



# OCEAN'S HEAVEN

KATY DAVIDSON, ONE OF THE WORLD'S  
PREMIER OYSTER EXPERTS, EXPLAINS JUST  
WHAT IT IS THAT MAKES US ADORE THE  
WORLD'S MOST SENSUAL FOOD

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WORDS BY  
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Complex, deep, evolved and utterly unique; from the Romans to the ridiculously rich, oysters have always been with us. Though its reputation as an indulgence of the gilded elite is a relatively recent one:

“The poorer a place is the greater call there seems for oysters. Look here, Sir, here’s an oyster stall to every half dozen houses — the street’s lined with ‘em.” So wrote Charles Dickens in ‘The Pickwick Papers’.

But its trajectory from morsel for the masses to bivalves for the fiscally bountiful is down to nothing other than simple lack of foresight according to oyster expert Katy Davidson:

“New York had the most prolific beds in the world at one time. The Hudson River was once absolutely full of oysters. I read one book where the writer claimed that the city should have been called the Big Oyster, not the Big Apple. But overfishing in the early part of the 20th century really destroyed the supply there and the same thing happened to oyster beds in Britain too.”

Katy is a self-proclaimed oyster fanatic who presents specialist chef demonstrations and masterclasses on oysters at food festivals and private events. She recently opened a seafood bar, similar to Venetian Cicchetti Bars, in Newquay in the heart of the English Riviera where she serves a variety of seafood alongside her first love of oysters. She is currently developing an industry standard qualification for oyster culture akin to the Master of Wine and sommelier qualifications. There are few people on earth who know more about oysters than her.

“Elitism began in the 1960s when oysters started being regarded as something really special,” explains Katy. “I think it’s slowly becoming more egalitarian again as the access is improving and there’s also a lot more variety now. But the glamour of eating an oyster is still undiminished. When I first saw an oyster I was totally taken in by the mystery of this living fossil. It’s a very grey, flinty rock with an opalescent orb inside. It’s such an exciting contrast and it has such a sensual appearance.”

One thing that the Victorian working classes and the more louche oyster audience of today appreciate is the colossal health benefits that eating oysters can bring. There’s more zinc pound for pound in an oyster than any other food, including even steak. And this goes some way to explaining the sensual allure of oysters.

“People wax lyrical about oysters though it’s actually quite hard to describe what it tastes like,” says Katy. “You can’t quite pin it down. But the natural source of dopamine found in oysters do elicit natural waves of pleasure. When you eat them you’re happy, and there’s an actual science behind that.”



## KATY'S FAVOURITE OYSTERS

### LOCH RYAN NATIVES

“These are considered to be rather noble oysters as they take a long time to grow, and aren’t harvested until they are knocking on as much as eight years old. They grow within one single Loch on the Mull of Galloway, so they are kind of like a ‘single estate’ variety of oyster. I’d say it’s the oyster equivalent of a fine single malt whisky. Though every oyster is different as the conditions in which they grow are in such a constant state of flux.”

### JERSEY ROCK

“Jersey Rocks have quite a high salinity as they grow a little deeper in the intertidal zone. This makes them great for cooking with as the liquor becomes less salty and it brings out this fantastic umami taste along with a subtle creaminess too.”

### WHITSTABLE NATIVES

“These are wild natives that have been harvested commercially since Roman times. Wild means that the oysters are dredged from the seabed, as farmed oysters are kept contained in bags, so you’ll expect a less uniform size and shape. These are legendary oysters and eating them at source is the best way to do it.”

### GILLARDEAU OYSTERS FROM LA ROCHELLE IN FRANCE

“These are perfect oysters for the first timer. They’re creamy, very smooth and with very little aftertaste. Often people think you need to neck oysters in one go like a shot of tequila. With these you should really chew them a few times and let the flavour burst out.”









SUNSEEKER



“AS I ATE THE OYSTERS WITH THEIR STRONG TASTE OF THE SEA AND THEIR FAINT METALLIC TASTE THAT THE COLD WHITE WINE WASHED AWAY, LEAVING ONLY THE SEA TASTE AND THE SUCCULENT TEXTURE, AND AS I DRANK THEIR COLD LIQUID FROM EACH SHELL AND WASHED IT DOWN WITH THE CRISP TASTE OF THE WINE, I LOST THE EMPTY FEELING AND BEGAN TO BE HAPPY AND TO MAKE PLANS”

ERNEST HEMMINGWAY – A MOVABLE FEAST

Not that oysters have a charm that is entirely ubiquitous. For every Hemingway or Chekhov who have extolled the joys of eating them, there have long been vocal naysayers, impervious to the draw of the bivalve.

"I never was much of an oyster eater, nor can I relish them 'in naturalibus' as some do," penned William Makepeace Thackeray. "I require a quantity of sauces, lemons, cayenne peppers, bread and butter, and so forth, to render them palatable."

Mild criticism indeed compared to Woody Allen who once quipped, "I will not eat oysters. I want my food dead. Not sick, not wounded, dead."

"The fact that people seem to love them or hate them does play a part in their appeal," says Katy. "It's not contrived. You can't pretend to like oysters. I genuinely think that oysters seem to attract nice, friendly people! It's because there's something ritualistic about them I think. The process of shucking them and eating them live is so unique. You don't do it with any other food. It's very social. People rarely seem to eat oysters on their own, it's the ultimate raw, shared food and the communal element creates such a buzz."

Ultimately, perhaps the appeal of these ancient creatures is the fact that, if you believe in Darwinism, then we are actually consuming our distant ancestors. It was the Romans who first transported oysters around their empire; one of the earliest examples of a food import and export system as we know it. The location of so many Roman settlements around rivers and estuaries seems to confirm that our predecessors knew that to be near fresh water and oyster beds was a necessity for survival and a flourishing society.

"The vitality of eating a live oyster is incredible," concludes Katy. "It's very captivating. You simply can't eat anything more pure or beneficial I think. We've thought that way for centuries, and I don't see it ever changing."

For more information on Katy and The Oyster Academy please visit  
[www.mangezmoi.co.uk](http://www.mangezmoi.co.uk) or @mangezmoioyster



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