

Emirates

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The art of enjoying oysters

by Roshan K. Machado

ABU DHABI: The world is Francois-Joseph Pichot's oyster, and he wants the capital to know it, using the Abu Dhabi Hilton for a special four-day oyster promotion that ends tomorrow (Saturday).

Francois is not your average oyster farmer, helping his father to farm over 400 hectares of sea bed, he has a pet peeve — he simply cannot stomach them anymore — and its not because of their taste.

"It's like a worker in a chocolate factory, who after eating his fill just cannot eat another chocolate again," he said smilingly adding: "I've eaten my share of oysters."

The promotion is aimed at familiarising Abu Dhabi's vast number of discerning diners with the many good qualities of the oyster and helping the queasy to overcome any misgiving they may have about cracking one open and eating it.

Francois, 26, whose father's farm supplies the UAE with all the oysters it can consume through the Greenhouse Company in Sharjah, says that eating oysters is one of France's favourite pastimes and is certainly a healthy habit.

Acknowledging that the UAE does have its pearl diving history, he however makes it clear that eating oysters has nothing to do with pearls.

"You must be very, very lucky to find a pearl when opening an oyster. In the 20 years that I have been working on the farm we have found only two pearls and that too totally worthless," said Francois whose visit to Abu Dhabi is the first to any country in this region.

The oyster promotion is the brainchild of the Abu Dhabi Hilton's Executive Chef, Michael Wunsch, who is extremely qualified to talk on the exact way of enjoying an oyster, with his expert opening of one leaving you in no doubt about it.

"I want the guests and diners to get acquainted with oysters, and that is why I invited Francois to supervise this promotion, since I had seen first hand his expertise



Francois-Joseph shows them how it's done, opening an oyster along with Abu Dhabi Hilton's Executive Chef Michael Wunsch at the hotel. — Picture by Mohammed Latif

when I visited their farm last year," he said.

Mike also proudly displays a video recording of his visit to the farm last year at the L'Express which along with the Pearl and Hemingways will be the main outlets for the promotion.

He put to rest the popular belief that oysters should be eaten raw or with lemon.

"They can be braised on charcoal with lemon butter, skewered and barbecued, just cooked, casseroled or added to a fish dish.

"It is also very healthy as it contains plenty of calcium and protein and absolutely no fat," said Mike.

Francois' farm is in Cancale in the Bretagne province on the north coast of France.

This, he pointed out proudly, is one of the best places in France to farm oysters and the annual output at the farm is over a 1,000 tonnes.

The oysters at the farm can be harvested throughout the year, which is ideal news for customers.

But work has to be done only during low tide which gives the workers just four hours to complete their task.

At high tide, Francois explains, the whole area, is covered with water and the level rises to around 15 metres.

Oyster farming is a labour inten-

sive industry, with a lot of hard work put in to ensure that they are alive and clean.

This work can only be done by hand as each one is picked up and individually washed, stacked and boxed to be shipped out with the necessary certificates attended to and take care of.

"The ideal time to harvest oysters is when they are two years old," said Francois, adding that oysters can be opened in two ways, one from the back of the shell and the other from three-quarter way down the side.

"The trick is to insert the knife at the correct point and twist it cutting the connecting muscle that will open the shell automatically," he said.

In France, oysters are eaten with either lemon or vinegar and washed down with bubbly, while in Asia, more often than not it is eaten with Tabasco.

Here at the Hilton, the promotion entails raw oysters with the proper accompaniments and a glass fizzy drink.

A part of Francois' promotion is to teach the hotel staff the proper way of opening an oyster, though he said, at least one member of the staff — Neil Ranasinghe — opens them as well as any that he has seen.

As a matter of course, Francois can open 400 oysters per hour, though he readily agrees that an expert can prise open as many as 600 in the same time.

The Pichot Company which are one of the two top oyster exporters in France, send out their oysters to 20 countries around the world and figures increase substantially during Christmas time when it seems that the French living in Africa cannot get enough of it.

"It is a traditional Christmas delicacy for the French there, believe it or not," said Francois, whose father produces both the flat and deep variety of oysters and includes Belons and Fines de Claires types at the farm.

Francois, who has oyster farming in his veins (his maternal grandfather was an oyster farmer as well), also runs his own curio shop which sells all things nautical — that is when he is not putting in the hours at his father's farm.

When asked about the aphrodisiac qualities of the oyster, he said with a laugh giving nothing away: "You would have to try them to know, wouldn't you?"