



Michael Bendixen/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Travis Oja and Rita Welch of Nevør Shellfish Farm work with oysters at low tide in Netarts Bay.

Oyster taste influenced by where they live

By MICHAEL BENDIXEN
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THERE IS TENDERNESS IN THE TASTING OF PLACE — SOMEWHERE IN THE ACT OF GETTING TO KNOW IT, OF CONNECTING, OF BEING THERE, SOMEWHERE, EVEN FOR A MOMENT.

The oyster. This is a creature of the sea. It tastes like the sea, it smells like the sea. It smacks of sea-essence in that boundless way that escapes words. Some oysters have been known to filter 50 gallons of water a day.

Essentially, when you eat an oyster, you are eating what that oyster ate. You taste the flavor of its home, for better or worse.

Season has an outsized influence. Hood Canal's Hama Hamas, for example, taste sweet and briny in autumn, buttery when rain has swelled the Hama Hama River in the spring. They are thin and salty in summer after they spawned.

Many oysters taste their sweetest mid-winter when they are loaded with nourishing stores of glycogen and glycine in preparation for dormancy. You'd have to chew your oyster a lot to taste the sweetness of glycogen, the oyster's stored form of glucose.

Few are willing to do that. Glycine, an amino acid, tastes sweet to us and may be more recognizable in crab and shrimp.

As the oyster depletes its glycine reserves through winter, it starts to taste thin.

The taste of oysters is influenced by where they live. An oyster that dwells near a bay's entrance may taste brinier, where the impact from seawater is strong.

An oyster that lives far up a narrow inlet can taste minerally, even metallic, where the influence from land overpowers the sea.

Some say the Belon, a famous French oyster named after the river where it originates, tastes like sucking a copper penny. More specifically, an oyster's taste can be influenced by its depth in the water column. So, by definition, when you eat an oyster, you are eating place; in that particular slice of time, in that particular bay, in that particular inlet and within that particular foot

foot column of water.

If there's algae unique to that locale, you taste that. If there's pollution, you taste that, too. Because oysters are literally cemented to the substrate, it's hard to find any other food where you taste place with such specificity.

The closest analogy would be "terroir," the wine-making expression that speaks to how the land influences the character of wine. That's why the term "merroir" is apropos for oysters — how the sea subtly influences the character of oysters.

Oysters in the raw are adult food. Let's be honest. The squishy, gooey, sea-smelling creature is typically not high on a toddler's list of food requests. There's risk. It's spelled out clearly on a menu. Getting sick from consuming a raw filter feeder is a gen-

uine possibility.

But there is something in that risk that is alluring.

As food writer Rowan Jacobsen, author of the book "A Geography of Oysters," says: "When you eat an oyster, you wake up. Your senses become sharper — touch and smell and sight and taste."

In growing older, there's often a reverence for subtle things. An appreciation for pleasures that sneak up on you. Maybe the love for tasting oysters comes from aging, from memory stacked upon memory of time spent in the sand and surf — the potent memory of the vegetable-brine smell as you played with seaweed when you were 3.

What does the sea taste like? It's this and more.

But there is an attraction to the ritual. The careful shucking of the shell, the furtive squirt of mignonette. The meticulous turning and admiring of shells when done.

There is tenderness in the tasting of place — somewhere in the act of getting to know it, of connecting, of being there, somewhere, even for a moment.

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