

## Oyster season is here, but start by being a better-informed slurper

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Most Charlestonians don't need this column to tell them that oyster season's come around again: They're already busy sharpening their shucking knives and mixing their own personal mignonettes. And for many of them, knowing it's oyster time is oyster knowledge enough.

But for folks looking to swap oyster info around the shucking table, the following seven facts should come in handy:

1. Occasionally, eaters will come across pearls in their oysters, but the oysters typically cultivated for pearls belong to a different bivalve family

2. Seventeenth-century Dutch settlers were stunned by the size of the oysters around Manhattan Island: The foot-long specimens dwarfed their European kin. Although the biggest oysters were wiped out by the 1850s, visiting novelist William Makepeace Thackeray was still disgusted by the oyster he was served on a New York City visit, likening the experience to "eating a baby," according to Mark Kurlansky's "The Big Oyster."

3. There's an ongoing spat between San Francisco and New Orleans concerning the origins of the oyster loaf. In the latter city, the sandwich of hollowed-out, buttered and toasted bread, crammed with deep-fried oysters battered in cornmeal, was sometimes called "the mediator." Apparently gallivanting 19th-century husbands hoped that bringing the treat home after a late night in the French Quarter would pacify their wives. (San Francisco gets full credit for Oysters Kirkpatrick, sauced with ketchup and broiled with bacon.)

4. Merroir, the maritime equivalent of terroir, refers to the site-specific environmental conditions that determine an oyster's size, shape and saltiness. There are just five main types of edible oysters: Belons, Olympias, Kumamotos, Pacifics and Atlantics (or *Crassostrea virginicas*), which account for 85 percent of the oysters harvested in the U.S. But you'll rarely see an oyster labeled "Atlantic" or "Oyster." Most oyster bars and fishmongers instead refer to oysters by their merroir-based name, such as Bluepoint or Wellfleet. There are 200 recognized oyster appellations.

5. Oysters are exceptionally good at filtering nitrogen from water, which is one of the reasons many environmentalists are staunch supporters of domestic oyster farming. "The oyster is pretty particular about what it eats, but it's not particular about what it filters," a scientist told *The Economist*, adding that a single oyster can clean 50 gallons of water a day.

6. Vegans don't eat any animal products, but there is a contingent of vegans who eat oysters. As one member of that group explained in a 2010 *Slate* essay, "Since oysters don't have a central nervous system, they're unlikely to experience pain in a way resembling ours."

7. Oyster experts advise against storing oysters in ice, which can freeze the life right out of fragile bivalves. If you've purchased a bag of oysters for an at-home roast, leave them in the bag (or, if dealing with loose oysters, put them in a pan); cover with a moist towel and refrigerate.

