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Loss Leaders on the Half Shell

A national binge on oysters is transforming an industry (and restaurants' economics).

BY KAREN STABINER

The joint is jumpin': Three mixologists in striped dress shirts, dark slacks and suspenders pour drinks almost as fast as three shuckers send platter after platter of raw oysters to their fate. A bluesy soundtrack wafts over the standing-room-only din as patrons sip and slurp, oblivious to the crowd that has gathered outside for what can be a 90-minute wait.

It feels like 9 o'clock on a Saturday night. It is 4:30 on a dank weekday afternoon.

This is oyster happy hour at Maison Premiere in Williamsburg, Brooklyn — a selection of 15 different kinds of oysters, most of them for \$1 each, with a handful at \$1.25 because they had to fly in from the West Coast. Krystof Zizka, a co-owner of the restaurant, says he doesn't make a penny on the oysters, though they are one of the reasons his three-year-old restau-



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rant is so successful.

The cheap late-afternoon oyster is to a restaurant what a liter bottle of Coca-Cola is to a supermarket: the loss leader that gets customers in the door, at which point they buy something else at full price. It's a nationwide binge, attributable in great part to the rapid growth of oyster farms on the East and West Coasts. East Coast production alone has doubled in the last five years, even as wild oyster reefs approach extinction.

Happy-hour oysters make up 60 percent of Maison Premiere's oyster sales, which range from 11,000 a week in winter months, when the back courtyard is closed, to a high of 14,000 a week in better weather. To wash them down, customers may order a \$15 glass of Chablis or one of dozens of

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An oyster platter at Maison Premiere in Brooklyn. Happy hours with \$1 oysters are helping small oyster farmers to thrive.

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cocktails in the \$10-to-\$14 range, said Mr. Zizka, a self-effacing 37-year-old wearing a gently rumpled windowpane-check shirt and slightly baggy khakis. Because oysters aren't filling, people often order more food from the full-price menu, where small plates run in the low teens.

"That's where we make our money," he said. "The people who come in aren't cheap."

Cultivated oysters make up about 90 percent of raw-bar sales, and they show up as far inland as Chicago, St. Louis and Minneapolis-St. Paul. They have the artisanal cachet attached to small suppliers; most are locally sourced, and the ones that aren't local still come from small farmers, albeit on another coast. They're a low-calorie chunk of protein, and they're a year-round crop, because careful temperature and bacteria monitoring has retired the old rule about avoiding them in the summer.

Diners between 18 and 34, with money to spend and a lifetime of food preferences to develop, are a perfect fit for oysters on the half shell, according to Ron Tanner, a vice president at the Specialty Food Association — likelier than any other age group to buy specialty foods.

"It's a generation that uses food to impress others," Mr. Tanner said. "That's probably behind the trend."



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Oysters acquire their distinctive flavor based on the water in which they grow, so they give people a lot to talk about. "They're coming from great growers who are developing their own terroir, like wine growers," said Jeffrey Hubbeling, general manager of Shaw's Crab House in Chicago. Fans can sound knowledgeable expounding on the relative brininess of a Sunken Meadow from Massachusetts and a Fanny Bay from British Columbia.

But Mark Kurlansky, author of "The Big Oyster," says something bigger than demographics is at work here: it's destiny. In the early 1900s, both rich and poor New Yorkers ate oysters, whether at elegant dinners or bought from street carts. He believes that the people lined up outside Maison Premiere are hard-wired to love this particular bivalve; they simply needed the opportunity.

"I think that history has its impact, whether you know about it or not," he said. "It just feels right to be sitting in a bar in New York City, eating oysters."

TWO HOURS EAST of happy hour, at the muted, monochromatic edge of Southold Bay on Long Island, Karen Rivara, an oyster farmer, works in a silent world on land owned by the Peconic Land Trust. She has spent a 30-year career surrounded by flasks and incubator tubs and strainers and nets; her office suite includes a tarp-skinned, igloo-shaped greenhouse, an underground hatchery and an oyster barn that sits at bay's edge, its seawater floor crisscrossed by walking planks. Her hand, offered for a firm shake, is smooth and disconcertingly cool, as though her veins pumped seawater.

In 2000, she formed the Noank Aquaculture Cooperative with eight other shellfish growers. Today, the cooperative sells 500,000 to 750,000 oysters a year, about double the volume of 10 years ago, with plans to increase the yield to 900,000 to one million this year. Ms. Rivara's own oysters include two trademarked brands: the Mystic, a regular on the Maison Premiere menu, and the smaller-run Peconic Pearl (which Mr. Zizka rarely orders because of its higher price).

Farms like hers have supplanted the wild oyster population, which was decimated in the last century by pollutants and disease, but farms are vulnerable to environmental threats as well: Pacific Northwest and Chesapeake Bay oyster crops have been damaged in recent years by higher acidity in the water as a result of fossil fuel emissions. Ms. Rivara blames increased population density and overtaxed



At top, the shellfish barn of the Noank Aquaculture Cooperative on Southold Bay on Long Island. Karen Rivara, above right, formed the coop with eight other growers in 2000. Among Ms. Rivara's customers is Maison Premiere in Brooklyn, above and above left, where Charles Forde and Aisha Blakey shared an oyster platter at a recent happy hour. Below, an engraving published in Harper's Weekly depicted oyster stands at Fulton Market in 1870.

septic systems for occasional bacteria-count spikes in her area. (State inspectors do regular testing.) Being a successful farmer requires not just vigilance but also a measure of good luck.

