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Oysters have always been highly prized and keenly sought after. The Greeks were partial to them and the Romans were probably the ones who spread the word about their aphrodisiac power.

This, by the way, has recently been scientifically confirmed. A team of American and Italian scientists identified two rare amino acids in bivalve molluscs; when injected into rats, they prompted a surge of hormonal activity in both males and females. It seems that Casanova's legendary 50-oyster breakfasts really were helping him to keep up the good work.

The kings of France were noted oyster fanciers, too, and it was Francois I who in 1545 raised the community of Cancale in Brittany to the status of Ville de Cancale in appreciation of the oysters they sent to the royal kitchens. The town's coat of arms shows a square-sailed oyster boat against a bright green sea and a bright blue sky surrounded by 12 golden oysters.

Louis XIV, the Sun King, had them rushed fresh to Versailles, as did the ill-fated Marie Antoinette. The thrusting pioneers of the Revolution, too, robust Danton, the dandy Desmoulins and the sinister Robespierre were all oyster men.

There are very good reasons for Cancale's supremacy as a centre of oyster cultivation. The sea in the bay on the western side of Mont St Michel is teeming with the nutritious plankton that the bivalve molluscs thrive on. The oysters have their share of nutrients to impart to us, as well, and the National Heart and Lung Institute recommends them as ideal for low-cholesterol diets. They are well balanced between protein, carbohydrate and fat, contain lots of vitamins and half a dozen will contain all your daily requirements of a fistful of minerals.

Oyster farming, introduced in 1858, has ensured that the maturing oysters can be constantly supervised while they are maturing, and are free from pollution and attacks by sharp-beaked birds.

There are two shapes of oyster, the first being *ostrea edulis*, which is like a flat disk and is the native Brittany oyster also known as Belon. The other is the deeper, longer, almost rectangular *crassostrea gigas* (in French, *creuse*) that was introduced to Brittany in 1970.

The most sought after and most expensive kind of oysters are the ones known as Fines de Claire. These have been raised in converted salt marshes called *claires*, where the clean waters have a very high mineral content including chlorophyll, which gives the oysters a distinctive and much

admired green tinge.

Whatever their effect on humans, oysters themselves are bisexual or intersexual, slipping between both genders at various times. The flat oysters can produce up to 1.5 million larvae and the *creuses* between 20,000 and 100,000, but only a small proportion will survive. They attach themselves to a hard surface, a post or a mangrove tree, and just stay there forever — unless they are to be farmed.

Oyster farmers use tiles as a hard surface to which the miniscule seed oysters attach themselves in clusters. They are taken to large basins, or *parcs*, where the oysters are removed and placed in a sheltered environment, to be pampered until they are ready to be sold. That is usually when they are three or four years old — their flavour begins to diminish once they reach the age of five. They are washed either by water jets or mechanical washers and given a thorough examination during which anything less than perfect is rejected.

Their juicy, salty sea flavour and their unique texture as they slip between the taste buds make them the most seductive item on the seafood menu, and this weekend, Lord Jim's at the Oriental, seafood destination par excellence, is presenting an oyster promotion with one of Cancale's leading oyster farms, Les Parcs Saint-Kerber.

Fresh oysters will fly in from now until September 18, and the CEO of Les Parcs Saint-Kerber, Francois Pichot, will be at Lord Jim's to do some expert shucking — oysters are at their absolute best when consumed as soon as they have been opened. There will be Belons, Fines de Claire, the little Papillons and the big Tsarkaya oysters — for it was not only the kings of France who loved them, but the Tsars of Russia, too. The Tsarskaya, a *creuse fine de claire*, was exclusively developed in Cancale for them at Parcs Saint-Kerber over a century ago.

While M Pichot is shucking, Lord Jim's gifted young chef, Enrico Froehnel, will be preparing a selection of baked oysters including Fine de Claires Rockefeller, Tsarkaya with fennel and Pernod sauce, and Belons with leeks and champagne sauce.

Champagne is difficult to beat as an accompaniment for oysters, but the bone dry Muscadet is held in high regard, as well as Chablis, and, indeed, many dry white wines.

You can enjoy this unique Parcs Saint-Kerber oyster promotion from Cancales at Lord Jim's until Sunday, September 18, in the seafood buffet at lunchtime and a la carte at dinner. The number to call for information and reservations is 02-659-9000 ext Lord Jim's.