

MONDAY, DECEMBER 26, 1994

TASTE

TASTE BUDS



CHEF LARRY JONES

There's nothing finer than fresh oysters

I can't imagine spending a holiday without including some form of oyster in my culinary repertoire. Sucking down good oysters to me is like a great wine to a conophile, a sharp knife to a butcher or a sunny 80 degree day to a mailman; they are much appreciated.

But not everyone shares my enthusiasm. The world is full of people who would cringe at the sight of a bowl of clam chowder, let alone allow the feel one gets when sliding a fresh shucked Belon down one's gullet. Oysters are definitely an acquired taste, and if you haven't coerced your friendly fish monger into bringing in a dozen exotics, I can't think of a better way to reward oneself for making it through the holidays.

The oyster market has grown considerably and due to over harvesting and poor quality control, the cost of exotic fresh oysters is increasing rapidly. Quality exotic oysters with names like Belon, Golden mantels and Kumamotoes can cost as much as \$1 a piece and when you think about it, that's one heck of an expensive taste.

Less expensive and more common, Eastern oysters are usually what you get in bulk form at most fish markets and retailers. If you think those are oysters, well, you obviously haven't had the real thing.

Bulk shipped Eastern oysters come from warmer waters south of Cape Cod and the warmer waters make the oysters spawn and they become milky and tasteless and even at their best, should only be used for stews and chowders.

Generally speaking, the colder the water, the better the oyster. Ergo, if you were to draw a line from Cape Cod to San Francisco, any ocean north of these two points are the breeding grounds for a great oyster. The salinity of oysters can vary quite a bit, generally from mild to strong.

Exotic oysters usually have a full sweet flavor with a delicious flinty overtone.

Tasty morsels

Surely the best way to enjoy them is on the half shell with just a tiny squeeze of fresh lemon. For your information, only gulfies novices swallow them whole and yes, they are (or should be) still very much alive when eaten. If the shells gape and do not close quickly in handling, discard them as well as those with any broken shells.

Exotic oysters have flavors and tastes unique unto themselves. The Belon, for example, was only raised in the heavily iron laden waters of northern France and recently were introduced to oyster farms off Maine and California. Because the water in which they are raised has a heavy iron content, their flavor is sweetly metallic. Tiny Olympia from northern Washington state are briny and have a fresh crisp taste.

Storage tips

The best way to store fresh oysters in their shell is to keep them relatively cool (about 39 degrees F.). This can best be accomplished by filling a cooler with ice and setting a colander or strainer on top and slightly buried into the ice.

Since oysters are alive, under no circumstances should they be kept in a sealed or tied plastic bag or completely closed cooler. If you received them fresh from a reputable dealer, oysters may be kept stored in this way for up to three days.

To serve, scrub the oysters with a wire or plastic brush under cold running water just before shucking. Never allow the oysters to soak in any amount of liquid.

To shuck, wrap a dishcloth around your holding hand so that the oyster can be held firmly and also to protect your hand should the oyster knife slip. With the rounded part of the shell facing down, find the hinge and with the oyster knife, attempt to push the tip of an oyster knife into it, between the shells. It is not necessary to plunge the knife completely inside the oyster, but just to be able to get the point into the hinge area between the shells.

Now here is how you can tell a pro from a novice. Once the tip of the oyster knife is embedded, simply twist your wrist while holding the knife securely; pretend you're tuning in a stereo. Usually two or three good twists will break the hinge seal.

See Larry Jones' family-tested recipes inside. Chef Larry is a free-lance writer for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. To leave a voice mail message for him dial (313) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, then mailbox number 1886.

LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Wine columnist Eleanor and Ray Heald reflect on what was hot and not in 1994.
- Chef Larry Jones shows you how to bake healthy.



According to AAA,
alcohol is a factor in nearly 10 percent
of crashes that cause injury.



By KIKELY WYOMNIK
STAFF WRITER

Don't worry about drinking and driving. Toast 1995 with festive alcohol-free drinks.

Explore the possibilities. Robin Ray of Farmington Hills, second place winner in AAA Michigan's "Zero Proof Mix-Off" Dearborn Regional Contest created Garbo's Glow with yogurt, banana, raspberries, ginger, lemon juice and a splash of soda. According to AAA, alcohol is a factor in nearly 10 percent of crashes that cause injury and about 5 percent of crashes that result in property damage.

"During last year's Christmas and New Year's holiday period, 27 persons were killed in 26 traffic crashes statewide," said Jerry Beach, AAA Michigan Commu-

ty Safety Services manager.

