



Lack of marketing hurts French oysters

OPENING UP NEW OPPORTUNITIES: The French oyster industry wants its product to be more than just an occasional seafood treat. But getting oysters to go mainstream won't be an easy task. Marketing and promotion are two key areas where the industry is lacking. PHOTOS: Peter Oftedal

Shellfish growers want consumers to start thinking of oysters as a year-round buy.

Quentin Bates

French oyster growers are missing out on expanding their market by not looking beyond their traditional market of Christmas and New Year, according to a producer who wears numerous industry hats.

Stephan Alleaume, managing director of producer Les Parcs St

Kerber, also heads the Brittany shellfish producers organization. This gives him the role of defending the market and members' interests, as well as heading the only forum to discuss prices. If these two positions weren't enough, he is also in a very visible position as president of the French oyster producers association MER.

In all three positions, he is very concerned that French oysters need to be promoted more effectively.

"Promotion is not about price - it's about the product," he said. "In France we produce 120,000 to 140,000 metric tons of oysters a year and 60 to 80 percent of this is for the Christmas market."

In the last 10 years, Alleaume noted, the number of consumers buying oysters has fallen by 20 percent in an environment that has a great deal of competition in the market for cold starters.

"If everyone in France who buys a dozen oysters once a year were to buy a dozen twice a year, we wouldn't have enough to go around," he said. "We have not promoted oysters properly."

There is a distinction between city consumers who represent the bulk of consumption - but who buy oysters only during the winter - and coastal consumption that typically takes place during the summer months, coinciding with the tourist season. It is at this time that oysters are as fresh as fresh can be.

"We have an association here on the coast that promotes regional products and all of the growers supplied oysters for a food festival here a few weeks ago

when people had the opportunity to try and then buy," Alleaume said. "What was noticeable was just how many people there were who were trying an oyster for the first time."

Oyster mortality mystery
Although there are fewer oysters available in Europe, prices

at the end of the summer and then count what we have left," Alleaume said.

"Companies are more fragile in economic terms and although we have all been hit, the younger farmers who have made their investments are finding it difficult to cope.

"Any help, from government

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are still falling due to reduced demand. Irish producers have seen revenue fall by 50 percent this year, while in France the oyster business has been hit by a disease affecting younger shellfish which has still not been identified.

"We now have this mortality problem for the second year, with no help from the government," said Alleaume.

"We don't know what it is that's killing the oysters. There's between 40 and 100 percent in some areas with more under one-year oysters affected this year."

Last year's outbreak was faster and earlier in the year than this year's. The disease has affected the English Channel, Atlantic coast and Mediterranean grounds at different times and it is not yet possible to assess the damage.

"It only affects the deep oysters. We'll have to wait for

or elsewhere, would be welcome. Ifremer's [French Research Institute for Exploitation of the Sea] work has not yielded any results yet beyond conjecture that this is an opportunistic parasite that affects oysters when they are most vulnerable. But we don't know if it's a virus or bacteria. But the main thing is why oysters are dying and to know where does this thing come from?"

If the market does not increase, Alleaume said, then they will have enough oysters for the season, but if there is an increase in demand, the problems will be felt next January.

Distinctive taste

Based at Cancale in the north of France, Les Parcs Saint Kerber is a family-run company now in its third generation. The company supplies some of the top restaurants in 70 countries, Alleaume said.



FRESH OUT OF IDEAS: Ironically, if oyster demand holds steady, French producers should be able to meet demand. If it grows – as producers hope it will – the industry could be facing a product shortfall next winter.

With sales of 800 metric tons every year, most of this is exports which account for 85 percent of the company's turnover.

Parcs St Kerber has its signature Tsarskaya oysters, that are the top of their local production, creamed off at each level of production and kept separate.

The bay of Cancale itself is what makes their oysters so distinctive, Alleaume said.

"It's the salt and the iodine that do it. This area is also extremely tidal, so the oysters have a constant flow of nutrients and are constantly filtering. This gives them a crunchy texture with a sweetness to it that stays on your palate and dries your tongue a little," he said.

This contrasts with Les Parcs St Kerber's other flagship product, the Muirgen oyster, which is

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sourced from a small group of Irish producers.

"The meat is the same quality, crunchy but not as strong as

Tsarskaya oysters. It's sweeter, with no dryness of the tongue and the taste does not last as long

in your mouth."

Alleaume said his company has had good links with Irish producers for more than 20 years

as some top quality shellfish is produced in Ireland and has been sold in the past in France as French oysters.

"We wanted to create an Irish brand. We saw our competitors buying from Ireland, a lot of our customers were asking for this and we saw an opportunity to add a new item to our catalogue," he explained.

"They are kept in the water here for no more than a few days," he said, explaining that the oysters are only kept for a short time before being shipped on to customers so that they do not lose the distinctive Irish flavor.

"Now," he said, "if we can only get our customers thinking oysters year around."

French oyster facts

France controls more than 2,000 miles of coastline, featuring some of the finest oyster beds in the world, cultivated by around 3,400 growers.

From north to south there are seven distinct growing regions: Normandy, North-Brittany, South-Brittany, West-Central, Marennes-Oleron, Arachon and the Mediterranean.

Two culinary oyster species are cultivated in France, the Pacific oyster which was introduced in the 1970s from both Japanese and British Columbia stocks, and the European oyster. More than 90 percent of the oysters produced in France today are Pacific oysters.