



# throat-sliders

No excuse is required to consume copious numbers of this shellfish.

# The best oysters

are briny, sweet and creamy all at once; small ones served freshly shucked with just a squeeze of lemon juice or larger ones topped with ginger, green onion and a splash of soy and steamed in their half shell for just a few seconds. English author Jonathan Swift said: "He was a bold man who first ate an oyster", but these coastal- and estuary-dwelling, bi-valve molluscs have been eaten all over the world for at least 30,000 years. Most ancient civilisations farmed them well before the time of Christ and many found other uses for their shells, including grinding them into a poultice for wounds, ulcers and chilblains as the Romans did, or for writing on as the Greeks did when voting to send someone into exile, giving us the English word 'ostracise'.

## SPECIES

There are only two main species of food oysters: *ostreinae* and *crassostreinae*, or more simply, flat and cupped; though oyster shells are largely shaped by the surface on which they grow so the distinction can get a bit blurred at times. Flavours and textures vary greatly between species, and even within species, as, being filter feeders, they gain a lot of their taste from their environment and are often sold by location name.

**Pacific Oyster** (*Crassostrea gigas*), also called Japanese, Oriental or Portuguese\* oyster, and *huîtres creuses* in French, is a cupped oyster with an oval, sometimes elongated, shell often with spiky protrusions, and a black mantle around the oyster meat. Being very hardy, it has been introduced around the world to fill the gulf left by declining natural oyster beds, and is now the most widely cultivated oyster worldwide. Although it is generally considered to be lesser eating than the native oyster, production has risen sharply in recent years as it is faster growing, taking less than two years to reach maturity. It is grown in Tasmania, South Australia and Port Stephens (NSW) in Australia; in Marennes-Oléron (where 60 percent of France's oysters are grown) and in Brittany in France; and on the west coast of the USA. It represents a threat to native oysters if allowed to grow unchecked, and is often banned in areas where native species thrive. It is the largest oyster in the Asia Pacific region, where it's usually sold at around 15 cm (7 - 8 cm is the norm in Australia), and is grown in Hong Kong specifically for making oyster sauce.

**European Oyster** (*Ostrea edulis*) is a flat oyster with a round shell; historically the most important in Europe, though it only accounts for about ten percent of European oyster production today. It occurs naturally from the Norwegian Sea to the Mediterranean and is farmed in France (the largest producer), UK, Ireland, Belgium, The Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Greece, Croatia, Bosnia and Morocco. *Belons* (or *Armoricaines*, 'ar-mor' meaning 'by the sea', is the old name for Brittany) traditionally refers to oysters fattened in the mouth of the Belon River (in Morbihan, Brittany), the designation was later widened to include all flat Brittany oysters and today is often used for any flat French oyster.

Two other French designations can refer to either Pacific or European oysters:

- *Fines de Claire* are raised in the former salt basins of Marennes-Oléron on the west coast of France and are highly prized.
- *Vertes de Marennes* are oysters from Marennes-Oléron with a greenish tinge to their gills from an algae that occurs naturally in some basins. Some people say they have a distinctive hazelnut taste. The algal green tinge also occurs in some oysters from the River Crouch in Essex (UK) and Freycinet, Tasmania (Australia). Don't confuse this condition of green gills with oysters that have accumulated copper and are green throughout.

In the UK, oysters are usually named for the area where they're raised (or transplanted to for their final stage of growth), with some names referring to both European and Pacific oysters grown in that region, such as Pyefleet and Blackwater. Other popular oysters such as Helford (from Cornwall) are only European, while Whitstable in Kent distinguishes its native oysters from the Pacifics grown there by the designation Royal Whitstable. European oysters are also cultivated in the USA and South Africa.

\* The Portuguese oyster was originally thought to be a different species to the Pacific oyster, it now seems to be generally accepted that they are the same.

