



VENUS

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THE PLAYBOY GOURMAND HAS A DATE WITH DESTINY IN THE BIG EASY: HUNDREDS OF OYSTERS AWAIT

Pacific Northwest oysters have their place, as do the delicate oysters of Maine. Japanese oysters—kumamotos—are among the best. And French oysters—belons, for example—are delectable. Every oyster is a unique reflection of the seabed in which it grows. To me, there's nothing better than Louisiana oysters. What they lack in delicacy they make up in vigor. They're usually big and salty and sweet. But it doesn't matter much how they vary from other oysters, because they all taste like the sea. And New Orleans is the place to go if you want to eat oysters.

At P&J Oyster 10 shuckers work from 4:45 A.M. till 11 A.M., opening 30,000 oysters a day. They stand at an elevated counter, slipping knives through shells with a rhythmic click. Or so I'm told. This being New Orleans, I arrive too late to see any shucking.

Only a couple of men remain, washing down the walls and floors.

Sal Sunseri, vice president of P&J, greets me in the company office on Toulouse Street, where he is finishing his day's work with his sister and nephew. His own office is filled with maps and various paraphernalia (hand-painted oyster shells, photos, toys). He's a fourth-generation oysterman, one of seven kids. Sal says he drank oyster juice out of a bottle as a baby, and if he got to where he is today because of his diet, he's a good argument for oysters. Nearly all the oyster bars and fine restaurants in New Orleans buy their bivalves from him. Leah Chase, legendary proprietor of Dooky Chase restaurant, says she has never in 65 years used an oyster from anyplace other than P&J.

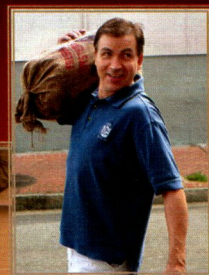
New Orleans is the nation's oyster capital, and P&J is ground zero.

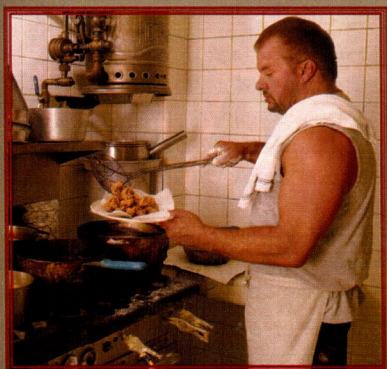
About half the fresh oysters Americans eat come through the Crescent City, and the lion's share of those are distributed by P&J, founded in 1876 by John Popich and Joseph Jurisich. Oyster farming in Louisiana has traditionally been the province of Croats, who raised oysters in the Adriatic.

Sal probably knows more about oysters than anybody else in the U.S. He tells me an oysterman can distinguish by taste or appearance between a Caminada Bay and a Pumpkin Bay oyster. He will also tell you oysters are good year-round, but it's in his interest to have everybody eat them every day. Oysters lose much of their sharp mineral flavor and become milky and undistinguished in warm weather. But with the arrival of cooler temperatures, they take on a lot more flavor.

Sal shows me around the shop. The walk-in cooler at P&J has burlap sacks

OPEN FOR BUSINESS: Ten shuckers work at P&J Oyster, opening more than 30,000 of the bivalves a day. It's hard work, but a good shucker can make a decent living in New Orleans. Louisiana oysters are robust but are still great on the half shell. That's Sal Sunseri at right with a sack of oysters.





CASAMENTO'S has been a New Orleans landmark since 1919. C.J. Gerdes has worked in his family's restaurant since he was a kid. Using a basic setup, he dredges oysters in corn flour and cooks them in lard. They're the best fried oysters in the world.

of oysters piled on pallets. It smells invigoratingly of the sea and of minerals. I'm ready for a dozen right there.

H.L. Mencken disapproved of frying oysters, claiming it destroyed the flavor. But Casamento's is a temple of oysterdom, and co-owner C.J. Gerdes makes the finest fried oysters in the world. Since the restaurant's founding, in 1919, its white clapboard front, classic neon sign and brisk white-tile interior have been an uptown landmark on Magazine Street. New Orleans has other oyster joints, of course. Bozo's in Metairie is worth a visit, and Drago's is famous for its garlicky char-grilled oysters. But nobody tops Casamento's. C.J. is a broad-shouldered 52-year-old who has worked in the family business since he was a teenager. He's the grandson of founder Joe Casamento, and he and his wife, Linda, run the place. When I go to visit C.J. on his birthday, he's wearing a sleeveless Under Armour shirt and a close-trimmed beard. His restaurant is closed for the summer, and C.J. is on vaca-

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—H.L. MENCKEN

tion. We sit at a table and talk.

C.J. has fried millions of oysters in his day, all in cast-iron pots on an old six-top stove. He works with two shuckers, then dredges the oysters in corn flour. His secret is frying them in lard at a high temperature (450 degrees). He tells me he can judge the oil's heat by the way a pinch of corn flour spreads or how the oysters sound when they go into the pot. Such knowledge derives from experience. "I've had people tell me they tried to fry oysters at home," says C.J., "but most home stoves don't get hot enough. Even if you get the oil hot, it becomes too cool when the oysters go in." Not much has changed at the restaurant since the 1920s, and that's

one reason Casamento's is so extraordinary. It's a small place, and sometimes you have to wait to eat at one of the 12 tables. But it's always worth it.

There are two camps in New Orleans: those who prefer to eat oysters at Acme and those who prefer theirs across Iberville Street at Felix's. I am in the latter camp, primarily because Felix's has a better feel and a majestic marble oyster bar. Lee Harvey Oswald is said to have worked as a numbers runner out of there. Nothing is better than to stand at the rail at Felix's and have the shucker open a dozen—remember to tip him well—to accompany a cold Abita Amber.

