if you tried to ban rugby or beer.

Oyster lovers put out statements saying the Bluff oyster was "one of New Zealand's food icons" and a "beloved kiwi staple." Wyatt Creech, the opposition health spokesman, thundered that "real kiwis" would go on enjoying their shellfish, joining a chorus of those suggesting that Ms. Kedgley was being downright unpatriotic.

Her warning was a little hasty -- the cadmium found in oysters is bound to the protein metallothionein and is generally not ingested. The World Health Organization has also given oysters a clean bill for heavy metal poisoning. But apart from suggesting that New Zealand politicians don't have enough to keep them busy, the whole kerfuffle illustrates the sort of passion that can be aroused by these mollusks.

Passion, of course, is a word that is closely linked to oysters. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, emerged from an oyster shell (although it could have been a scallop shell) and Casanova was said to eat six dozen of them for breakfast in a bathtub designed for two. Alas there is no evidence that oysters have any physiological effect as an aphrodisiac. In the past, people living on a generally poor diet might have felt an impact from the injection of protein,

phosphorus and zinc, but if you're well nourished, the effect is all in the mind. If the sight of sea water dribbling down the chin of a loved one works for you, you're in luck.

They may not live up to their reputation as aphrodisiacs but oysters do stimulate the appetite. The high dose of salt in the oyster and its surrounding liquor stimulates gastric juices and arouses a deeper hunger. This effect was best described by the Stoic philosopher Seneca: "Oyster dear to the gourmet," he wrote, "beneficent oyster, exciting rather than satiating, all stomachs digest you, all stomachs bless you!"

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The giant Pacific oyster, grown in the cool waters off Washington state, produces a range of small, succulent varieties with names like Little Skookum, Eagle Creek and Hamma Hamma. Oysters, like wines, vary depending on where they were grown. No two oyster beds are said to be the same and so this once humble food has attracted the attention of gourmets out to prove their knowledge.

There are now oyster bores with a line of intimidating patter to match any wine snob. They show off descriptions of "fruity, nutty, impertinent" Blue Points or insist on only those oysters from a certain part of a specific bay in the San Juan Islands near Seattle. I've even seen oysters described as having "an aftertaste reminiscent of cool watermelon."

Certainly different oysters do have different tastes but after they've spent several days on ice getting to Asia, the real subtleties are likely to be lost. Nobody is going to be able to isolate a certain area of Puget Sound eating an oyster slathered in Tabasco, mignonette or cocktail sauce.

To appreciate the differences, taste as many varieties as possible at an establishment like the Oyster Bar and Restaurant at Grand Central Station in New York. Up to 30 different oysters are listed on the blackboard in this wonderfully shabby, subterranean restaurant that dates from an era when oysters were a proletarian food with no pretensions. For those who don't like their oysters raw, there is an excellent oyster stew and delicious fried oysters along with about 300 other dishes.

The number of restaurants serving oysters in the United States seems to have grown exponentially in recent years with the renewed popularity of brasserie-style French eateries that have oyster bars or that serve towering arrangements of iced seafood. Oysters are increasingly being served with complex sauces, even sorbets. The Russian Tea Room in New York serves Nootka oysters from Washington state with a lemon vodka granita. Variants of the classic mignonette sauce (vinegar and shallots) using champagne and other wines have also become popular.

In Asia, oysters tend to make an appearance only at hotel buffets where you never know how long they have been sitting around. Some specialized seafood restaurants serve them in a safer manner. At Yu, in the Regent Hotel Hong Kong, the oysters are flown in from France, Ireland, Holland, New Zealand and Australia and are allowed to recover from jet-lag in tanks of carefully purified water.

The restaurant generally serves five or six types of oyster, varying them according to the season. They come on the half-shell with Asian and traditional sauces as well as cooked in such classic formulations as oysters Rockefeller (gratinated with cheese and spinach). Yu even does oysters with a Hong Kong twist, serving them steamed with XO sauce and chervil.

Lined up at the counter at the Grand Central Oyster Bar on any given night are likely to be dozens of Japanese visitors enjoying the bargains on offer. Japan has cool enough waters to grow good oysters and has been cultivating them since the 17th century when farming techniques were introduced from Europe. They are eaten raw or as sugaki -- raw oysters dressed with vinegar. They are also cooked dipped in egg and breadcrumbs as furai or served as nabemono, stew-like dishes cooked in a pot.

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Penang Oyster Omelet
Serves 2-3
3 tablespoons rice flour or cornflour
10 fluid ounces (280 ml) cold water
4 tablespoons (60 ml) oil
3 large eggs, beaten, with salt and pepper to taste
1 cup (250 ml) raw oysters
2 teaspoons (10 ml) oyster sauce
1 fresh red chili
2 tablespoons (30 ml) chopped fresh spring onions
2 tablespoons (30 ml) chopped fresh coriander (cilantro)

Mix cornflour and water. Heat a large flat frying pan and add half
the oil, swirling to coat the base of the pan. Pour in the flour mix
and cook until brown. Pour in the eggs and the remaining oil. When
set, cook other side until golden. Use a spatula to cut into pieces.
Add the oysters and oyster sauce and cook for 30 seconds. Sprinkle
with chili, spring onions and coriander and serve at once.
Source: Charmaine Solomon's "Encyclopedia of Asian Food" (Periplus
Editions)

## DETAILS

<b>Business indexing term:</b>	Subject: Restaurants; Industry: 72251 : Restaurants and Other Eating Places 31171 : Seafood Product Preparation and Packaging
<b>Subject:</b>	Restaurants; Oysters; Eggs; Seafood; Vinegar; Taste; Food
<b>Publication title:</b>	Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong
<b>Pages:</b>	P8
<b>Number of pages:</b>	0
<b>Publication year:</b>	2000
<b>Publication date:</b>	Jun 16, 2000
<b>Section:</b>	Personal Journal
<b>Publisher:</b>	Dow Jones & Company Inc.
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Victoria, Hong Kong
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, Victoria, Hong Kong
<b>Publication subject:</b>	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
<b>ISSN:</b>	03779920
<b>Source type:</b>	Newspaper

<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	NEWSPAPER
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	315457514
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-lust-oysters-theyre-big-asia-taste/docview/315457514/se-2?accountid=11311">http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-lust-oysters-theyre-big-asia-taste/docview/315457514/se-2?accountid=11311</a>
<b>Copyright:</b>	Copyright Dow Jones & Company Inc Jun 16, 2000
<b>Last updated:</b>	2023-11-20
<b>Database:</b>	ProQuest One Business, ProQuest Central

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