

Frequently Asked Oyster Questions

ABOUT OYSTERS

How many different types of oysters are there?

In North America, there are 5 species of edible oysters commercially available –

1. Eastern (*crassostrea virginica*)
2. Pacific (*crassostrea gigas*)
3. Kumamoto (*crassostrea sikamea*)
4. European Flat (*ostrea edulis*)
5. Olympia (*ostrea conchiphila/lurida*)

Oysters that commercially produce pearls are NOT in the same family as edible oysters. The edible varieties of oysters can produce pearls, but it is very rare.

Different types or "varieties" of oysters are determined by a combination of their species, location, and growth method. Oysters from one harvest location will taste similar, but they may look completely different depending on how they're grown. In short, there will always be an infinite number of oyster varieties.

How do oysters reproduce?

Oysters are hermaphrodites and change sex based on their life stage. They typically reproduce in the summer because warm, fluctuating water temperatures trigger the oysters to spawn. Female oysters will release between 5 and 8 million eggs into the water at a time. Males also release their sperm into the water, and once the eggs encounter the sperm, the fertilization process begins.

What's the difference between farmed and wild oysters?

Oyster farming is unique because farmed oysters are grown in their natural environment, the ocean, and they filter the same food as wild oysters. The main difference between the two is that farmed oysters are looked after by growers. Oyster farmers may use gear to protect the oysters, as well as certain techniques to promote uniformity and growth. Wild oysters grow on public beds, and are caught by shellfishermen or "diggers." The most important difference between farmed and wild is that farmed oysters are more sustainable.

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Where do oysters get their flavor or "merroir" from?

Oysters take on flavors influenced by their surrounding waters and topography very much like wine and coffee. This concept of terroir is known as "merroir" for oysters. For example, an oyster grown closer to freshwater will taste less salty than an oyster grown in a salt pond. Any number of environmental characteristics can influence an oyster's flavor such as the minerals in the sediment of the growing area, the amount of seaweed nearby, or even the type of algae the oyster may be filtering.

OYSTER HANDLING

How long do oysters stay fresh?

Generally, oysters stay fresh for up to 10 to 14 days from harvest. If stored properly, some oysters can stay live for over 4 weeks. There are many factors that affect an oyster's shelf life like its species or handling, so there's no straight answer, but the best way to know if your oysters are still any good is to check for closed shells and cups filled with liquor when shucked opened.

How to store oysters?

Oysters should be stored at 38 - 43 °F in a cooler. We recommend storing Pacific oysters on ice as they tend to be more perishable. If storing oysters at home, place them in the back of your refrigerator and cover with a damp towel. Do not store them in a plastic bag or airtight container. Make sure the oysters have adequate water drainage, especially if storing on ice, so they do not sit in a pool of water.

What is a wet storage system?

Wet storage can be accomplished in many ways. There is ocean wet storage where harvested shellfish is stored in its natural environment. Open system wet storage has water flowing into tanks from a natural body of water. The water is then discharged back into the ocean. At Pangea, we have a closed system wet storage. We truck water from Duxbury Bay to Boston to fill our tanks, which then recirculates the water. There are several types of filtration used to keep the water clean. The water must also be government tested weekly. If you see a wet storage date on your shellfish tag, this means the product was wet stored in some way after harvesting.

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*Wet storage is different from depuration. Product from "conditional areas" must be depurated or cleansed for a certain period of time by law. Pangea does not buy from conditional areas where the product must be depurated.

CONSUMING OYSTERS

Why are oysters best in the fall?

Oysters are seasonal creatures. Like other animals, they become dormant in the winter, so to prepare for this, they build up their glycogen stores (a type of sugar) by stuffing themselves in the fall. This process makes them sweet and plump during those fall months -- an ideal state for oyster eaters. Oysters become thin after coming out of dormancy in early spring when all their glycogen reserves have been used up.

Should I only eat oysters during months with "R"?

Oysters are safe to eat year-round. The "R" rule, which singles out the warmer months of summer (May to August), is an outdated rule when refrigeration and scientific testing was not as prevalent. Since summer tends to be the time when there are algae blooms, red tides, and higher counts of vibrio (a naturally occurring bacteria in the ocean), there are recommendations to avoid oysters during these months. However, the commercial shellfishing industry has strict regulations like closing shellfishing areas to take precautions against potential foodborne risks.

Quality is another concern during the summer. Oysters tend to be thinner during warmer months because they expend most of their energy spawning. To solve for this, look to oysters from colder waters, such as those from the Canadian Maritime, which are less likely to spawn due to cold water temperatures year-round. So, if you're craving oysters in the summer, don't let the "R" rule prevent you from slurping one back!

Is there a right way to eat oysters?

There isn't a right way to enjoy oysters, but we highly encourage eating oysters "naked" first, basically without any condiments. Every oyster has unique notes or flavors, but when you cover it with cocktail sauce, it can mask that merroir which makes an oyster special. Even if you're a seasoned oyster eater, try new varieties naked, too.

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Order at least two oysters of the same variety, so you can enjoy one naked and the other however you like. Pile on that horseradish and mignonette, it's totally fair game. Sometimes an oyster may taste better because it needed a squeeze of lemon.

Are oysters nutritious?

Yes, oysters are full of nutritional benefits! They are low in calories and saturated fats, and jam packed with vitamins and minerals. Oysters contain 2.5x the amount of iron and 10x the amount of zinc compared to beef. One serving of oysters provides more than the daily recommended value of copper for adults. They're a great source for vitamin B-12, which is essential for the function of the brain, nervous system, and blood formation.

Are there any risks in eating oysters?

The short answer is yes, there will always be risks when eating raw or under cooked meat and seafood. It is not recommended for pregnant women and young children to eat any under cooked proteins. Although the shellfish industry has strict regulations to prevent foodborne illnesses, consumers should be fully aware of the associated risks. If you are nervous, then eat your oysters cooked, which eliminates any potential foodborne risks! They're great breaded, deep fried, and baked!