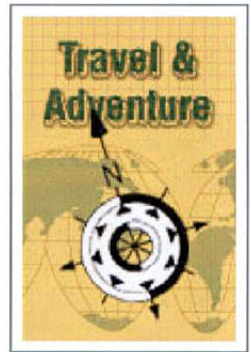


Chasing the Irish oyster

By Stephanie Ager Kirz



"He was a bold man who first ate an oyster." Jonathan Swift

Slide into a pub and order two dozen oysters harvested from the last low tide by a nearby oyster farmer. Top them off with an ice-cold Guinness and some Irish brown bread. Now that's chasing the Irish oyster.

And that's exactly what my husband and I did on a recent excursion along the west coast of Ireland. Our rolling adventure took us not by car, but by bicycle on a discovery of Ireland's national culinary treasure: the oyster. According to the BIM - Irish Sea Fisheries Board - there are currently more than 200 oyster-farming enterprises in 11 coastal counties of Ireland. We concentrated on just a few.

Our first stop was Dublin (on foot) where by accident we ran into a platter of two dozen gleaming oysters fresh from Kilkee, served on the half shell in the restaurant Pearl. We knew right then that chasing the Irish oyster by bicycle was our destiny for the next few weeks. Fortunately someone else was carrying our luggage! The Pearl sits on Merrion Street right next door to the lovely Merrion Hotel, one of Ireland's few five-star establishments. Deep, long shells holding clear, briny, plump oysters gave us our first introduction to the Pacific oyster. Oysters can be tasted like wine with characteristics such as aroma, appearance, texture, flavor and overall impression. These oysters from Kilkee tasted like fresh sea air with a flinty hint of celery. Our overall impression: Shuck some more.

Two types of oysters are being cultivated in the Irish waters: the Native oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) and the Pacific oyster (*Crassostrea gigas*). You can tell the difference by the shape and the season. The Pacific has a long shell with fluted ridges and is edible all year long. The Native is flat and is identified by its symmetrical, almost round shell. It is harvested September through April in all the "R" months.

Once out of Dublin, we headed to the west coast, which features some of Ireland's most scenic and mystical countrysides with names like The Burren, Connemara, Cliffs of Moher, Doolin, Clifden and Galway. Galway is the largest population center of the west at about 60,000 residents. West is where the oysters, the seafood and the bicycling are superb. Ireland is in the midst of a culinary revolution and even the smallest pub in the most remote area along the seacoast offers local oysters, mussels and smoked and fresh salmon. And we had been expecting Irish stew!

Galway, it turns out, is the site of the world-famous Galway International Oyster festival. Also located in Galway is one of the best-known purveyors of the fine Irish oyster. Michael Kelly Shellfish Ltd. supplies all the Native oysters for the country's two beloved annual oyster festivals: the Galway International Oyster Festival and the Clarenbridge Oyster Festival. A family-owned business for more than 40 years in Galway Bay, they produce over half a million oysters each year. Their oysters fatten and grow in the bay with both the Clarenbridge



IRISH HARBOR - Tourists flock to the charming Irish harbor of Clifden (pictured), where they are greeted with platters of fresh local oysters from the bays of Claddeghuff and Cleggan. CNS Photo by Howard L. Kirz.



IRISH OYSTERS - Slide into a pub and order a dozen fresh oysters on the half-shell from a nearby oyster farm, top them off with ice-cold Guinness and some Irish brown bread. CNS Photo by Howard L. Kirz.



and Kilcogan rivers adding a special flavor to the bivalves, which filter up to 11 liters of this pristine, grade-A water an hour.

After leaving Galway, we peddled along the many coastal inlets and eventually arrived in Clifden, where another platter of fresh, local oysters greeted us at Mitchell's Restaurant. When we inquired where the oysters might have come from, our gracious hosts at the charming Quay House in Clifden, Paddy and Julia Foyle, referred us along the coast to two bays, Claddeghduff and Cleggan, where we spied the lonely Connemara oyster farmer working his oyster trestles in the fingerling bays at low tide. Along the bay we discovered a sorter machine, known as a grader, which separates the shells into three different sizes. Once sorted, they are put in mesh bags and placed on the trestles to mature. A solitary cottage industry, these independent oystermen make up a booming business.

The Pacific oyster was brought to Ireland in the 1970s when the stocks of Native oysters declined. Successful trials secured its place as an important alternative, and it's farmed almost all year. It is now a mainstay in the oyster farming industry. In fact, according to the BIM, France is one of Ireland's largest oyster markets consuming an impressive 140,000 tons of gigas (Pacific oysters) each year, and is Ireland's principle export market. Fortunately, the Pacific oysters don't spawn in Irish waters (with the exception of 1995, a long, hot summer that threw the oysters into a spawning frenzy, as one oyster farmer recalled). As oyster lovers know, spawning makes the oyster liquor milky instead of clear and dramatically alters the texture and taste. Actually, during the spawning season the oyster stores glycogen, starch that provides the energy to reproduce. It is this glycogen that, in turn, produces lactic acid, thus creating the milky appearance.

The Native oyster is also known as the European Flat Oyster or, as it is sometimes called, Belon. At one time they were so abundant that, during the Great Famine, they were one of the most available sources of free food. The Native is harvested primarily during the "R" months of the year, but the season is sometimes short and always controlled so that the resource isn't depleted. Unlike the Pacific oyster, the Native is mainly grown on the seabed itself, not in baskets, and is harvested by fishing and dredging by boats outfitted with special equipment.

