Loss Leaders on the Half Shell

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

BY KAREN STARKER

The joint is jumpin': Three mollusks 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 bouncy soundtrack wafts over the standing-room-only din as patrons up and down, 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 $1.50 because they had to fly in from the West Coast. Krystel Ziska, 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 restaur-

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 exhaustion.

Happy-hour oysters make up 40 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 these 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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Oyster growers acquire their distribution facilities based on their size and location, which often translates into greater income for the growers. This is because larger growers can afford to invest in refrigerated trucks and storage facilities, which allow them to transport their oysters over longer distances. In contrast, smaller growers may have to sell their oysters locally or at markets, which can limit their potential sales and margins.

Two Hours East of Happy Days, at the Stonoe, a 30-year-old business managed by Sid and Josephine Rouslin, the oyster business is a family affair. The Rouslin family, which includes Sid, his wife Josephine, and their children, are passionate about growing high-quality oysters. They use traditional methods, such as hand-sorting and harvesting, to ensure the best possible oysters for their customers.

At the Nantucket Oyster Company, a family-owned business founded in 1959 by the late Martin Rouslin, the oyster business is also a family affair. The Rouslin family, which includes Martin's children and grandchildren, are dedicated to producing high-quality oysters. They use modern farming techniques, such as using floaters to maintain the oyster beds, to ensure the best possible oysters for their customers.

The Lighthouse, a restaurant located in the heart of Nantucket, is known for its fresh oysters. The restaurant owner, a third-generation oyster grower, sources his oysters from local growers, ensuring the best possible oysters for his customers. The restaurant also features a variety of oyster dishes, such as oysters on the half shell and oyster sliders, which highlight the quality of the oysters.

For more information on oyster farming, contact the Oyster Farmers Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting oyster farming. The association offers resources and support to oyster growers, such as training programs and marketing resources, to help them grow and sell their oysters.

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