The Oyster

"Where, How and When to Find, Breed, Cook and Eat It"



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(*From a curious Glyptic in possession of the Author.*)

THE OYSTER;

WHERE, HOW, AND WHEN TO FIND, BREED, COOK, AND EAT IT.



CHAPTER I.

THE OYSTER IN SEASON.

The R. canon correct; Alimentary Qualities of the Oyster; Profitable Investment; Billingsgate, and London Consumption; English Oyster-beds; Jersey Oysters; French Oyster-beds on the Coast of Brittany.



OF the Millions who live to eat and eat to live in this wide world of ours, how few are there who do not, at

proper times and seasons, enjoy a good oyster. It may not be an ungrateful task, therefore, if I endeavour to inform them what species of animal the little succulent shell-fish is, that affords to man so much gastronomical enjoyment—how born and bred and nurtured; when, and where; and, lastly, how best it may be eaten, whether in its living and natural state, or having undergone the ordeal of cooking by the skill of a superior artist.

I have oftentimes been told that it is a mere question of fastidiousness, or fashion, that oysters should be served for human food only at a certain fixed period of the year—those months possessing the letter *r* being proverbially the only months when the oyster is fit for human food. Why not, such reasoners have said, eat oysters all the year round? Life is short. Why not obtain the first of gastronomical enjoyments every month of the year and every day of the month? I can in no manner go with these opinions, either from my practical knowledge of the oyster, or from any just reasoning.

I am aware that there are many good men and true, and others calling themselves, somewhat erroneously, sportsmen, beyond the white cliffs of Britain, who would eat an oyster on the hottest day of June and July as they would a partridge, a pheasant, or a salmon at any season of the year. Sufficient the names oyster, partridge, pheasant—all gastronomical delights—all to be eaten, and by them eaten whensoever and wheresoever served, what matters it? I am also aware that in our good City of London, in the hottest and earliest days of August,[1] oysters are gulped

down by the thousand: it is, nevertheless, an error—a revolting, unhealthy, unclean error—which ought to be denied, both at home and abroad, by the strong hand of the law.

I, for my part, utterly and entirely ignore fish or fowl of the game species, as fit for human food during the seasons of breeding; and although an oyster may be eatable in August, if the month be hot it is rarely fresh; and what is more disgusting or more likely to be injurious to man than a stale oyster? That which I have said, however, on the oyster in this little book which I offer to the million—for the million are interested in the subject—will, I hope, induce those who have hitherto broken through a rule strictly adhered to by all gastronomes, to abstain in future; and those who have hitherto enjoyed oyster-eating, fearlessly to eat on and secure the first and foremost of all gastronomical indulgences provided for man—only in due season.

On the 25th of July, says Brand, the antiquary, being St. James the Apostle's Day, the priests of old were wont to bless apples; and a popular belief too, in 1588, though generally ignored in the more enlightened days in which we live, was, that whoever ate oysters on that day would not be without money for the remainder of the year. This is very probable, for without they were selected with great care, disease and even death might follow. This conjunction of apples and oysters on St. James's Day may have suggested Bianca's remark in the "Taming of the Shrew," when comparing the resemblance of the old Pedant to that

of Vincentio, which she remarks was as complete as that of an oyster to an apple.

One must, therefore, take care not to eat oysters during the months of June and July, because they are unwholesome on account of the spawning-time; and also be careful in their selection in August. There are instances when persons, after having eaten oysters during these months, have become ill, and have even died. Last summer, at Ostend, thirty persons were taken ill in consequence of having eaten oysters in the month of July. They are, during these months, very thin, and without taste; in the month of September they become again fat and eatable, which may be accounted for by the fact of their being self-generated. The strength of the poor oysters is entirely spent in fattening themselves, in order the more to tickle the palate of the epicure in the proper season.

Now let us proceed to open the oyster.

The Oyster! The mere writing of the word creates sensations of succulence—gastronomical pleasures, nutritive food, easy digestion, palatable indulgence—then go sleep in peace!

Lobster salads, beef and veal, truffles and chestnuts, all good in their way, are, nevertheless, attended with evil consequences to the human frame.

