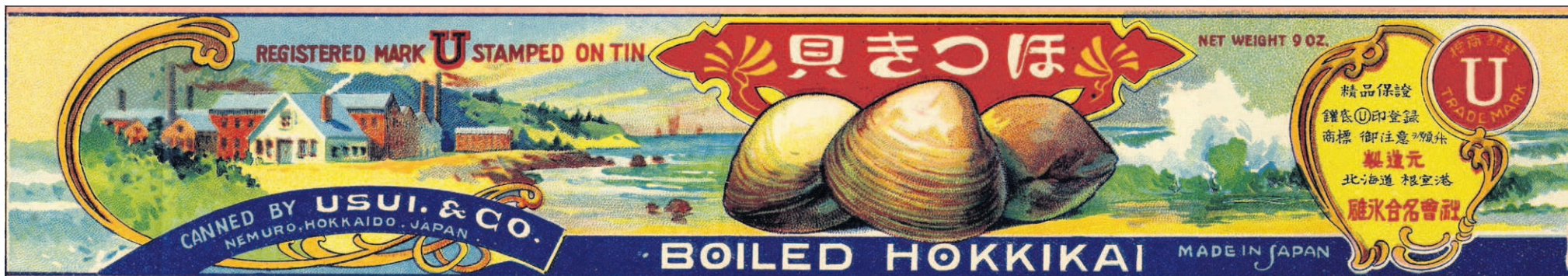


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A vintage Japanese Sakhalin surf clam "Hokkikai" can label, circa 1920 and canned by Usui & Co., Nemuro, Hokkaido, evokes a nostalgic vision of home for recent immigrants. Private Collection

ASIA COMES TO AMERICA

IN THE FORM OF OYSTERS AND CANNED GOODS

By **MATT WINTERS**
 EO Media Group



Writer's Notebook

Tastes of Asia

LONG BEACH, Wash. — The giant oysters of Willapa Bay have chanced upon a strategy that may preserve their lives long beyond the typical 30 months or so between a Pacific oyster's birth as a carefree larva and its fate as a delicious — albeit kind of disgusting — morsel.

Quoting National Geographic, our remote ancestors who first tried oysters were brave: "If undaunted by the oyster's rough, rock-hard, nearly-impossible-to-open shell, the undoubtedly famished first taster would then have confronted the gray, slimy, almost phlegmatic appearance of its plump body. Once beyond any primal gag reflex though, this seminal slurper would have been surprisingly rewarded with the oyster's delicate, toothy texture, rich flavor, and salty liquor."

Around Willapa Bay there have long been stray outcrops of gigantic feral Pacific oysters clinging to rocks and bridge abutments. But a friend recently told me of larger patches in commercial shellfish beds where the oysters have literally become too big to sell — and thus to die. Left to themselves, oysters can live 30 years, a dozen times longer than the age at which they're usually harvested. If this strategy worked for humans, I could give free reign to my homemade ice cream addiction. Growing large as Mr. Creosote in Monty Python's movie, I might live to be 1,000.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, consumers seem to have liked big oysters. Typical advertising from the 1890s: "The Saddle Rock Oysters are famous for their size and flavor and are packed expressly for the best family trade." A pint jar or can might have contained eight or fewer shucked Pacific oysters.

The Pacific oyster's scientific name is *Crassostrea gigas*, basically meaning thick giant oyster. In the near-century since Olympia Mayor E.N. Steele imported the first large batch from the Miyagi Prefecture area of Japan, their tendency to grow big and bigger has been a bit of a marketing problem.

Today, even oyster lovers like me have an element of culinary disquiet at the thought of downing one that's more than an ounce or so. In the 1930s, growers worked hard to cultivate a taste for oyster stew in the broader public, profitably utilizing the biggest oysters in diced-up form. Sadly, oyster stew didn't win this battle for America's fast-food dollars, or else there would be stew stands on street corners instead of McDonald's.

Although it pleases me to think of huge old oysters napping the decades away in Willapa's delicious tides, my local business-booster side wishes the Asian fetish for giant geoduck clams extended to other shellfish. It would be pleasing economic symmetry to export back to Japan their giant oysters that revived the U.S. West Coast industry after the stunning environmental collapse of native Olympia and transplanted Eastern oysters in the years around 1900.

I worship Asian markets — their buzzing chaos and underlying order, their almost-otherworldly symphony of human and animal voices, riotous smells, brain-busting colors and tongue-torturing flavors. After first encountering Vancouver's dangerous/wondrous Chinatown in the 1970s before the city became such a grotesquely expensive theme park, I went on to traipse through many more — naively fancying myself as a modern Marco Polo in the exotic East. What a pretentious clodhopper I was, but my enjoyment was genuine.

On a small Indonesian island, for instance, I once observed, "Only a thousand or so people selling a vast array of fruit, songbirds, roosters in bell-shaped bamboo cages, big seething pans of eight-inch-long eels, and something hidden up an old man's shirt, which I wasn't interested in seeing, far less buying."