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photography by Franz Scheurer





## Some other common oysters from around the world:

**American oyster** (*Crassostrea virginica*) is a cupped oyster native to North America, occurring from Prince Edward Island to the Gulf of Mexico. It has a rough, oval shell that grows to a maximum of about 17 cm. Also called Atlantic or Eastern oyster, it is often named by location, with Blue Point or Box oyster from Long Island, Chincoteague from Chesapeake Bay, Virginia, and Wellfleet, grown slowly in the salt marshes of Cape Cod, among the most prized.

**Olympia oyster** (*Ostrea lurida*) is North America's flat oyster, native to the Pacific North West and found mainly in Puget Sound in Washington State. This tiny oyster (maximum 5 cm in diameter) is highly prized and takes up to five years to reach maturity.

**Sydney Rock oyster** (*Saccostrea glomerata*) is a cupped oyster native to Australia and New Zealand (also called Western or Albany Rock oyster in Western Australia and New Zealand Rock oyster). It has a triangular-shaped, smooth shell and a pale mantle to its actual meat. It is generally sold quite small (6 - 8 cm is common), and has a mild taste. It is popular in Southeast Asia where it's known as Hooded Oyster.

**Angasi oyster** (*Ostrea angasi*) is a flat oyster, also called Native or Mud Oyster, endemic to southern Australia. Once abundant, it has been scarce since the early 20th century, but has had a recent resurgence in popularity, especially on top restaurant menus, and is now farmed on the south coast of NSW.

**Bluff oyster** (*Ostrea chilensis*), New Zealand's most famous oyster, is also native to Chile. It is a flat oyster found throughout New Zealand, although mostly harvested in Foveaux Strait at the bottom of the South Island and landed in the town of Bluff.

**Pearl oyster** (*Pterididae* species) are more closely related to scallops than to other edible oysters. Their primary purpose is pearl and mother-of-pearl production, but the soft, sweet adductor muscle meat is popular, especially in Asia, served fried or in soup.

### BUYING

The old rule about not eating oysters during months without an 'r' in them (the warmer months in the northern hemisphere) relates not to oysters perishability in summer, but to the fact that these are the months when they spawn. It's slightly more complex however, as only flat oysters incubate their young inside their bodies until tiny shells form and then release them. Biting into one of these oysters just before spawning can be decidedly unpleasant as the tiny shells taste gritty and the oysters contain an oily greyish-black 'milk'. Cupped oysters release their eggs into the water where they are fertilised.

Just before spawning, these oysters (especially Rock, or Hooded, oysters) are plump, creamy, and, many consider, ideal for eating. All oysters are unpleasant just after spawning, often described as thin, watery and even sour, as all their nourishment has gone into their spat, and so are best left for a few months to regain their condition. Some people find that Pacific oysters are too rich just before spawning, although others relish their flavour.

### STORING

Oysters are best bought live and shucked just before serving. Store them in the warmest part of the refrigerator (usually the crisper) for up to a week, covered with a cloth that is kept damp. Once opened, lay them out flat in their shells, covered with plastic film or a damp cloth, store below 4°C and consume as soon as possible, within 24 hours. If you are not opening your own oysters, try to buy them unwashed with all their natural flavour, as they are only washed to prevent customers complaining about shell grit in their oysters.



### COOKING

While many people argue that the only way to eat oysters is freshly shucked with, perhaps, a squeeze of lemon, they can be steamed with garlic and green onions, poached in soups, deep-fried in light batter, pan-fried into an oyster omelette, baked in their shell or in pies, grilled with a topping such as Kilpatrick, Mornay or Rockefeller, barbecued, smoked, and pickled.

