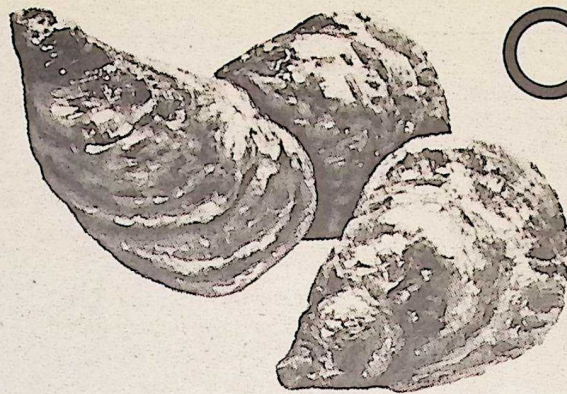


From Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

by Lydia Lovell



Oyster Roister

It's been a long wait. Like as not, you don't remember what the weather was that day nor the headlines in the daily paper. Even if April 30th is your birthday or wedding anniversary, I'll bet you have to stop and think to recall what you did to celebrate. Had it been my birthday or wedding anniversary (which it was not), I know what I'd have done. I'd have had oysters for dinner that night because it's a long time until September when I'll eat the next one . . . but now, it IS September.

And oysters are gloriously back on the menu. Yet before we rush to the fish market, let's consider the oyster. Its Latin names, *Ostrea Ostreidae*, give no hints that the marine bivalve mollusk dates back to the Triassic period, most ancient of the Mesozoic rock formations. Although a much newer development, geologically, than the horseshoe crab, the animals were around when dinosaurs waddled among giant ferns. With a hundred or so species of oysters, and with each female laying 50 million eggs at each spawning, it's a miracle we're not ankle-deep in oysters . . . but attrition is high. It takes oyster larvae 48 hours to grow their shells to protect against a sea full of ravenous predators . . . and two weeks for them to become large and strong enough to fasten themselves where they can sustain a measure of safety.

Many bays and estuaries where oysters were once abundant are now devoid of the delicious mollusks, pollution and overfishing, dredging and boating, have taken their toll. Still, oysters can be obtained on Cape Cod. Fresh oysters, live oysters, right-out-of-the-water oysters await your attention at fish markets. Unless you are expert at shucking, ask the fishman to open them for you.

Once you've brought home a couple of pints of oysters, do something with them almost immediately; they don't age well. A favorite oyster dish for Uncle Henry . . . at either lunch or supper . . . was **Oyster Stew**. Aunt Olivia prepared it this way.

In a deep saucepan, she heated, but did not boil, 3 C. milk and 1 C. light cream, seasoned with a t. salt and a few shakes of pepper. In a large iron spider she melted about 3 T. butter over medium heat. While the butter melted, she poured the oysters into a sieve and carefully removed any bits of shell or seaweed, transferring the oysters, one by one, to a bowl. When the butter was hot, she poured the oysters into the spider. After cooking them four or five minutes until the edges started to curl, she added them to the pan of hot milk and cream. Aunt

Olivia kept the stew hot for half-an-hour, then removed it from the stove and set it aside to cool. Unless she planned to serve it within the hour, she put the saucepan in the icebox as soon as it was cool. When the time came for final heating, the stew was brought very slowly to just below the boiling point, then served piping hot with a pat of butter in each soup plate. Crackers were passed. This recipe yields one bowl apiece for four people, or one cup each for six. Two people can make pigs of themselves eating it all.

You might think oyster stew is oyster stew, that there's but one way to prepare it. That's far from fact as this alternative recipe demonstrates.

Drain six cups of shucked oysters, reserving juices. Clean bits of shell from oysters. In a large saucepan, scald 2 C. milk and 2 C. heavy cream. In a large skillet, cook oysters in the reserved juice just until their edges begin to curl. Stir oysters and liquid into milk and cream. Add salt and pepper to taste and, when steaming, ladle into heated soup plates. Float a pat of butter on top and pass crackers. Makes six servings.

Cooks on some parts of the Atlantic seaboard are dissatisfied with unadulterated oyster stew as Cape Codders have made it for centuries. They do things which, in my opinion, ruin it. But if you're one who doesn't like it plain, you might prefer it this way.

Grate two medium-sized carrot, fine. Dice 1/2 C. celery. In a Dutch oven, simmer carrots and celery until tender in 1/4 C. butter. Add a quart of milk and bring to a boil. Set aside. In a large skillet, cook one quart of oysters in natural liquor until their edges curl, about five minutes. Combine oysters with vegetable mixture. Season with salt, pepper, and paprika, and garnish with chopped parsley. Serve immediately. The stew curdles if left standing. (I should think it would.)

One might think the only two ways to eat oysters are raw or in stew, but one would be mistaken. If you come into possession of a few dozen oysters in the shell and don't feel competent to open them, serve **Roasted Oysters** and be the hostess without band-aids on her hands. Get your better-half to fire up the charcoal grill for these.

Wash the shells, brushing well with a vegetable brush; wipe dry with paper towels and lay them on the grill, larger side

down. Grilled over bright coals, the shells will open wide and, when done, the oysters will be white instead of gray. Place carefully, in their shells, on dinner-size paper napkins on large plates, preserving the juice. Serve hot with buttered rolls.

Aunt Olivia preferred **Smothered Oysters** to any other method; Uncle Henry partook of them graciously to please her. In a large frying pan over medium heat, melt butter the size of an egg and season with 1/8 t. cayenne pepper and 1/4 t. salt. Add a quart of well-drained oysters, and clap on a tight-fitting cover. Lower heat and simmer five minutes or until edges ruffle. Serve on thin-sliced buttered white toast. A dry white wine is a nice touch. Enough for three . . . four, with a salad.

Uncle Henry's preference, second only to Oyster Stew, was **Scalloped Oysters**, a hearty supper for six people.

Grease a large shallow baking dish with butter; sprinkle a thin layer of cracker meal or crumbled soda crackers over the bottom. Put a layer of oysters on top. Sprinkle with salt, pepper, chopped parsley, and dot with bits of butter. Add another layer of crackers, then another layer of oysters and seasonings, repeating until pan is within 1/2" of full and ending with oyster layer. In a small bowl, beat the yolks of two eggs until foamy and lemon-colored, stir in one cup of milk, and pour carefully over the oysters. Top with a final layer of crackers and bake at 325° for 40 minutes.

There are those who consider **Pickled Oysters** a delicacy fit only for royalty or the person best-loved in all the world. Aunt Olivia prepared them for Uncle Henry, and he laid no claim to blue blood, so draw your own conclusions.

In a large skillet, scald a quart of oysters in their own liquor with an additional quarter cup of water, until they plump up. Remove from heat after about four minutes. Lift them with a slotted spoon and plunge into a bowl of ice-water; rinse well; transfer to glass jars; refrigerate. Measure liquid remaining in skillet; add to it an equal amount of cider vinegar, 2 whole peppercorns, 1/2 t. mace, and 1 T. salt. Bring to a boil, remove from heat, pour into a bowl, and refrigerate. When brine is thoroughly cold, pour over oysters, cap the jars, and store in the refrigerator. Use within two weeks . . . if you can keep them around that long.

How long has it been since you've tasted a pickled oyster? How long since you sat down to a steaming plate of scalloped oysters? How long since you dipped your soup spoon into a bowlful of oyster stew? Can't remember? Well, the season for oysters has re-opened; there's no reason to delay. Get a pint or two. Do it today. Invite a couple of friends to join you and the person you love best . . . and make the memory a happening.

Bon appetit.