



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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SEPTEMBER BRINGS NEW OYSTER SEASON

From Cape Cod to the mouth of the Rio Grande, and from Puget Sound to San Diego harbor, oystermen are busy these days tonging and dredging oysters from their beds in the bays and estuaries and preparing them for shipment throughout the nation for the beginning of the new season in September, the first "R" month.

According to reports received by the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior, a good crop of oysters can be expected again this year, which will assure a plentiful supply throughout the season which customarily extends from September through April.

Oysters are taken commercially in the waters of every seaboard state except Maine and New Hampshire. The annual production of oyster meats in the United States totals around 80 million pounds. Virginia leads all states with an annual production of oysters amounting to 17.5 million pounds. Maryland is second with 15 million pounds. At one time--in 1880--these two states produced 117 million pounds.

Skipping the scientific names, the American market receives its stock of oysters from three different species or varieties, two of which are native to our waters and one of which is of Japanese origin. The native Eastern oyster, found and cultivated from Massachusetts to Texas, accounts for about 83 percent of the domestic oyster crop. The small but succulent Olympia oyster is found along the Pacific coast from Washington to Mexico and is cultivated chiefly in Puget Sound near Olympia. The large Pacific oyster, introduced from Japan in 1902, is also cultivated on the Pacific coast. The Pacific states contribute about 13 million pounds of oyster meats, or about 17 percent, of the total production.

Few foods better balanced nutritionally

Oysters contribute nutritive value to the diet as well as being flavorful. They are an excellent source of the "protective" nutrients -- proteins, minerals, and vitamins. An average serving of six oysters will supply more than the daily requirements of iron and copper, about one-half the iodine and about one-tenth of the needed protein, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, Vitamin A, thiamine, riboflavin and niacin. To make a completely rounded meal from a nutritional standpoint, only additional sources of calories are needed.

Oysters are easy to prepare

Oysters also have a special appeal to the busy homemaker because of the ease with which they are prepared--no waste, completely edible, and easy to serve. They can be served raw as a cocktail, cooked in a variety of ways, such as stews, chowders, baked, broiled, fried, creamed, scalloped or in combination with cheese, bacon, celery, spinach, rice, or as a stuffing for poultry.

How and what to buy

Oysters may be purchased in three forms: live in the shell, fresh or frozen shucked, or canned.

Oysters in the shell are generally sold by the dozen and should be alive when purchased. If shell oysters are held at 40 degrees, they will remain alive for a week or more.

Shucked oysters should be plump, and have a natural creamy color with clear liquor. When kept properly refrigerated, they will remain fresh for a week or ten days. Frozen oysters should not be thawed until ready for use. Once thawed, they should not be refrozen.

The quantity to purchase depends on how the oysters are to be served. For six persons, allow three dozen shell oysters, or one part of shucked oysters, or two No. 1 cans of canned oysters. Large or select shucked oysters are usually preferable for frying or broiling; small or standard oysters for stews, casseroles, etc.

A few ways to prepare them

To retain the delicate, distinctive flavor of oysters, never cook them too long, just enough to heat them through and leave them plump and tender.

OYSTER STEW

1 pint oysters
4 tablespoons butter
1 quart milk
1-1/2 teaspoons salt
1/8 teaspoon pepper
Paprika

Melt butter, add drained oysters, and cook 3 minutes or until edges curl. Add milk, salt, and pepper, and bring almost to boiling point. Serve at once. Garnish with paprika. Serves 6.

FRIED OYSTERS

1 quart select oysters
2 eggs, broken
2 tablespoons milk
1 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon pepper
1 cup bread crumbs, cracker crumbs,
or cornmeal

Drain oysters. Mix egg, milk, and seasonings. Dip oysters in egg mixture and fry in hot fat; when brown on one side turn and brown other side. Cooking time about 5 minutes. Drain on absorbent paper. Serve immediately with slices of lemon or tartar sauce. Serves 6.

OYSTERS AU GRATIN

1 pint oysters
6 slices buttered toast
2 eggs, beaten
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon prepared mustard
1/2 teaspoon paprika
1/2 cup milk
1 cup grated cheese

Trim crusts from bread. Cut each slice into quarters. Combine beaten eggs, seasonings, and milk. Arrange layer of bread in buttered casserole, cover with layer of oysters. Sprinkle with grated cheese. Repeat layer, pour milk mixture over contents of dish, and cover with grated cheese. Place casserole in pan of hot water, bake in moderate oven 350° F. for 30 minutes or until brown. Serves 6.

Photographs are available upon request.

NOTE TO EDITORS:--The additional data is supplied for those writers who desire more background or filler material.

Oysters are one of our oldest and most favored foods. Their popularity dates back more than 2,000 years. Oyster culture was practiced before the days of Christ. Early Roman aristocrats set up salt-water tanks in their villas in which to hold oysters fresh for their tables. The terms used to describe oysters in those times best illustrate the esteem in which they were held. To the Greeks, oysters were "the perfect prelude to a meal," and to the Romans, "the dainty manna of the sea."

Long before the earliest American colonization, the Indians had discovered the merits of the oyster as an important seafood. This is attested by the huge mounds of oyster shells, often called "kitchen middens," found along the seaboard in our eastern States. One such mound along the Damariscotta River in Maine is supposed to contain about 7 million bushels of shells. The Indians of the East coast subsisted largely on oysters. It is said that they used them in a dried and smoked state, strung on twigs, as an article of barter with their inland neighbors.

Oysters were so abundant when the first settlers on the Atlantic coast began to take them from the natural beds that the colonists thought the supply was inexhaustible. With the depletion, through over-exploitation, of these natural beds, the planting of artificial oyster beds--or oyster culture--came into practice through the initiative of the oystermen themselves. Since the culture of oysters resembles the sowing, cultivating, and harvesting of a cereal such as wheat, oyster culturists have become known as "farmers of the sea."

Oyster farming is carried on by individuals who may cultivate a few acres of bottom; by corporations which operate thousands of acres of water area; and by state governments which conduct operations on the public grounds.

Practically all oysters are taken by fishermen using tongs or dredges. Tongs are long, scissor-shaped tools from 12 to 18 feet long with iron baskets fitting together at the tips. Tongs can be used only in shallow waters. Dredges are rake-like contraptions to which a bag (generally of chain) is attached to catch the oysters loosened from the bottom as it is dragged at the end of a tow line.

Oysters of varying species are found along almost every seacoast in the world wherever the water at some period of the year reaches a temperature of 70 degrees F. or above.

About 13 percent of the total annual take of oysters are used in canning; the balance is sold fresh-shucked or in the shell.

The domestic pack of canned oysters amounted to more than 357 standard cases (48 cans, each of 4 2/3 oz. drained weight.)

Although the popular oyster season extends from September through April, canning usually takes place only from January through April.

While canned oysters are produced in 48 plants, most of the pack was canned in Louisiana, with Mississippi and Washington in second and third places.

The oyster canning industry was first established in Chesapeake Bay but no canning is done in that area now.

The label on a can of oysters usually indicates the drained weights of the oyster meats rather than the net weight of the total contents.

Only about 7 percent of shell oysters find their way into a can of oysters. The balance, or 93 percent, consists of shells and lost juice or nectar.

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