"Eight of those victims lost their lives in alcohol-related crashes. Alcohol also adds lots of calories at a time when rich holiday foods are already padding our waistlines, says the American Institute for Cancer Research.

To give holiday hosts some alternatives, AAA publishes a "Great Pretender's Party Guide." This year's 14th annual guide has a Hollywood theme and features 16 drink recipes by Michigan residents, including Ray, who were selected as finalists in three regional "Zero Proof Mix-Off" contests held in October. Finalists drinks were selected based on taste, appearance and adherence to the contest's silver-screen theme.

The booklet, available for free

Leave alcohol out of your celebration



Festive drinks: Combine Ocean Spray Cranberry Juice Cocktail, orange juice and club soda for a delicious holiday punch (top). Egg nog made with Egg Beaters is fat-free.

at AAA branch offices or by calling (313) 336-1500, also contains favorite alcohol-free drinks of some Michigan-based celebrities including vocalist Anita Baker.

Here are some party planning tips from AAA and the American Institute for Cancer Research.

- Schedule a short cocktail hour and serve measured drinks. Offer a good selection of non-alcoholic beverages.
- Serve food early to guarantee your guests don't drink on an empty stomach. Foods rich in

protein such as meat, cheese, and vegetables will help slow the absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream.

Give the party another focus such as preparing special appetizers (make your own taco or fondue), playing a game, exchanging gifts or singing songs. This is also a good way to get people to interact without drinking, instead of tempting them to resort to alcohol because they may feel uneasy about not knowing each other.

See recipes inside.

Old acquaintances gather to greet the new year

By SANDRA DALEA-PRYBY
SPECIAL WRITER

It was the early 1970s when two young newlywed couples — neighbors in an apartment complex — shared their first New Year's Eve together. Now, more than 20 years and five daughters later, those two couples continue the tradition of ringing in the New Year together.

A strong friendship and good food made the end of each year a special time for Tom and Marge Kress of Troy, and Brian and Rita Dates of Beverly Hills.

"It's Brian's clam chowder that has held us together," said Tom. "It's the best New England clam chowder that my wife and I have ever tasted. It's worth waiting a whole year to have it."

The chowder is traditionally the start to the couples' New Year's Eve meal, he said. "And we usually have lobster as the main course." This year the couples are also having twice-baked potatoes and Caesar salad.

Marge said that when the couples first began celebrating, she and Rita planned elaborate menus.

"We would work on the meal for days and it would take hours to eat. The more complicated and elegant the meal was, the better. Now we keep the meal simple."

Take dessert, for example. "We used to make sweet and rich delights like cheesecake and chocolate mousse. Now we serve champagne over lime sherbert. It's a light, fantastic-tasting dessert, and we have champagne left over for a New Year's toast."

Tom, who teaches at Oakland Community College, and Brian, a psychologist, have always played an important role in the annual celebration. Tom is usually assigned the salad, and Brian, in addition to making the chowder, is the server of the lobsters.



Good friends: Brian and Rita Dates (left to right), Tom and Marge Kress have celebrated New Year's together for over 20 years.

"I got this task because I spent my summers as a child on the Massachusetts coast. This, according to the others, makes me an expert on lobster selection."

One New Year's Eve, when the weather was

extremely miserable (drifting snow and freezing ice), the Dates arrived with the lobster in a traditional lobster pot and dressed in yellow slickers and other foul-weather gear.

"Their arrival certainly added a great deal of mirth to the evening," the Kresses said.

Two years after the couples began their tradition, they had to break it.

"Marge insisted on having her second child on New Year's Eve morning in 1973," said Rita, with a smile. "She couldn't wait until our celebration was over."

That was the last time that the birth of a child interfered with the celebration. The Dates had their three daughters on other days.

"All five girls have spent many of their New Year's Eves over the years with us," said Rita. "While the adults feast on seafood, the girls have chosen pizza and chips and dip."

"Also, the kids usually watch television as we have a leisurely dinner. Then we all get together and throw confetti at midnight," she said.

What started as a romantic tradition for four and then a family tradition for nine, is returning to a quiet evening for its original participants as the five girls are growing up and planning New Year's Eve celebrations of their own.

The Kresses two daughters are: Jennifer, who graduated from the University of Michigan earlier this year, and Sandra, a junior at Arizona State University. The Dates' daughters are: Stephanie and Courtney, both students at Birmingham Groves High School, and Lindsay, a fifth grader at Greenfield Elementary School.

"With or without the girls, spending New Year's Eve together is a cherished tradition," said the two women, both elementary school teachers. "We can't imagine any other way to end the year and start a new year."

See recipes inside.