Even here in the bland Pacific Northwest they are worth a visit, as my family did several years ago to DK Market in Renton, Washington, in pursuit of a brand of Japanese fizzy drink my daughter covets. A reviewer on Yelp reflects my impressions: "The funny thing about DK Market is that you rarely find what you're looking for, and you ALWAYS find what you aren't looking for! ... This place is basically why I love America. It represents all that is diverse and vibrant and sometimes quirky and strange (definitely without that intent). It's not pretty, but it's pretty cool. I could spend an hour going through this warehouse of produce and non-perishables from around the world!"

It was disappointing to read a couple years ago about the passing of Hiroshi's Anzen, a 109-year-old Portland institution established by the Matsushima family. It was the kind of neighborhood market that once served communities of recent immigrants and their children hungry for the tastes of the old country.

Willamette Week said of Anzen: "A happy jumble of Asian groceries and cookware sprouts from every available surface, even the ceiling: fresh and frozen sushi staples; hot, steamed hum bao rolls and squid salad by the pound; more types of nori than found in the Pacific Ocean; and a whole fridge case devoted to sticky fermented soybeans called natto ... Plus, lovely tea and sake sets, robes and paper umbrellas."

In an age when children don't often choose to take on the grueling hours demanded to run a grocery, the internet offers a sterile but convenient option for finding many Asian foods. Even the infamously stinky durian fruit can be purchased online: <http://bit.ly/2e8tWv8>. Personally, I consider durian a once-in-a-lifetime experience, for good reason.



A cargo of Japanese oyster seed is secured on a ship in Matsushima Bay, Japan in May 1947, bound for Washington state where oyster growers eagerly awaited resumption of trans-Pacific commerce and cooperation. Private Collection



Japanese-Americans played a key role in re-establishing the Pacific Northwest oyster industry, cultivating oysters native to Japan in Washington and Oregon waters. The New Washington Oyster Co. operated on Willapa Bay. Wing Luke Museum

Japan in the Pacific Northwest

Canned foods were once — and remain to some extent — a main way for East Asian people to maintain dietary traditions. In an interesting article (tinyurl.com/Japanese-Canned-Foods), Shigeru Kojima of Waseda University writes of the extensive industry that arose to supply Japanese-Americans with home-style products. These goods ended up in stores like Anzen.

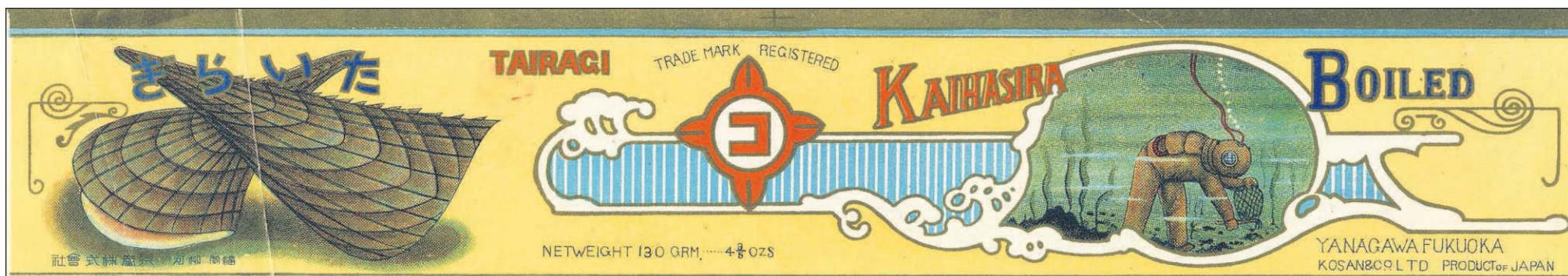
"Yorozu-ya may more commonly be called general stores, or grocery stores with general merchandise in addition to foods," Kojima writes of these multi-function community centers. In the early-20th century, "while the Japanese American populations in Portland and Seattle were approx. 1,300 and 7,400, respectively, there were roughly 40 import/export firms and general stores in the two cities. This means that there was one store selling Japanese merchandise for every 100 or 200 Japanese-American residents."

The canned foods sold in these stores were often inferior to fresh ingredients at home, but for Issei, Nisei and Sansei — first-, second- and third-generation Japanese-Americans — they were a precious reminder of what had been left behind. Advertisements and labels emphasized the old land; these "traditional images were meant to induce nostalgia and desire for Japan," Kojima observes.

Although I've only briefly been to Japan, it's high on my list of favorite cultures — and one reason I collect old Japanese can labels. A few are pictured here.

The synthesis of Asian and Pacific Northwestern cultures — which came together at Middle Village and Astoria in ways that deserve to be internationally famous — is a vital aspect of our vibrant local life. We should celebrate it every day.

Matt Winters is editor and publisher of the Chinook Observer and Coast River Business Journal. He lives in Ilwaco.



A label from about a century ago was designed to market tairagi or Pacific pen shells, a delicacy that is increasingly rare and expensive in Japan. Private Collection