But oysters—ye pleasant companions of the midnight hours, or the mid-day feast; is there a man, woman or child in all Europe—ay, or in Asia, Africa, or America—who does not owe you a debt of gratitude which they re-

pay to the full by the enjoyment of your society *tête-à-tête*? You are eaten raw and alive, cooked and scolloped, in sauce and without sauce. True, true, oh oyster! thou art the best beloved of the loved!

The oyster, when eaten moderately, is, without contradiction, a wholesome food, and one of the greatest delicacies in the world. It contains much nutritive substance, which is very digestive, and produces a peculiar charm and an inexplicable pleasure. After having eaten oysters we feel joyous, light, and agreeable—yes, one might say, fabulously well. He who has eaten for the first time oysters is best enabled to judge of this; for, soon after having eaten them, he will experience a sensation he never felt before, and never had an idea of. This sensation scarcely remains with people who eat oysters every day; it is more practically felt when oysters are eaten for breakfast or before dinner, although they are also very wholesome in the evening, when taken moderately. Gourmets and epicures eat the oyster in its natural state, except that the beard is taken away. In England it is eaten with pepper, in Holland with vinegar, in Germany frequently with lemon-juice; but I am of the opinion, and am convinced, that when taken with the liquor they still contain, they are more digestible and more tasty. The opinion that this fluid is salt water, is an error; it is the white blood of the oyster itself, which it emits when injured in having its upper shell broken off. If it were sea-water, it would have a disagreeable bitter taste, and cause sickness; but as this does not take place, but on the contrary gives a fine taste to the oyster, the error is evident. The error appears to arise from the fact that uncon-

scientious oyster dealers wash the oysters with salt and water in order to give them a better appearance, as they say.

"The oyster," says a writer in No. 824 of the "Family Herald"—that most agreeable of all window-seat books—"is a species of food combining the most precious alimentary qualities. Its meat is soft, firm, and delicate. It has sufficient flavour to please the taste, but not enough to excite to surfeit. Through a quality peculiar to itself, it favours the intestinal and gastric absorption, mixing easily with other food; and, assimilating with the juices of the stomach, it aids and favours the digestive functions. There is no other alimentary substance, not even excepting bread, which does not produce indigestion under certain given circumstances, but oysters never. This is a homage due to them. They may be eaten to-day, to-morrow, for ever, in profusion; indigestion is not to be feared, and we may be certain that no doctor was ever called in through their fault. Of course we except cooked oysters. Besides their valuable digestive qualities, oysters supply a recipe not to be despised in the liquor they contain. It is produced by the sea-water they have swallowed, but which, having been digested, has lost the peculiar bitterness of salt water. This oyster-water is limpid, and slightly saline in taste. Far from being purgative, like sea-water, it promotes digestion. It keeps the oysters themselves fresh, prolongs their life for some time until it is destroyed in our stomachs, or until the oyster has been transformed into a portion of ourselves."

The degree of importance which different persons attach to matters connected with the world in which we live, depends, of course, in a great measure, on the manner in which they view them.

One person considers a loving wife, and four hundred a year, wealth and happiness; another would be miserable without four thousand, and could dispense with the wife. Some consider a post with five thousand a year a tolerable means of existence; others a commissionership with twelve hundred. Some seek a good consulship; others, till they have travelled from St. Petersburg and back in a telega, or sledge, half a dozen times during mid-winter, use the interest, which in other days would have secured a snug governorship, even in the Island of Barataria, to obtain a queen's messenger's place. At least so it used to be. Whether competitive examinations will lead to our having the right man in the right place, the round pegs in round holes, and the square pegs in square ones, still remains to be seen. And so is it with most things in life, whether personal or gastronomical. Different men are of different opinions; some like apples, and some like—onions; but I have scarcely ever yet met with the man who has refused a thoroughly good oyster.

There is not a man, however unobservant, but knows that oysters are a great source of profit to some of that multitude which rises every morning without knowing exactly how, when, and where it shall dine. Billingsgate in the oyster season is a sight and a caution. Boats coming in loaded; porters struggling with baskets and sacks; early