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France's oyster trail

All oysters are not created equal. The Brittany oysters in Cancale and Locmariaquer are superb.

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Reporting from Cancale, France — Cancale and Locmariaquer are dots on the Atlantic coast of France. Also places that produce my favorite food: Brittany oysters. Served raw on the half shell, with no more sauce than a squeeze of lemon, they are generally smaller than other varieties but intensely flavored, more precious than pearls to people who know their oysters.

French King Henri IV could down 20 dozen in a sitting. Diderot, Voltaire and Rousseau ate them for inspiration, as did Napoleon Bonaparte before going into battle. I could wax poetic about the appeal of the oyster but know I'd never convince people who find them abhorrent because they hate the idea of eating them raw, the vastly preferred preparation in France. Others think oysters are unhealthy because they are bottom feeders, living in one place, attached to an immobile object, siphoning gunky nutrients from seawater. Unless outrageous fortune serves you the rare bad oyster, nothing could be further from the truth; oysters contain vitamins and minerals, especially phosphorous, good for bones and teeth.

On the other hand, oyster idolatry may be a matter of instinct. "Obviously if you don't love life you can't enjoy an oyster," Eleanor Clark wrote in "The Oysters of Locmariaquer."

The point is, even today as oyster cultivators transplant varieties from place to place, all oysters are not created equal; their taste, like that of wine, depends on where they matured. So order your New Zealand Bluffs and Virginia Chincoteagues; then transcend by eating an *Ostrea edulis* plucked from Mont-St.-Michel Bay.

I discovered the supremacy of Brittany oysters a decade ago on a three-day trek from St.-Malo to the great gothic monastery of Mont-St.-Michel. Along the way I stopped in the village of Cancale where every waterfront restaurant had an oyster-on-the-half-shell special.

I let the first Cancale puddle on my tongue, husky with the taste of iodine and ocean floor, before releasing it

down my throat, a sensory experience completely unlike ordinary eating. After I polished off the rest I sat looking over the wide, flat bay and then ordered another dozen. I could have eaten more, though perhaps not as many as the 19th century Englishman who must have set a record by consuming 12 dozen, washed down by 12 glasses of Champagne, while the clock was striking 12, according to M.F.K. Fisher in her small 1941 classic "Consider the Oyster."

Last spring I returned to Cancale as well as another celebrated oyster-producing region in the south of Brittany around the Gulf of Morbihan. I planned to visit farms, talk to cultivators and eat oysters at breakfast, lunch and dinner even though it was May, a month spelled without an R, when customs tells people to avoid oysters. Almost 50% of Brittany oysters are consumed in France in December and January, during the Christmas and New Year's holidays. But as it turns out, the R rule is an old wives' tale, born perhaps of government efforts to protect oysters by banning harvest during procreation in spring and summer.

I drove to Cancale from Paris on an overcast day, arriving at low tide. Barnacled flotsam and jetsam lay where the water had left it, and boats were keeled over in the sand, high and dry. Also exposed were acres of oyster beds, laid out like farm fields, with low tables that supported wire bags of maturing Cancales, tended by rubber-booted oystermen, some of them driving tractors.

Spanning the border between Normandy and Brittany, Mont-St.-Michel Bay is known for its tides, which raise and lower the water level as much as 45 feet a day, and made the monastery accessible only by boat before the construction of a bridge connecting it to the mainland. People still have to look sharp when the tide comes in "as fast as a galloping horse," Victor Hugo said.

This amphibious place, some shade of gray-green-blue that has not yet been named, is one of the great beauty spots of France, low on the Normandy side where farmers have reclaimed pasture land from the sea. Gorse-covered cliffs rise around Cancale, holding in the west side of the bay before rounding lofty Pointe du Grouin and heading southwest along Brittany's Emerald Coast, lined by the Grande Randonnée footpath I walked 10 years ago.

Cancale was just as I'd left it, all dour gray stone and suspicious shuttered windows. The upper town has churches, shops, a tourist office and square with a statue of women oyster workers. In the port below there was the same collection of restaurants with seafood specials, including multitiered shellfish platters with crab legs, mussels and oysters as well as tiny whelks and winkles.

This time I went to the open-air market on the pier where stalls display oysters on beds of seaweed, grouped

and priced by size. A saleswomen, about as friendly as a mollusk, chose 12 No. 2s for me, stabbed them open with a short, sharp knife and then served them up on a plastic plate; the cheapest dozen I'd ever had, about \$7, with a lemon, but no napkin. The ensuing debauchery, closely watched by passers-by, left juice dribbles on my shirt and salty brine on my face and hands.

I spent the night at the Manoir des Douets Fleuris, a charming little hotel a few miles inland from town. It has a handful of prettily decorated country-style rooms around a courtyard garden, a small swimming pool and an excellent restaurant that serves traditional Brittany cuisine with a contemporary flair. For my main course at dinner I ordered a salad with pillowy soft local chevre. Need I say that I started with a dozen Cancales?

I spent the next morning at St. Kerber, a working oyster farm with a museum where I saw a film about the history of oyster farming and looked around with the proprietor François-Joseph Pichot, who described the bivalve's life cycle. Those who doubt its fascination should consider some of the things I learned:

—Oysters are hermaphroditic, in other words both male and female, able to produce sperm and eggs alternately.

