

# No lemon or pepper?

The French passion for oysters requires an Anglo-Saxon stiff upper lip, writes Rebecca Rose

There is only one way to eat an oyster," says oyster cultivator Baptiste Montant, a sandy-haired man wearing a T-shirt and flip-flops. "And that is *au naturel*." Digging his hand deep into a crate of salt water, he pulls out a grained oyster shell and shucks it open with a penknife. Loosening the glistening, dark-rimmed mollusc from its pearly bed, he slurps it down unadorned. A dreamy, appreciative expression sweeps across his face.

No lemon or pepper? I ask weakly as he hands me my own muscular specimen. Realising this is an occasion for that Anglo-Saxon stiff upper-lip so admired by the French, I siphon the oyster from its shell, chewing it once to make sure it is dead, and gulp it down. It is cool and fresh-tasting, like a mouthful of gelatinous sea water... sea phlegm. High quality sea phlegm.

Montant works for David Hervé's oyster farm in the Marenne area of the Charente-Maritime region of western France. The mineral-rich marshy terrain, irrigated by sea water from the nearby Atlantic coast, offers ideal conditions for oyster production. Hervé's oysters are often dark or greenish-rimmed, with a distinctive - and for oyster connoisseurs, highly desirable - nutty taste.

Oyster tasting is being offered more and more by farms in Charente-Maritime, a draw for tourists to the region. Hervé's farm is situated on an island among the salt marshes, where the oysters are reared in specially constructed *claires*, or shallow ponds. The farm has an annual turnover of €2m and Hervé's oysters are exported to some

of the world's top restaurants, from Hong Kong to Russia. And, of course, they're despatched to Paris, where, feted on silver platters, they grace the tables of Michelin three-star restaurants, such as Pierre Gagnaire and the restaurant at the Hotel Bristol.

Like many oyster producers on France's

**Pearly**  
Above, oyster farming on the Ile de Ré, on the French Atlantic coast. Right, a basket of local oysters

Atlantic coast, Hervé rears his oysters à l'ancienne, according to old-fashioned methods. Life for an oyster here is brief but luxurious. Baby oysters are brought in from the sea and reared carefully in clay ponds rich in nutrients. Each oyster is assigned a one square metre living space, at least five to 10 times more than the average farmed French oyster. Hervé's family has been rearing oysters in this way for three generations. As with all French oysters, theirs are classified by size and how long they are left to mature, or *affiner*, in the ponds. The longer they languish in their briny beds, the higher their profile and attendant price. *Fine de claire* are reared for one month; *spéciales*, for three months; and *pouasse en claire* - the ultimate oyster - for six months minimum.

Although any real difference in taste may be imperceptible to non-Gallic palates, discerning French tend to prefer oysters from their own region. The taste, size and appearance of an oyster depends vastly on its terroir - ie where it is cultivated. And whereas we see oysters as a decadent treat, for French living on the littoral, they're a regular source of protein. Our notion of oysters as aphrodisiac is laughed off as an Anglo-Saxon joke. And the American propensity for rinsed oysters is abhorred by French purists - why wash away the taste of the sea, when that is the oyster's raison d'être?

After our visit to Hervé's farm, we head back to the coast passing the port of La Rochelle. We are headed to Ile de Ré, the chic Atlantic island that Parisians flock to, gorging themselves on

*fruits de mer* year-round. The Charente-Maritime area of the Atlantic coast, only a few hours by train from Paris, is regarded as one of the best spots in France for oysters, langoustines and other marine delicacies.

At the Hotel de Toiras in the capital St-Martin, the oysters we took with us from Hervé's farm are waiting for us in the dining room, shucked and

their noses up at ovulating oysters, many find them off-puttingly corpulent. Triploids are adapted to be sterile and, therefore, transparent year-round. Cultivation of triploids is catching on fast with the younger generation of oyster farmers, who realise the market potential of year-round reliability. David Hervé, who rears these summer oysters as he calls them, is a perfect example. But whether a triploid is an oyster that has been artificially messed around with or simply one grown with an extra chromosome is a subject that hotly divides opinion.

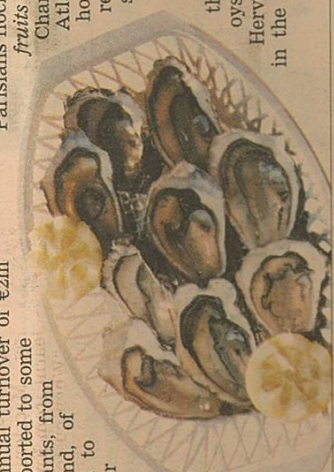
Judging from the disgusted expression on his face, the proprietor doesn't balk at a milky oyster. And as I slurp down a particularly whitish, lumpy specimen, I try not to either.

## Details

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**Hotel de Toiras**, 1 quai Job Foran, 17410 Saint-Martin-de-Ré, tel: +33 5-46 35 40 32; [www.hotel-de-toiras.com](http://www.hotel-de-toiras.com)

**Bistro Marin**, 10 quai Nicolas Baudin, 17410 Saint-Martin-de-Ré, Ile de Ré tel: +33 5-46 68 74 66



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