Down in Tralee, County Kerry's capital and largest town (in what is considered to be the southwest), the wild oyster beds are dredged. Each boat has a quota and a license to harvest during the season. Tralee Bay is only six miles long and two miles wide, so harvesting the Natives only takes place from October to December.

Farming the Pacific oyster was Jim Lyons of SeaLyons Seafoods in Carrigaholt, County Clare, around the corner from Kilkee. Jim started his business in 1994 with his brother who was a fisherman. Now Jim does the oysters and his brother handles the seafood. Jim said his busiest farming months are October to March.

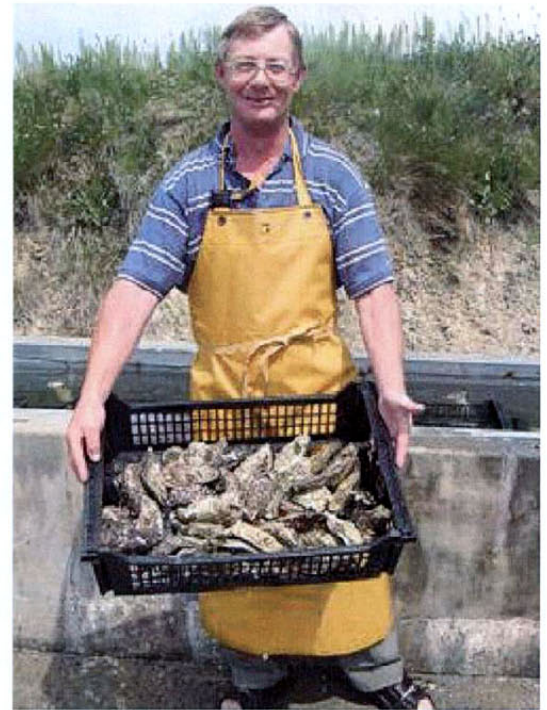
According to the BIM, cultivation of the Pacific oyster is carried out on licensed plots of intertidal shore in bags and trestles. A sub-tidal bottom culture has recently been adopted successfully for the Pacific oyster. The Irish gigas (Pacific oyster) industry is expected to increase from 5,000 tons to 11,500 tons by the year 2006 under the National Development Plan.

In the nursery, Lyons takes a 4-millimeter seed and grows it to approximately 15 millimeters during the summer, which takes about two months. There is a lack of food in the sea so the hatchery feeds them and they rapidly increase in size. Bit by bit the seed during the summer grows, turning into juveniles that have a better survival rate. SeaLyons oversees approximately 5 million juveniles out in the sea on trestles in bags. They put the bags out in the fall around October and November so that the oysters can harden up over the winter, then in the early spring they sell off the excess and keep the rest under contract to other growers. Basically, it's a three- to four-year cycle and can take as long as five years for a Pacific oyster to fully develop.

SeaLyons' customers are very particular about the quality and control of the product; not just the handling, but how the oyster is treated after harvesting. Like many other farmers, Jim exports 85 percent of his oysters to France. Jim confessed that with all the extra care that he takes with his oysters, he feels like he's an organic farmer. He hopes all his pain will be worth his effort.



OYSTER FARM - Young oysters are sorted by size into mesh bags and then placed into these trestles to mature. CNS Photo by Howard L. Kirz.



FAMILY FARM - Jim Lyons tends to an oyster farm in Carrigaholt, County Clare, Ireland, which he started with his brother in 1994. CNS Photo by Howard L. Kirz.

Meanwhile, we started getting hunger pains ourselves and asked Jim where we could get a few dozen oysters. He sent us down the road to The Long Dock in Carrigaholt. Seated at a sunny table we watched as a SeaLyon truck rolled up and delivered our lunch. It doesn't get any fresher than this.

This last plate of Irish oysters on the half shell ended our trip, leaving us with a perpetual taste for more, and more savory visits to Ireland to chase the Irish oyster.

IF YOU GO

WHERE TO STAY

The Merrion, Upper Merrion Street, Dublin 2, Ireland. Phone 353-1-603-0600, Web site www.merrionhotel.com. General manager: Peter MacCann.

The Quay House, Beach Road, Clifden, County Galway, Ireland. Phone 353-095-21369, e-mail: thequay@iol.ie, Web site www.thequayhouse.com. Proprietors: Julia and Paddy Foyle.

Gregans Castle Hotel and Restaurant, Ballyvaughan, Co Clare, Ireland. Phone 353-065-707-7005, Web site www.gregans.ie. Proprietor: Simon Haden.

Ashford Castle, Cong County, Mayo, Ireland. Phone (800) 346-7007 in the U.S., Web site www.ashford.ie.

WHERE TO EAT

Patrick Guilbaud, 21 Merrion St., Dublin 2, Ireland. Phone 01-676-4192, e-mail restaurantpatrickguilbaud@eircom.net.

Pearl Brasserie, 20 Merrion St., Dublin 2, Ireland. Phone 01-661-3572, e-mail info@pearl-brasserie.com, Web site www.pearl-brasserie.com.

Kirbys, Cross Street, Galway, Ireland. Phone 091-569404.

Mitchell's, Market Street, Clifden, County Galway, Ireland. Phone 095-21867.

The Long Dock, Carrigaholt (near Kilkee). E-mail: thelongdock@eircom.net, phone 353-0-65-9058106.

Paddy Burkes - The Oyster Inn, Clarenbridge, County Galway. Phone 091-796226.

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