And there's the matter of aphrodisiacs. Casanova, it is said, ate 50 oysters for breakfast whenever he had a chance. Maybe it's symbolic, maybe it's real. Some people will tell you oysters are high in zinc, and zinc is one of nature's most fertile nutrients. Who knows? But one thing is certain: Few things are more promising than a woman who has an appetite for oysters on the half shell.

OYSTER STEW

¼ lb. good butter with liquid
 1 cup chopped 4 cups whole
 onions milk
 3 cloves garlic, salt
 chopped white pepper
 1 cup chopped ½ cup finely
 celery chopped
 1 sprig thyme parsley, for
 2 tbsp. flour garnish
 2 pints oysters,

In a large, heavy pan, melt butter on a low flame. Add vegetables and thyme (but not parsley). Sauté for five minutes, stirring well. Add flour, and sauté for another two minutes. Add oysters (with liquid) and milk. Cook on medium flame for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add salt and white pepper to taste. Garnish with chopped parsley. Serve hot.



P&J'S OYSTER CEVICHE

2 dozen oysters, any color
 shucked ½ cup chopped
 1 large tomato, parsley
 skinned, seeded and chopped
 1 Vidalia onion, ½ cup vinegar
 chopped ½ cup orange
 2 jalapeño juice
 peppers, seeded salt
 and chopped black pepper
 ½ cup chopped juice of 2 limes
 sweet peppers, juice of 1 lemon

Strain oysters. Prepare marinade by combining all ingredients except oysters in a large bowl. Add oysters to marinade, cover and refrigerate overnight, mixing occasionally.

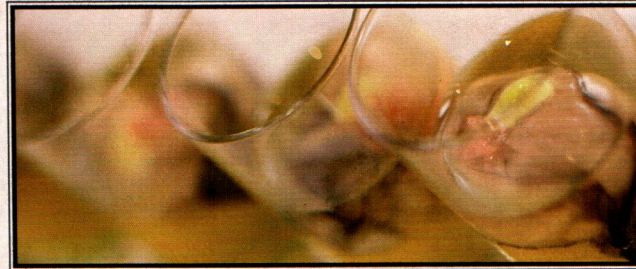
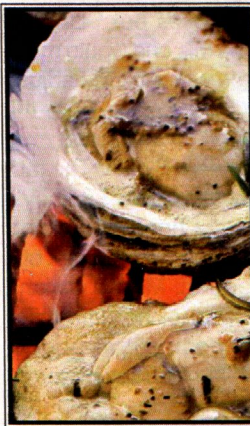
All recipes (except shooter, below) adapted from Kit Wohl's wonderful P&J Oyster Cookbook (Pelican Publishing).



CHARBROILED OYSTERS

1 lb. butter ½ cup grated
 3 cloves garlic, pecorino
 minced cheese
 salt parsley for
 black pepper garnish
 3 dozen 1 dash
 shucked Tabasco
 oysters, on sauce
 half shells

Fire up the Weber grill. Melt butter in a pan; stir in garlic, salt and pepper. Lace each oyster in its shell with the garlic-butter mix. Add a pinch of cheese. Grill over hot coals until oysters puff up and begin to curl. Garnish with parsley and a dash of Tabasco. Serve immediately.



SPICY OYSTER SHOOTER

1 tall shot glass 1 shucked oyster
 ½ ounce vodka 2 dashes Tabasco
 (cucumber flavor works well) 3 thin slices of
 jalapeño

Oyster shooter recipe from Michael Farrell, executive chef at Le Meritage at the Maison Dupuy.

WHAT TO DRINK WITH OYSTERS

Perhaps more than any other seafood, oysters shine when accompanied by alcohol. There are plenty of ways to go. If you're eating a dozen on the half shell, a cold beer is hard to beat. Pilsners are great, but fried oysters with Guinness are also special. If you're in the mood for something fancier, try a glass of champagne. The classic French accompaniment is Chablis (the 2006 Boudin Chablis is a bargain), but any minerally white Burgundy will work. Stay away from oak.

HOW TO EAT OYSTERS

It was a brave man who ate the first oyster. But after the first, it's a cinch. Don't be afraid to be sloppy. The best way to open an oyster is to have someone show you how. It's easy to cut yourself when shucking, so use the right utensil (try a Dexter Russell Sani-Safe oyster knife), and wear gloves or hold a towel. The biggest mistake home shuckers make is not washing the outside of the shells. Don't be reluctant to buy oysters already shucked—they'll do fine if you're cooking or making a stew. If you can, shuck your oysters immediately before consuming them.

ACCOMPANIMENTS

Sebastian Cabot, it is said, ate his oysters with black pepper and nothing else. The Southern standard is cold oysters on the half shell with cocktail sauce or a dash of Tabasco. If you want to go the French route, try a mignonette of shallots and vinegar. Or just a squeeze of lemon.

COCKTAIL SAUCE

Mix half a cup of ketchup, half a cup of horseradish, the juice of one lemon and a tablespoon of Worcestershire sauce. Saltine crackers are an optional accompaniment.

MIGNONETTE

Finely dice two shallots, add a lot of fresh black pepper and soak in half a cup of red wine vinegar.



OYSTER COOKERY:

Cassotrea virginica is extraordinarily versatile and lends itself to a wide variety of preparations. Classics such as oysters en brochette and oysters Rockefeller are always welcome, but oyster lovers can also delight in new, creative pairings. Chef Michael Farrell (right) has been opening eyes in New Orleans with his innovative cuisine. Check out his imaginative oyster dishes at Le Meritage at the Maison Dupuy.