Ms. Rivara, 54, is the only cooperative member who breeds oysters, using some of her adult oysters as brood stock in the underground hatchery. Once the offspring are an inch big, she puts them in mesh bags and takes them into the bay, where they will live for 15 months to two years. She sells other batches to cooperative members and other local oyster farmers, who depend on her, utterly, to get started each season. "Not everybody," she said, "has the temperament for the tedious stuff."

It's a painstaking, multistep process: N.O.A.A. cooperative members start out growing four million to five million oysters, but end up taking no more than 750,000 to market.

IF NOT FOR KAREN RIVARA, according to Mr. Zizka, there would be no newly thriving local oyster industry. If not for oyster happy hour, there would be no Karen Rivara, at least not in her current expansionist mode. Recently, she had begun to think about life beyond oysters; she and her husband have just moved out of the land trust's house and into town rather than be on site 24 hours a day. But happy hour has made her the focus of a lot of attention, and the promise it holds is irresistible.

The potentially very profitable next step

is to grow more oysters and to change the way they make it to market. To that end, Ms. Rivara created the Mystic Oyster company and took on a 24-year-old director of sales and marketing, Andrew Blacker.

Mr. Blacker wants to redefine the distribution chain and funnel a larger percentage of profits to the farmer by eliminating the middleman. He estimates that Ms. Rivara now sells 90 percent of her yield through wholesale distributors, and only 10 percent in small batches to individual restaurants like Maison Premiere. His goal is to tip the balance in the opposite direction, which has benefits for restaurateurs like Mr. Zizka.

Direct-to-restaurant sales are the only way that Mr. Zizka can afford to keep variety high and prices low. He calls 20 oyster farmers each week to see what's available, then orders from as many as 15. While he uses a few distributors, most of his inven-

Oyster farmers are "developing their own terroir, like wine growers," one restaurant manager says, and are giving happy hour an artisanal cachet.

tory comes from "all over the place," he said: from small farmers in Maine, Connecticut and Virginia, and from Ms. Rivara.

His featured oysters cost him an average of 65 cents each, because that, combined with the price of ice, seaweed, condiments and labor, gets him to either a dollar or close enough that he's willing to absorb the small loss. The more expensive oysters on his list of almost three dozen are available only on the full-price menu. When West Coast oysters hit 66 to 71 cents a few months back, he bumped them up to \$1.25 at happy hour rather than dump them, assuming that his by-now loyal customers would tolerate the small uptick. They did.

Most restaurateurs fill otherwise empty seats with a less extravagant menu than Mr. Zizka's. Kevin Faerkin, general manager of the Grand Central Oyster Bar and Restaurant in Manhattan, says business exploded when the restaurant started serving happy-hour Blue Points for \$1.25, requiring him to hire two extra servers and an added shucker. On the West Coast, David Lentz, chef and owner of the Hun-

gry Cat in Southern California, had similar success with a small selection of half-price oysters on what had been quiet Monday nights. He now sells a total of 40 to 60 dozen oysters at his two Los Angeles locations on Mondays, about double his old numbers.

Farmers and distributors are scrambling to keep up with demand. One of Mr. Lentz's farmer-suppliers, Neal Maloney, says his five-year-old Morro Bay Oyster Company now does "crazy numbers" — so crazy that he ran out of oysters in 2012. He built his own hatchery to guarantee that he will have enough to meet demand this year.

The Lobster Place, which supplies hundreds of New York City restaurants, has had a 20 to 30 percent increase in wholesale oyster sales over the last year, both from existing clients who increase their orders and from new restaurants, said Brendan Hayes, president of the company's retail and restaurant division.

"Every month," he said, "we're contacted by a new local oyster farmer about where and what they're farming and the nuance of flavor from one variety to the next."

As Ms. Rivara put it: "Happy hour's good for us."

MOST DAYS, MR. ZIZKA drops in to survey the happy-hour scene at Maison Premiere, whether for his own weekday allotment of five to eight oysters, or on the weekends, when he gives his taste buds two days off. He doesn't see himself as part of a trend, which implies a temporary infatuation, but as a standard-bearer for a revived tradition. In that spirit, he is already in the "more than a thought, less than a signed lease" stage of planning a second outpost.

He likes to watch the shuckers, who work at the back of the bar; he admires the expertise that makes a difficult maneuver look graceful. They deftly pry open the hinge that holds the oyster's shell shut, using a small oyster knife that's slightly curved at the tip. Ms. Rivara describes the start of an oyster's life as "zen and voodoo"; Mr. Zizka says its end is just as elusive, because each type of oyster has a slightly different hinge.

"It's actually quite hard to do," he said, "and more about finesse than about being strong."

His team is necessarily fast. Aluminum trays of empty shells fly by like Frisbees, passing laden replacements on their way out; a new knot of people lingers outside. Mr. Zizka can't help but glance up as a tray passes by, to see who's ordering what. He can distinguish East Coast from West Coast oysters on sight, and by flavor — a point of pride and of exasperation, because the one thing that Mr. Zizka can't supervise effectively is the way the daily happy-hour mob enjoys its oysters.

"People order one of each, which is the poorest way to eat them," he said. "You're never going to get a true taste. Twelve different oysters is like 12 sips of different wine. Each one impacts the next, so there's no true flavor."

If it were up to him, he'd counsel people to try six oysters at a time, three each of two different varieties, to gain a better sense of the difference between a Barnstable oyster from Massachusetts ("briny, sweet, butter") and a Totten Inlet oyster from Washington State ("medium brine with watermelon accents, beach grown"). But it's out of his control; people seem to prefer the sampler approach.

"I've created a monster," he said.



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