



Forbes Global Life

## A Giant Shucking Sound

Dirk Smillie, 11.10.03

### The boutique oyster boom is on. New technology makes slurping safer.

Reading an oyster menu has become an esoteric challenge. There are Gliddens from Maine, Cuttyhunks from Massachusetts, Bras d'Ors from the Canadian Maritimes and Kumamotos, originally from Kyushu, Japan. This *Babette's Feast* of bivalves is courtesy not just of big producers but of small-time oyster farmers like Marshall Shnider.

After Shnider made a mint in the shrimp business, he started Farm 2 Market, his direct-to-consumer oyster company. He takes orders from patrons who lust after Shnider's 32 varieties of Pacific bivalves, shipped overnight from locales like Washington State's Willapa Bay, the Silicon Valley of oysterdom. "I feel like a seafood sommelier. People talk about oysters the way they choose wine," says Shnider.

Among the most popular: the delicate, mild-flavored Quilcene from Hood Canal in Puget Sound and the mighty Olympic Miyagi from Case Inlet, a briny 100mm beast with a cucumberish finish. There's also the shallow-cupped Belons from Discovery Bay, which deliver a hint of watermelon rind. (For a comprehensive guide to oysters, and the producers who can ship them to you overnight, visit [forbes.com/oyster](http://forbes.com/oyster).)

Oysters can live up to two weeks after they're pulled from the water, but the best-tasting ones will be sitting on your plate no more than three days after harvesting. It's one of the few animals Westerners eat alive.

Like French varietals, most oysters are named for the area from which they're farmed. And like wine, their flavor reflects their own marine *terroir*. Example: Fishers Island. Off the Connecticut coast, Steve and Sarah Malinowski harvest Atlantic oysters, brinier and more minerally than Shnider's critters. The Malinowskis sold 600,000 oysters last year, up from 300,000 in 1999, growing them on longlines and buoys in Block Island Sound. Varietal oysters are worth \$8 to \$10 a dozen wholesale, not counting the (considerable) shipping costs.

The Malinowskis sell 75% of their catch to celebrity cooks like Jean-Georges Vongrichen, Rick Moonen and Michael Lamonico. A favorite pairing is a plate of sweet and briny Atlantic oysters, brimming with juice (or oyster liqueur, as its known) with a bone-dry white Burgundy. Feeling more adventurous? Try a platter of the tight-shelled Cranberry Island oysters, from off the Maine coast, with a Chablis. The Cranberry oysters' strong mineral streak practically explodes in your mouth when it meets a Chablis from one of the many French vineyards whose soil is rich with decomposing oyster shells.

This isn't the first golden age of oysters. Oysters held an almost mythical status among high society of 17th-century Europe. In 1671 the Prince de Condé's steward fell on his sword after a basket of oysters arrived late for a lunch with Louis XIV.

As anyone who's encountered a bad bivalve can attest, the Prince's servant wasn't the last person to suffer oyster-related physical distress. The biggest problem facing today's producers is *Vibrio vulnificus*, a saltwater bacterium that can cause illness, even death. It's uncommon in cold

northern waters, but a seasonal problem for U.S. Gulf states.

Last May California's Department of Health Services slapped an embargo on Gulf oysters from April to October, when warm waters breed vibrio. But California's average three deaths a year is hardly an emergency, complain Gulf producers, who say the embargo has cost them \$20 million in sales this year.

How worried should you be about oysters? Not very. One easy precaution is to make sure you know where your oysters come from. Oysters grown in pristine northern waters, say Maine or Washington, have extremely low incidence of bacteria. Fishers Island oysters are tested every week. Marshall Shnider says that his are tested twice a week and, moreover, that there has never, ever been a case of vibrio from a farmed Pacific Northwest oyster. Science, meantime, is dealing with the Gulf states' problem (*see below*).

## **Squeeze Play**

Scientists in the 1890s knew that putting raw milk into a pressurized container would kill bacteria. But it was not until a century later that the first commercial attempts were made to zap bacteria with pressure. Now Avure Technologies, a Kent, Washington subsidiary of Flow International (maker of water-jet cutting tools), is selling pressure tanks that kill vibrio bacteria in oysters.

In the Avure process, a 2-meter basket of oysters is dropped into a two-story-high stainless steel cylinder, which is wrapped with 80 kilometers of high-tensile-strength steel wire. The water is pressurized to 20 tons per square inch. (That's a lot. Water pressure at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, the deepest place on earth, is only 8 tons.) After two minutes the pressure is released, and the oysters are safe to eat. "We're not really crushing the bacteria, just interrupting its metabolism," says Edmund Ting, Avure's head of research.

Eight of Avure's \$1.4 million machines are now in use. One of Louisiana's largest shellfish processors, Motivait, run by seventh-generation-oysterman Michael Voisin, puts 120,000 oysters a day through his two pressure units. "A drop in the bucket," Voisin admits. About 2.3 billion oysters are harvested in the U.S. annually.

As pressure treatment catches on, it may not just kill bacteria. When the oysters emerge, their shells are open and the meat detached. That could spell curtains for an age-old profession: that of the oyster shucker.