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# RECONSIDER THE OYSTER

BY GARRETT MCCORD PHOTOS BY GABRIEL TEAGUE

There's a decadence about oysters that's a little bit odd when you stop to ponder what about them makes them so. Oysters are simple bivalve mollusks that spend their life filtering out microflora from the water. They spend years in the wild or in nurseries on buoys, lines, and barrels before they grow to appropriate farming size. Tough gloves must be worn, special knives procured, and plenty of elbow grease applied to crack them open. The sharp and knobby stone-like shells hide the oyster's meat that most children (and some adults) would describe as a giant sea-booger.

Consider, then, what you actually eat. We simply call it the oyster, but what is devoured is the creature's entire being: gills, gonads, kidneys, blood, a three-chambered heart, and every other little oyster organ and ichor. None of it sounds exactly appetizing and it doesn't help when you stop and realize the oyster is still alive when you eat it.

Yet, there is a reason people pluck these pearly half-shells off beds of crushed ice and greedily, clumsily slurp them down in excess as if there is a prize at the bottom (perhaps, more

oysters?). The meat is sweet, tender, and at times somewhat creamy. Most of all, the oyster is briny and cold. It's the flavor of the ocean distilled and concentrated; primal tastes that appeal to both the instinctual and poetic sides of the palate.

Martin Strain, owner of the Point Reyes Oyster Company located in Tomales, California, understands the allure of the oyster. Wanting to escape an office environment Strain went to Washington State University to start learning about proper, responsible bivalve farming before getting his first intertidal lease.

Strain explained to me that the history of oyster farming and eating isn't a pleasant one. "The Gold Rush was responsible for hurting the natural oyster population. Oysters weren't really plentiful in California to begin with. Pressure harvests and pollution really hurt them. Not only did runoff from gold mining hurt [the oysters'] environment, but mercury mining caused a lot of damage." Mercury, an intensely toxic element, is considered to be the main cause of wiping out most of the natural oyster population in the West Coast.

Today, the wild oyster is even more threatened by dredge