

Popular Oysters Have A Rocky, Risky Life

BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

A lustrous, perfect pearl and a particular juicy seafood morsel have much in common. You might say they're kinfolks, as they come from the same home: an ugly, craggy-surfaced shell found in shallow ocean and river waters, whose life is precarious from beginning to end.

In this area, it's the edible quality we admire. The oyster is a favorite food along the coast and once upon a time a big business in Brunswick County.

Lloyd Milliken, who operates a shucking house in Shallotte Point, remembers when he picked them up by the hundreds from the Shallotte River that runs behind his business.

"Now I have to get most of them from Florida and Louisiana," he said, "Until last winter, I hadn't used any of our local oysters for ten years."

What's happened to the beloved oyster and what is its history? There is a certain mystique in this gray-black bivalve whose hard, rough shell hides delicacies to eat or to wear.

The creature dates back to

prehistoric times, as great shell mounds have been found in all coastal regions, indicating the importance of oysters in the diet of early man.

Romans imported English oysters in the 18th and 19th centuries, as British beds were the most productive in Europe. Oysters was the poor man's diet.

This European flat oyster has two untidy shells or valves, one convex, one flat, hinged together by an elastic ligament. The irregular outline is made even more so by encrusting animals that grow on the shells.

Look between these valves and you'll see the edges of the mantle, a living tissue that secretes the inside of the shell. Its edge has a muscular fold that brings in a flow of water, whose nutrients feed the oyster.

Attached to a rock or another oyster shell (or "spat,") in shallow water, the oyster draws in two to three gallons of water per hour, filtering out the food particles.

In summer spawning or reproduction takes place, with eggs passing through the oyster's two double gills, then being fertilized by sperm car-



STAFF PHOTO BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

PILES OF OYSTER SHELLS are mounded behind Lloyd's Oyster House in Shallotte Point. They are shoveled onto a barge and replanted in the Shallotte River, so that new oyster larvae can attach to them.

ried in by the current. Some varieties are hermaphroditic, changing sexes to fertilize their own eggs within the shell.

In the latter case, eight days after fertilization the shell opens wide and closes violently at intervals, each time expelling clouds of larvae, numbering up to 100 million.

Fewer than one percent of these larvae survive, as most are consumed by fish and other animals. They spend two weeks as part of the ocean's plankton, the larvae changing into two-shelled mollusks and descending to the bottom where they

attach to a hard, clean surface, often an adult shell. As many as 1,000 tiny oysters or spat may cling to one of these shells.

Life isn't much more secure for the one percent who make it to the bottom. Oysters, as they mature, are constantly endangered by the oyster drill, boring sponge, snails, and varieties of crabs that attack its shell in various ways.

The survivors grow to become 2-6 inches in length. In warmer waters they mature within 18 months; cooler waters slow down maturation to 4-5 years.

Spawmed in summer, then, an oyster can be harvested as an adult, fit for a seafood-lover's palate between October and April.

Meanwhile, their tropical relatives, the pinctata are sought out for the lovely white pearls they have produced through repeated secretion of the mantle around a grain of sand or other foreign matter from the sea. These valuable natural pearls are found largely in the Persian Gulf and in some North American rivers.

Pearls are also cultivated for mass production by placing small mother-

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