

Oysters

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When I was a child oysters were a crisis food. My father liked to eat them and my mother would cook them. I think that she liked oysters too. I hated them.

The smell of frying oysters in our little kitchen was metallic and unpleasant, even sickening, and they looked repulsive: stringy, with tubes and weird parts that you were actually supposed to eat—that *I* was supposed to eat, that I was supposed to put in my mouth, chew, unavoidably taste and then *swallow*.

For some reason, my profound aversion to oysters was a challenge to my parents; it was as though their parental adequacy was based upon whether or not they could make me eat oysters. Of course I could not. My revulsion was proportionate to their insistence. After the others had finished dinner I would still be hunched over my dinner plate in a misery of resistance and loathing. No good ever came of it.

I have nothing against oysters as living organisms. Look at an oyster shell: beautiful rough layers of chalky white and purple-tinged calcium carbonate and silicate, flared and furrowed almost as though fingers pulled and pressed it into shape. See the smooth interior with small fans of pastel brown and darker black and along the edges a lovely shine of iridescence. All housing for the soft-bodied creature called oyster.

And this from Wikipedia about that soft-bodied creature:

In addition to their gills, oysters can also exchange gases across their mantle, which is lined with many small, thin-walled blood vessels. A small, three-chambered heart, lying under the adductor muscle, pumps colorless blood to all parts of the body. At the same time, two kidneys, located on the underside of the muscle, remove waste products from the blood.

While some oysters have two sexes (European Oyster & Olympia Oyster), their reproductive organs contain both eggs and sperm. Because of this, it is technically possible for an oyster to fertilize its own egg. The gonads surround the digestive organs and are made up of sex cells, branching tubules and connective tissue.

So you see, they are a marvel of interesting and complex design, but my god, do you really want to eat that? Well, many people do, and that is why if you were to drive to one of the coastal oyster processing facilities at Willapa Bay or Tillamook Bay or Newport you might first encounter enormous stacks and bales of oyster shells.

Look further and somewhere perhaps you'll see trucks and a clattering column of oysters falling onto a conveyer belt that disappears into a hatch on the side of a building.

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Go inside where there might be a small, restaurant—nothing fancy: linoleum on the floor and refrigerated cases of fish, clams, and oysters. And maybe you'll find a viewing area, large glass windows set into a wall.

I remember the first time that I stood behind one of those windows and watched the oyster shuckers. Working in low light in a narrow little room, perhaps ten people, men and women, mostly Hispanic, stood on two sides of a long table heaped with oysters. With special knives they worked with unbelievable speed, jabbing into the bivalve's hinge, prying open shell after shell and dumping the pale limp bodies into big glass jars. Even through the glass I thought I could hear the sharp stabbing and scraping of their knives and occasional soft voices.

Seeing us watching, one young man with a naked oyster in his hand did something suggestive with it. I only intuit this because to me an oyster will never suggest more than oyster and unhappy childhood dinners, but after his manipulation of the oyster the guy smirked and said something to the person working next to him. We all know that oysters are associated with male potency. And there is a bar in northern Washington not far from Hood Canal called The Whistling Oyster where you used to be able to buy a t-shirt that said, "Shuck me, suck me, eat me with a spoon." (Not much intuition required there.) I remember my friend Ruben's story of youthful nights of macho drunkenness in Mexico City and the morning after antidote of long steam baths and platters of—oysters.

Oysters are sometimes associated with elegant dining and beach parties. But when people go to the store to buy jars of shucked oysters for that special dinner or communal feed, how many know whose hands were responsible for getting those oysters from shell to shelf?

I stood there watching the hands of men and women flying through stacks of oysters, jabbing, slicing, shucking—and began assessing the cinematic potential of the scene. How would we light the space in which they were working? Would there be room to set up tripods or would hand-held cameras be better? Could we even get permission from management to get in there? Would the oyster shuckers agree to be filmed? Let's find out.

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