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New York on the Half Shell

BY DAN MILNER

Just after Christmas, I walked past the famous Grand Central Oyster Bar, which is actually a cavernous restaurant. I haven't been inside for years, mainly because the friend who regularly invites me keeps breaking our dates, but it is a truly amazing place, particularly considering its location in a busy railroad station. Over an average twelve-month period, the restaurant serves between fifty and seventy-five varieties of oysters. Each is somewhat different in appearance and taste, but nearly all are variants of the eastern oyster or *Crassostrea virginica*, the species native to the Atlantic and Gulf seaboard.

The Hudson River estuary was once home to the largest actively worked oyster ground in the world. It stretched from Raritan Bay, south of Staten Island, to Croton-on-Hudson, more than thirty miles upstream from the Battery. John Waldman, professor of biology at Queens College, estimates the total area at 350 square miles.

The first Americans consumed large quantities of oysters. Given their abundance, they were easy pickings. Early Dutch settlers commented that some were so large that they needed to be cut into pieces before eating. By 1800, when the population of Manhattan had swelled to more than 60,000 (a 55 percent increase from 1790 and about one-tenth of the state's entire population), street vendors in the now-busy city sold oysters on the half shell. Charles Dickens tasted New York's delicious offerings during his 1842 visit. Their popularity was at its height between the 1830s and 1870s.

At the time of the Civil War, Henry De Marsan printed a broadside at his shop on Chatham Street (now Park Row) about a shattered affair between the daughter of an oyster merchant and a mollusk gatherer from the Garden State. In this comic song, the romance is broken by a member of a German (Deutsch) ethnic U.S. Army regiment encamped on Staten Island. De Marsan's song sheet notes that "The Jersey Fisherman" was popularized by "Dick McGowan, the great Favorite Banjoist."

Down near the Battery,
A young gal used to dwell,
Her father kept an oyster stand,
And sold 'em on de shell.
Her mother she sold shaving soap,
For renovating coats:
But the gal sold sour apples
On the Fulton ferry boats.

There was a Jersey fisherman,
His name it was Mr. Crank,
He used to dig for muscles
On the Coney Island banks.
He fell in love with this young gal,
Before that he did know her,
From seeing her picter painted
On an omnibuses door.

He took her to Staten Island,
Where the sogers sleep in tents,
And her cruel heart was konkered
By the Dutch regiments.
Come shange de rings mit me, my tear,
A Dutchman he did say,
He mashed his drum on de fisherman's head,
An' they both did run away.

Now all you Jersey musclemen,
What ever you may do,
Don't go near the oyster gals,
Or they'll get you in a stew.
Hail Columbia up in the garret,
Yankee doodle shouta,
By an' by de policeman,
He can nix fetch him outa.

New York consumption declined beginning in the 1880s, according to Waldman, although some 765 million oysters were still being eaten annually at the start of that decade. Oyster culture in the city was knocked out by three blows: overharvesting, siltation from dredging, and—the toxic punch—pollution. While oysters can clean huge amounts of water—one oyster can filter about a gallon of water in an hour—they do have their limits. In some areas, raw sewage pipes led directly to oyster beds. Other contaminating factors were the leakage of petroleum products and the wholesale dumping of garbage. Dumping twelve miles offshore was always accompanied by a "washback" effect. Although the practice ceased in 1987, it was immortalized in song

a century earlier by Edward Harrigan in "On Board o' the Muddy Day."

I've command of a trim-built scow,
was launched at Hackensack;
'Twas just one year ago when the tide
was very slack;
I carry garbage down from the city to
the sea;
The finest boat in all the fleet is the
gallant Muddy Day.

Once typhoid fever was linked to local shellfish, the public lost its taste for oysters. The last harvest in New York City waters was in 1927, the year Babe Ruth hit his record-setting sixty home runs. Happily, the Hudson River estuary cleanup mandated by the Clean Water Act of 1972 and other legislation is progressing well. A decade ago when I was stationed as a ranger at the Statue of Liberty, we were able to grow oysters below the north dock as part of a pilot harbor health program. No, we did not eat them! But New York oysters are now farmed commercially off Long Island in Shinnecock, Great South, and Oyster bays.

Bob Wright, a Staten Island native and retired high school teacher, produced the CD *Oyster Aristocracy* (2009), a musical retrospective about New York Bay partially funded by the New York State Council on the Arts and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. The songs are new, and they include "Down by the Oyster Barges," "Downing's Oyster Bar," and "The Captains of Captains Row." It's certainly worth a listen. Why not ask your local library to get a copy? Bob Wright's web site is www.bojomusic.com. If your appetite for oysters goes further, look for a copy of John Waldman's book *Heartbeats in the Muck* (2000) or Mark Kurlansky's *The Big Oyster* (2007). ▼

Dan Milner comes from a long line of traditional Irish singers. A cultural geographer and former ranger in the National Park Service, he is currently writing his doctoral dissertation. Dan's newest recording, *Civil War Naval Songs*, was released by Smithsonian Folkways in April 2011.



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