

Emphasis

In the raw!

Whether baked, stewed, fried or raw, oysters aren't just another seafood

By Sue Hoggard
Staff Writer

Most people will agree—either you like oysters, or you don't. Those shiny, slippery, muscle-like creatures really aren't concerned about who likes them or not; they just like to swim and crawl along swallow coastal waters until they can find a home and attach themselves permanently to the object they find.

But, it is oyster season, and experienced seafood critics such as Nick Collins of Carolina Seafood, 604 S. Worth St., Burlington, agree that months with R's in their names are the best months for gathering the oysters. Collins said cold weather makes for a plump, better tasting oyster.

Collins said, "I get my oysters from the Chesapeake Bay rather than the coast of North Carolina because the waters of the bay are a little further north. They are colder, the oysters are ready earlier and I also prefer their taste." Collins noted that some of the Carolina oyster beds were disturbed by last month's Hurricane Diana.

A lot of work goes into the preparation of oysters. People who would rather not even think about putting an oyster in their mouth tend to dismiss thoughts about what a delicacy oysters are in most parts of the world.

Before these delicacies are served, they have to be gathered from previously lain oyster beds in coastal waters. When the oysters are gathered, they must be shucked. Shucking is the procedure of removing the muscle from the shell.

Oyster muscles attach themselves to the shell on the inside. This makes it difficult to open up the shell. An inexperienced "oyster shucker" could have better luck at sticking his hand into a food processor if he isn't careful.

However, all one really needs to successfully shuck oysters is a pair of sturdy gloves and a strong bladed, sharp knife. The knife should be pushed into the narrow end of the shell with the twisting motion. Once the knife has penetrated the shell, a slicing motion down both sides of the shell will release the muscle from the inside of the shell.

Oysters can be bought by the peck or bushel in the shell. They come in many varieties and sizes. The taste is deter-

mined by the mineral content of the particular body of water it is in and the amount of pollution in the water.

People eat oysters raw, steamed in casseroles, and stews, and with Yaupon Tea, an ancient Indian beverage.

Legend has it that Indians in eastern North Carolina had huge oyster feasts similar to the fall eating festivities can be found today in coastal areas. They ate the oysters raw. In fact, they ate them and drank the milky juices until they couldn't hold anymore.

When they were totally glutted, they drank the Yaupon Tea which caused to upchuck what they had eaten—so that they would glut on oysters again, or until they couldn't stand the process anymore.

For those who don't like oysters, the tea wouldn't be needed.

Carolina Seafood carries oysters all year long, but Collins said he felt winter oysters were better. He carries the three sizes available: Counts, the large oysters; Selects, a medium size; and Standards, a smaller oyster usually used in stews.

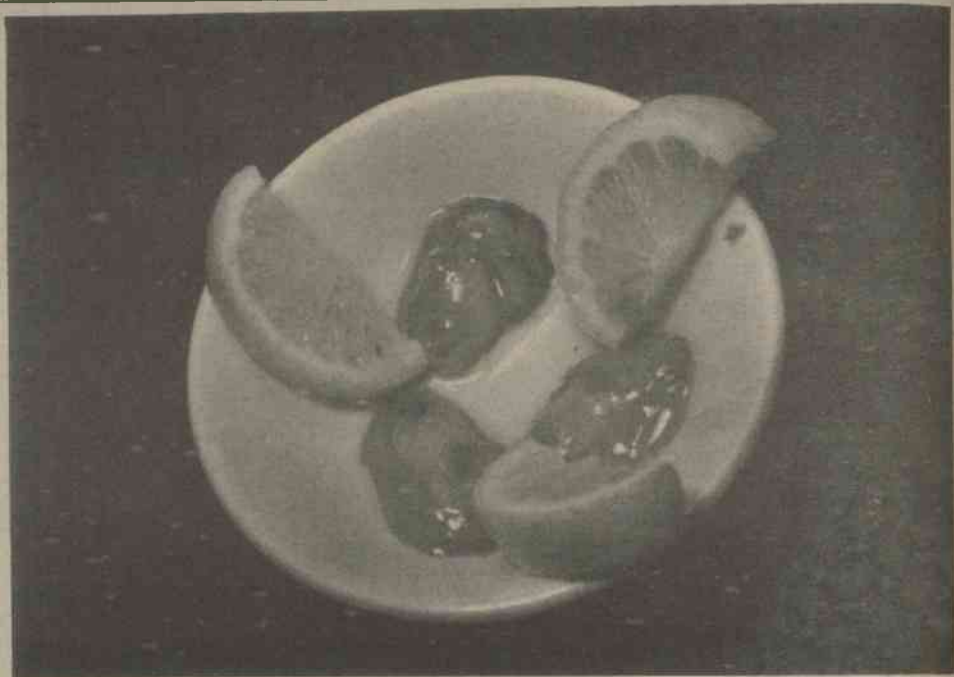
Collins said, "There is a great demand for oysters now. I can't keep enough of them."

Oysters are served in a variety of ways, Collins said one of his favorites is an oyster casserole. He said he layers oyster crackers (oysters even have a cracker just for their use), and oysters with pepper until he fills the dish with a layer of crackers on top. Then, he pours a cup of milk over the dish. He bakes it at 350 degrees until the crackers turn brown.

Preparation of oysters ranges from the simple—shucking and eating the raw of steamed oysters and dunking them in melted butter or cocktail sauce—to the complicated—such dishes as Oysters Rockefeller or Oysters Bienville are featured on many *haute cuisine* menus.

Master chef and syndicated food columnist Pierre Franey has called oysters the world's "most perfect food" because it can be prepared in so many ways without losing its own flavorful character in combination with other foods.

Not everyone would agree with Franey, of course. But it's hard to think of any other food which there is no middle ground of public opinion.



LEMONS AND OYSTERS: Part of the appeal of oysters is the variety of ways to enjoy this delicacy. Hot sauce is also a popular condiment for oysters.

