

WSGW RADIO PRESENTATION

Oysters and Champagne

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Oysters and champagne. Love is in the air. It must be Valentine's Day and oysters have long been associated with romance — the perfect aphrodisiac.

There were some experiments on this and though the results of the tests looked promising, some scientists pointed out that the animal studies might not pertain to humans, which to them meant that it's difficult to conclude that eating oysters can boost sexual desire in humans.

A healthy food:

Oysters are high on the nutritional scale. They're low in saturated fats, aka "bad fats," and high in "good fats," such as omega-3 fatty acids.

Oysters eaten in moderation can help lower cholesterol levels and reduce the risk of heart disease and they provide a lot of vitamins and minerals — iron, zinc, copper and vitamin B-12.

And if your true love is the environment, it's good to know that an adult oyster is capable of filtering 25-50 gallons of water a day. With filtered water, comes more seagrass, which is a feeding and breeding ground for other species such as rockfish and crabs.

Keeping it safe:

Before popping the champagne cork, make sure the oysters you'll be serving, or dining on, won't send you and your valentine to the emergency room — dehydration from vomiting and diarrhea doesn't make for anyone's version of a romantic time.

Raw or cooked?

That's an important question since raw oysters can be contaminated with a variety of foodborne pathogens, such as E. coli, norovirus, and *Vibrio vulnificus*, to name a few. The bacteria, which are generally found in the warmer Gulf Coast waters during the summer, can be life-threatening, even fatal, when eaten by someone with liver disease, diabetes or a weakened immune system, according to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Obviously, you raise your risk of illness by eating raw or undercooked oysters.

Selecting your oysters:

Look for the label: Look for tags on sacks or containers of live shellfish still in the shell and labels on containers or packages of shucked shellfish. These tags and labels contain specific information about the product, including the processor's certification number. While some oysters are harvested and processed in accordance with national shellfish safety controls, that information may or may not be on the label. If sellers don't have any tags to show you, don't buy their oysters.

Discard cracked/broken ones: Throw away oysters, clams, and mussels if their shells are cracked or broken.

Do a Tap Test: Live oysters, clams, and mussels will close up when their shells are tapped. If they don't close when tapped, do not select them.

Storing oysters:

Always keep oysters, and other shellfish, cold before cooking or serving them. That's important because foodborne pathogens reproduce quickly in warm temperatures, and even more quickly once they're in your system.

With that in mind, put oysters on ice or in the refrigerator soon after buying them. If you're going to transport the oysters in a picnic cooler, be sure to wash it with hot soapy water before putting the ice and oysters into it — and again before using it for anything else.

Cooking oysters:

Even though raw oysters on the half shell are extremely popular, many health officials warn that no matter how many safeguards producers follow, there's no way to assure buyers that the raw oysters are safe to eat. Only heat can do that.

For that reason, they recommend that oysters be cooked, and that means cooked all the way through to a temperature of 194 degrees F for a minimum of 90 seconds. But since poking a thermometer into a batch of oysters isn't always all that practical, they offer these tips:

- If you put the unshucked oysters into a pot of boiling water, keep cooking them another three to four minutes after the shells open. Discard any that don't open;
- If you're cooking shucked oysters, boil or simmer them for at least three minutes, or until the edges curl;
- Fry shucked oysters at 375 degrees for at least three minutes;
- Broil shucked oysters three inches away from the heat for three minutes;
- Bake shucked oysters at 450 degrees for 10 minutes; and
- Barbecuing oysters just until they open will not kill *Vibrio* bacteria, so keep them on the grill for several more minutes after they open.

Shucked oysters should keep in the refrigerator for up to two days and in a freezer for up to three months.

Here's to safe eating:

Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water before and after preparing oysters.

Wash cutting boards, utensils, counters, and sinks with hot, soapy water after preparing oysters.

Serve cooked shellfish on a clean plate, never the same unwashed plate that was used to hold raw product.

FDA oyster myth busters:

MYTH: Eating raw oysters is safe if you drown them in hot sauce, which kills everything.

Fact: The active ingredients in hot sauce have no more effect on harmful bacteria than plain water. Nothing but prolonged exposure to heat at a high enough temperature will kill bacteria.

MYTH: Alcohol kills harmful bacteria.

Fact: Alcohol may kill your good judgment, but it doesn't destroy harmful bacteria in the food you eat while drinking it.

MYTH: Raw oysters are an aphrodisiac and will cure a hangover.

Fact: There is no scientific evidence that either of these commonly held beliefs is true.

MYTH: Avoid oysters from polluted waters and you'll be fine.

Fact: *Vibrio vulnificus* in oysters has nothing to do with pollution. Rather these bacteria thrive naturally in warm coastal areas, such as the Gulf of Mexico, where oysters live.

MYTH: An experienced oyster lover can tell a good oyster from a bad one.

Fact: *Vibrio vulnificus* can't be seen, smelled, or even tasted. Don't rely on your senses to determine if an oyster is safe — or any other food is free of bacteria or other pathogens.

MYTH: Just a few oysters can't hurt you.

Fact: Roberta Hammond, the Food and Waterborne Disease Coordinator for Florida, cites a case where a fatality caused by *Vibrio vulnificus* occurred after the victim ate only three oysters. The seriousness of any case depends on many factors, including how much bacteria is ingested and the person's underlying health conditions.

MYTH: Avoid raw oysters in months without the letter "R" and you'll be safe.

Fact: While presence of *Vibrio vulnificus* bacteria is higher in warmer months, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a full 40 percent of *Vibrio* infections occur during colder months from September through April.

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