—When in a female mode, the mother bears up to 1.5 million eggs; only 10 in every 10 million eggs survive.

—It takes about four years for oysters to reach adulthood, when they are harvested, cleaned, sorted and shipped mostly to Paris. Pichot told me that he can't export to America because of U.S. government restrictions, not because they'd go bad before reaching North America.

—A healthy, living oyster with its shell closed tight remains good for several days, but tastes best as soon after harvesting as possible.

Nowadays oyster lovers are relatively abstemious, but in times gone by people gorged on them, especially at the start of a meal, believing that they sharpen the appetite for courses to come. In the 1st century Roman Emperor Vitellius — "the beastly Vitellius," historian Edward Gibbon called him — liked about 1,200 as an appetizer; 18th century rake Casanova routinely started dinner with 50, boosting the oyster's reputation as an aphrodisiac; English writer Samuel Johnson fed them to Hodge, his cat.

The native Brittany oyster — biologically singular and sovereign among varieties — fell prey to gluttony as well as disease, hard winters and predators such as starfish even more voracious than humans, it seems. In the late 19th century they were dying out when a couple of good things happened: French scientist Victor Coste found a way to cultivate them by laying beds made out of tiles for the baby oysters to latch onto; the technique did not affect the taste because oysters are sedentary, equally good cultivated or naturally bedded.

The second development occurred in 1868 when a boat carrying oysters from Portugal had to take shelter from a storm and dumped its cargo near the mouth of the Gironde River in southwestern France. Unexpectedly, the Portuguese oysters thrived there and eventually moved up the coast to Brittany, restocking beds formerly occupied by native plates.

At lunch that day in a café on the Pointe du Grouin, overlooking a sputter of rocky islets beloved by French sailors and birds, I committed a sacrilege. I had a mound of steamed mussels, raised in their own beds on Mont-St.-Michel Bay because they crowd oysters out if not carefully isolated from them. They were very good, but decidedly poor man's shellfish, compared with the aristocratic oyster.

On my way out of Cancale I drove along the Emerald Coast toward the fine old walled cities of St.-Malo and Dinan, then crossed Brittany from north to south, which took me almost as long as the drive from Paris the previous day. Brittany is a big place, I discovered, with inland mountains and moors, orchards and crossroads marked by weathered stone crucifixes, or *calvaires*, some dating to the Middle Ages.

I was bound for the village of Locmariaquer on one of the tidal rivers that shred the ragged Brittany littoral around the Gulf of Morbihan, another cup of seawater containing hundreds of tiny islands, locked into the coast by two almost-touching fingers of land. The region produces some of the best oysters in France, including the Locmariaquer. It's smoother than the Cancale, but you need to go there to understand; more than anything it tastes like the ethereal gulf where it is farmed.

Approaching my destination, I drove through Carnac, famed for its beaches and prehistoric stone monuments, and the yachting town of Trinité-sur-Mer, with a Cape Cod air and navy-blue-and-white-striped French sailor shirts in almost every store window. I washed my dirty clothes at a coin-operated laundry for seafarers on the harbor, then crossed the bridge over the River Crach, prime oyster habitat.

When I finally reached Locmariaquer I got my first sight of the Gulf of Morbihan and checked into the Hôtel des Trois Fontaines, where the friendly couple who owned the place told me where to find oysters for dinner.

The first night I tried L'Escale in town, which has a deck from which you can pitch your empty oyster shells into the water; lunch the next day was thick fish soup with croutons and Gruyère at Lautram, a modest hotel-restaurant across the street from the church of Notre Dame de Kerdro. Another dinner at Le Chantier, a small, casually elegant seafood shrine on the River Crach, was unforgettable. There I had sole, steamed whole and unadulterated by fancy sauces, with a dozen oysters as a precursor. When I asked the waitress where they

came from she just pointed down the river.

I spent my days biking around the Locmariaquer peninsula, stopping at oyster farms for free samples and taking a cruise on the gulf to Île-aux-Moines. The long, narrow islet is a pretty summer colony with a coast walking path. Following it, I found Ets Martin, another oyster farm so small its harvests are rarely exported, chiefly provisioning the island. Ets Martin oysters have a singularly sweet taste I savored, knowing it unlikely that I'd ever get another.

Out and about in Locmariaquer, I kept seeing a little blue and yellow van emblazoned with the logo for Erwan Frick oysters. Tracking it down to a farm outside of town, I met the producer, a ruddy-cheeked young man with curly dark hair who fed me some of his excellent oysters; attacked by disease, plates are rare in the region, he explained. Frick also taught me how to open an oyster by slitting the abductor muscle that holds the shell together, a skill I needed because I had decided to take some Frick oysters back to Paris.

The next day they sat on the seat beside me, wrapped in seaweed and tightly crated, filling the car with *aire des huitres*. In town a few hours later I took the Fricks to a friend's apartment where we devoured them, leaving nothing but a heap of shells, proof that two people can eat four dozen Brittany oysters in a month without an R and merrily live to tell the tale.

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