

taste buds

chef Larry
JanesOysters
a rite of
passage

I'll never forget eating my first raw oyster.

The passage into culinary adulthood was right after my 20th birthday. A group of friends had driven to Miami to catch a \$39 day cruise to Freeport in the Bahamas. That day I would slurp my first bluepoint, in addition to purchasing my first bottle of \$1.78 gin, insuring myself to a long week in a compact car with three other guys whose only bath was in a salt-filled ocean.

Enough said about the gin and the friends. Fortunately, that radical part of my life is behind me. The bluepoints, however, were just a start to an amorous relationship with shell-crusted mollusks. In all honesty, I never chewed the delicate bi-valved creature, instead opting to swallow him/her whole, embellished with just a splash of fresh lemon juice. There was definitely more flavor from the lemon than from the oyster, but since it was my first taste, I wasn't complaining.

Oysters are prolific little creatures. At various stages of an oyster's life, it can be either male or female. The oyster can't seem to make up its mind which is better. Seems there are a number of factors that will help determine the sex of an oyster — the number of plankton in its diet, water temperature and the salinity of the water.

BECAUSE THEY are so sexually ambidextrous, one male when ready to mate, sets off a chain reaction in the oyster bed. Females lay eggs in their shells and when the male releases his sperm, eggs and sperm from all the oysters in their beds are released virtually simultaneously until the water turns a milky white color.

A fertilized egg then develops into larvae, which attach themselves to almost anything, only to begin a life of sedentary growth with millions of other oysters still not sure which gonads they want to keep.

Oysters have been cultivated for thousands of years. In the Eastern United States, most oysters are grown in natural beds rather than cultivated and are still harvested by traditional methods. From Long Island, home of the internationally known bluepoint oysters, following the coast past Florida to Texas and going as north as Olympia, Ore., home of the most delicate Olympian oysters I have ever tasted, coastlines are the homes of our nation's oysters. Man is presently the largest threat to oysters. Not discounting the effects of nature, the biggest threats to the oyster population are pollution and overfarming.

Oysters, unfortunately, are usually associated with many myths. Are oysters aphrodisiacs? No self-respecting Roman orgy would have been complete without a Nubian slave shucking oysters for the thousands to satiate the lusty diners. Actually, any food of the sea can ride this wagon of love.

The sea and romance will be forever intertwined because Aphrodite, goddess of love, rose from the depths with the power of granting beauty and invincible charm. It became a powerful power that those who ate the most powerful seafood were the most fervent in love. To test this theory, drink the oyster liquor in your half shell — it's all sea water. Judge for yourself.

ANOTHER MYTH about oysters, which persists through the years, is that they should not be eaten in months that do not have the letter "R" in their name. Quabog wash. No doubt, there was a basis for this belief, especially before modern refrigeration. More significantly, during the summer months, when oysters reproduce, its meat can be fat and gooey. Later it is lean and watery but in no way harmful to eat.

BUTTER & OIL

Choices for lighter cooking

By Geri Rinschler
special writer

TO SAY THAT eating in the '90s is different from eating in the '60s is quite an understatement.

In 1960, Americans consumed as much butter as margarine. Since few of us were aware of the nutritional values of the two, the assumption is that the preference for margarine was based on price.

Few of us were cooking with oil except to prepare ethnic dishes from the Mediterranean or Middle East. Without a doubt there was always a can of Crisco vegetable shortening on the pantry shelf for deep frying.

As we plunge into the '90s, it's obvious that most Americans (a ratio of 3-to-1) have given up butter for margarine, for a variety of reasons.

Margarine and the new vegetable oil spreads are still much cheaper than butter. Often they are half the price.

Today, the outstanding advantage is not price but the fact that margarine has no cholesterol.

COOKING STYLES are changing quickly. Everyone is cooking lighter and healthier in home and professional kitchens alike.

Manufacturers of oils, margarines and vegetable oil spreads are constantly introducing new products increasing our options for reducing cholesterol and saturated fat from our diet.

As a result, many of us are confused, trying to decide what's best for cooking and eating.

ALTHOUGH THERE is no one answer, a few cooking tips and shopping guidelines should help you to worry less and enjoy cooking and eating more.

Both butter and margarine are fats. Butter by law must be made with no less than 80 percent milkfat.

On the other hand, classic margarine must be made with 80 percent fat but generally from vegetable oil such as soy, corn or safflower oil.

Margarines labeled light or diet usually have less fat but contain more water. Although home cooks may substitute margarine for butter in a recipe, this often works because butter and margarine have the same fat content.

RELATIVELY NEW in your grocer's dairy case are vegetable oil spreads such as I Can't Believe It's Not Butter, Imperial's A La Mode or Land o Lakes Spread with Sweet Cream. Most of these spreads have a low percentage of fat and cannot be labeled as margarine.

According to the National Association of Margarine Manufacturers, vegetable oil spread does not have a standard of identity and can have anywhere from 40 percent to 80 percent fat content.

Therefore, if you read the fine print you will notice manufacturers do not recommend them for cooking or baking.

Vegetables Provencale

This vegetable mixture can be served alone or added to an omelet base to create an interesting frittata. Serves 4.

- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- 1 garlic clove
- 1 medium onion, sliced
- 6 medium mushrooms, sliced
- 1/2 yellow pepper, trimmed, cubed
- 1/2 red pepper, trimmed, cubed
- 1 small white oriental eggplant, unpeeled, diced
- 1 small zucchini, sliced (about 5 inches long)
- 5 cherry tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped basil or
- 1/2 tablespoon dried basil leaves
- 4-6 tablespoons Parmesan cheese, to taste
- Salt and pepper, to taste

In a wok or deep skillet heat oil over medium high heat. When hot add onion and peppers, stirring constantly until tender. Remove from pan and set aside. Add sliced zucchini, mushroom and eggplant to skillet, season with salt. Stirring constantly cook over medium heat until tender. Add garlic when lightly golden, add onions, pepper and herbs, stirring until heated. Correct seasonings, top with tomatoes. Serve covered with Parmesan cheese.

Another recipe on page 28

ALONG WITH the variable fat content, vegetable oil spreads also have variable amounts of salt and milk solids.

Like margarine, vegetable oil spreads are cholesterol-free (and unlike sweet butter, which has 36 milligrams of cholesterol per tablespoon, sorry to say).

For many of us, margarine is not an acceptable alternative to cooking with butter for the sake of lowering cholesterol. Instead, substituting vegetable oil low in saturated fat works well in most stovetop recipes.

CANOLA OIL has the lowest amount of saturated fat (6 percent) and no cholesterol, according to the United States Department of Agriculture's Handbook No. 8-4.

Safflower oil has 9 percent saturated fat, corn oil 13 percent, olive oil 14 percent, soybean oil 15 percent, but-terfat 55 percent and coconut oil 92 percent. As a result, canola oil's popularity is growing rapidly.

Sharon Masselink, owner of Birmingham's Muffins and More, is very particular about the ingredients she uses in her oat bran muffins and breads approved by the American Heart Association.

"I began using canola oil about six months ago," she said.

"It's a very mild, light oil which I use in salad dressings, for sauteing, and for making our zucchini breads, or for any recipe that has oil as an ingredient."

"As a matter of fact, our muffin batters are even lighter than when we used corn and safflower oil."

CANOLA OIL is a vegetable oil made from a plant called rape, which is similar to turnip greens. The oil is pressed from seeds contained in long, slender pods.

Canola oil, along with safflower and soybean oil, can be considered as an all-purpose oil for most cooking techniques. Although canola oil is lowest in saturated fat, it lacks flavor.

For salad dressings, you may want to compromise by mixing canola oil with virgin olive oil, which is not as low in saturated fat. I prefer reserving virgin and extra oils for salads.

For occasions when you want a bit of a butter taste, I recommend Hain's All Blend Oil. It is made from a blend of soy, safflower, walnut and peanut oil.

All Blend is great for stir-frying and making mayonnaise. Look for it in the health food sections in most local grocery stores or in a health food store.

BAKING and cooking oil sprays are another way to cut back on fats from your diet.

Olive Mist, which is 100 percent extra virgin olive oil, is among my favorite new discoveries. It's great to saute vegetables and omelets, and to coat baking pans when making savory muffins and quick breads.

Olive Mist is distributed by El Molino and also can be found in grocery stores and health food markets.

Informality backdrops fine seafood



One can't go into Norm's Oyster Bar and Grill in Southfield without remembering its predecessor — the Vineyards, a waterfront restaurant where dining was once a formal, intimate affair.

The Vineyards is gone, and the restaurant has been dressed down, but the building's wonderful architectural features remain — brick, vaulted ceiling moldings framing the main dining room.

Under Norman LePage's ownership, the restaurant has been lightened up for a less intimate but more friendly atmosphere. The brick is now painted ivory, the booths and tables are covered with chintz floral cloths, and guests' attire can range

from suits to chinos.

Though much more casual, the restaurant still carries on the fine dining tradition. Seafood abounds, and judging from our experience, it is very well prepared. Our swordfish was still moist after being grilled and the bearnaise sauce served on the side provided a nice complement (though serving a bearnaise sauce in a tacky plastic cup is incongruous).

THE SWORDFISH (\$14.95) was one of nine seafood specials for the evening, including a platter with shrimp, froglegs, whitefish and scallops served over pasta (\$15.95).

The main menu features the usual variety of fish, chicken and beef but with some interesting touches — like a superb Chambord raspberry sauce served over chicken, a macadamia nut butter served on top of a char-grilled veal chop, or bacon bits and Swiss cheese coating broiled barbecued shrimp.

The raspberry chicken (\$12.95) was an exceptionally refreshing summer dish. The sauce itself was light, though cream is one of its ingredients. This entree came with spinach pasta and asparagus and the house salad.

Lake perch is a regular selection here and guests can choose to have it lightly sauteed or cooked English-style in a beer batter.

Among the special appetizers are a saute shrimp with mushrooms and artichoke hearts (\$7.95), baked brile with brown sugar and almonds, and — naturally — oysters — either baked with spinach and cream and topped with hollandaise sauce (\$8.95), or served on cracked ice with cocktail sauce (\$5.95). The artichoke heart dip, prepared with spinach and Parmesan cheese, is good.

Norm's is a special place where you can enjoy a delicious meal in a 55-year-old lovely dining room — or go outside and dine on the terrace.

Details: Norm's Oyster Bar and Grill, 29110 Franklin Road, Southfield, 37442.
Hours: Monday-Thursday 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Friday 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; Saturday noon to 11 p.m. and Sunday 4-9 p.m. Reservations accepted for lunch and dinner. All menu items available for carryout.
Prices: Lunch \$6-14, Dinners \$11.95-22.95, averaging \$15. All major credit cards.

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