

FOCUS - Agriculture & Aquaculture

A TRUE DELICACY

Summer oysters are the best oysters

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Special to The Star Democrat

Oysters have undergone a remarkable transformation thanks to advancements in oyster farming techniques. These delicious bivalves can now be savored throughout the year, dispelling the notion that oysters are only meant to be consumed in months with an "r." With a focus on quality, refrigeration, and adherence to Maryland regulations, oyster farmers are committed to providing an exceptional oyster experience. By protecting the health of oyster populations and the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem, Maryland ensures the sustainability and continued availability of its renowned oysters.

A little history

When it comes to indulging in the finest seafood delicacies, Maryland has always held a special status. Among the numerous treasures offered by the Chesapeake Bay, oysters take center stage. These briny bivalves, known for their unique flavor and versatility, have been a culinary delight for centuries. While a common belief suggested that oysters were best consumed in months with an "r," recent advancements in oyster farming, particularly the cultivation of triploid oysters, have made summertime oysters delectable when wild harvest diploids are not. The

summertime oyster experience has now reached new heights and a burgeoning following continues year after year.

Triploids: A Summer Treat; Forget the R

Traditionally, the "r" rule has guided oyster enthusiasts, urging them to consume oysters only in months with an "r" in their names, namely September through April. This guideline emerged from the understanding that wild (diploid) oysters spawn during warmer months, which can affect their flavor and especially texture. However, with the development of triploid oysters, this point of view has happily shifted to year-long enjoyment. Triploids are oysters with three sets of chromosomes, rendering them sterile, just like seedless watermelon and grapes. As a result, they don't undergo the spawning process and maintain their succulence throughout the entire year, particularly in the summer months.

Triploid oysters offer numerous advantages. First, their plump and meaty texture is highly desirable, making them perfect for shucking and enjoying raw. The creamy, briny flavor of summer triploid oysters is truly a treat for the taste buds. Second, because triploids do not spawn, they allocate their energy towards growth and building flavor, resulting in a more consistent and appeal-

ing taste. This consistency allows consumers to relish the distinctive taste of Maryland oysters all year round without compromising on quality.

Maintaining Quality: A Priority

To ensure the best oyster experience, regardless of the season, Maryland oyster farmers prioritize quality. From the very beginning of the cultivation process, strict measures are taken to maintain the oyster's well-being. Farmers carefully select healthy oyster larvae to nurture from special breeding facilities on the East Coast and provide them with the ideal environment to grow. By monitoring the salinity and water quality, these oyster farmers create the perfect conditions for the oysters to thrive and develop their unique flavor profile.

Some summer oyster farms in Maryland have adopted innovative methods to cultivate their oysters, utilizing specialized floating cages. These floating cages are designed to suspend the oysters in the water column, providing them with optimal conditions for growth and development. The cages allow for a controlled environment where the oysters can feed on nutrient-rich surface waters and are protected from predators. By suspending the oysters off the seafloor, farmers can minimize the risk of bottom-dwelling organisms attaching to the shells, ensuring that the oysters grow clean and free of

grit. Through the use of floating cages, Maryland oyster farmers are revolutionizing the summertime oyster industry, providing a consistent supply of high-quality oysters for consumers to enjoy, and cleaning our waters in the process.

Refrigeration: Preserving Freshness

Maintaining the freshness of oysters is crucial, especially during the summer months. Refrigeration plays a vital role in preserving the quality and taste of these local treats. Throughout the distribution process, from the farm to the restaurant or market, proper refrigeration is maintained to prevent spoilage. This commitment to constant refrigeration guarantees that oysters retain their flavor, texture, and nutritional value.

After harvest, oysters are rapidly chilled to temperatures that slow down their metabolism. This process not only ensures that the oysters remain fresh but also extends their shelf life. Additionally, summer oysters can only be harvested in the morning and must be promptly cooled as soon as they are dockside. Did you know that each oyster is tagged for the time and location of its harvest? Each one you are served can be tracked!

So this summer, don't miss out! Go enjoy Maryland's best-ever oysters and immerse yourself in the bounty of the Chesapeake Bay.

Lawrence Rudner, PhD, and



KARL GUSSOW

The Oyster Girl, by Karl Gussow, 1882



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A tray of oysters makes for a delicious feast.

Pamela Getson, PhD, changed oystergirl.us). They offer teaching and instruction through operate Oyster Girl Oysters Chesapeake Bay Maritime LLC in Harris Creek (<https://oystergirl.us>) Museum.

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