They can also be opened by cooking them on a barbecue or in a steamer. Whichever cooking method you choose, remember, the delicate flesh needs very little heat and you should stop cooking as soon as the edges of the meat start to curl. Larger Pacifics are often better served cooked, while the smaller oysters are ideal raw. A great party starter is Bloody Mary oyster shooters where oysters in the half shell are served alongside shots of Bloody Mary (equal parts vodka and tomato juice with a squeeze of lemon and dash each of Worcestershire and Tabasco sauces). **T**

## OYSTERS JOANNA



*Serves 6 as an entrée*  
*This dish is from food writer Franz Scheurer and is a sure way to convert those who think they only like raw oysters. They're great served as a nibble with pre-dinner drinks.*

36 oysters  
2 tbsp Szechuan peppercorns  
2 tbsp sea salt

1 cup fish sauce  
3 tbsp tapioca starch  
1 tsp white sesame seeds  
1 tsp black sesame seeds  
rocket leaves, to serve

### Dressing

1 tsp lime juice  
1 tsp fish sauce  
1/2 tsp sesame seed oil  
1 tsp Chinese rice wine  
1 tsp Chinese black vinegar  
1 small red chilli, seeded and julienne  
1 kaffir lime leaf, julienne

### Method

1. Pre-heat deep fryer to 170°C.
2. Place Szechuan peppercorns and sea salt in a small frying pan and dry-fry over medium heat until salt starts to colour. Pound to a fine powder in a mortar or spice grinder.
3. Remove oysters from shells, place in a shallow bowl, cover with fish sauce and marinate for 5 minutes.
4. Combine tapioca starch, sesame seeds and half the salt mixture, set aside.
5. Combine dressing ingredients, set aside.
6. Remove oysters from marinade, coat liberally with the tapioca mixture and deep-fry for a minute or two, until crisp and golden.
7. Serve on rocket leaves, sprinkle with a little extra salt mixture, spoon a little dressing over the top, and pass the rest separately.

## OYSTERS ROCKEFELLER



*Serves 6 as an entrée*  
*This dish was created in the late 1800s in Antoine's Restaurant in New Orleans. The story goes that the dish was named for John D. Rockefeller, Snr because the sauce was so rich. This version is by Sydney chef Janni Kyritsis.*

36 oysters  
125 grams butter  
10-cm stalk celery, chopped

4 green onions, sliced  
1/2 cup chopped flat-leaf parsley leaves  
1 tbsp chopped French tarragon leaves  
400g baby spinach leaves, washed and squeezed dry  
30ml Pernod  
1 cup fresh breadcrumbs  
Tabasco sauce to taste  
salt to taste

### Method

1. Heat butter in a frying pan and cook celery and spring onions until soft without colouring.
2. Add parsley, tarragon and spinach and cook until most of the water has evaporated, 3 - 5 minutes.
3. Add Pernod, Tabasco, salt and enough breadcrumbs to make a thick purée (you may not need all of the breadcrumbs depending on how dry the spinach mixture is). Process in a blender until smooth; if it seems too liquid, add some more breadcrumbs.
4. Taste for seasoning and add extra Tabasco or salt if needed. Refrigerate until cold.
5. Preheat oven to 220°C.
6. Mound a generous spoonful of spinach mixture on top of each of the oysters in the shell. Refrigerate until required.
7. Place oysters in oven for 3 - 4 minutes, until top is slightly browned, mixture is hot through, and oysters are just warmed but not overcooked.

## FOREIGN NAMES

**French** – huîtres (also a slang word for 'fool')

**German** – auster

**Dutch** – oester

**Polish** – ostryga

**Italian** – ostrea

**Spanish/Portuguese** – ostra

**Russian** – ustritsa

**Swedish** – ostron

**Norwegian/Danish** – østers

**Finnish** – osteri

**Icelandic** – ostrea

**Tunisian** – istridia

**Greek** – strídi

**Serbo-Croatian** – kamenica

**Welsh** – llymarch

**Burmese** – kha-mar

**Hong Kong** – mau lai

**Chinese** – mu li

**Japanese** – kaki

**Thai** – hoy nangrom

**Malay/Indonesian** – tiram

**Vietnamese** – hàu

**Filipino** – talaba

