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» DINING

Oysters

BY PATRICIA VALICENTI

France hosts prime oyster-growing territories, each yielding a specific taste, not unlike its vineyards.

Since Antiquity the Atlantic coastal waters of France, from Normandy to Brittany to the scenic Bay of Arcachon, have been a place of choice for raising oysters. The emperors and leading families of Rome clamoured for the oysters from Mare Nostrum, the actual Marennes Oléron basin.

The Marennes Oléron is a celebrated oyster cultivation region nestled on the Atlantic coast in the Charente-Maritime, between La Rochelle and Bordeaux where annually some 45,000 to 60,000 metric tons of oysters are produced. Pretty little cabins painted in bright colours, a picturesque offshoot of the oyster trade, dot the landscape. These tiny houses are where the oystermen sort, wash and grade the oysters.

Here, where the land meets the ocean currents, the oysters are bred, raised, then matured in the celebrated "Claire". The Claires were the flooded salt flats that oystermen transformed several centuries ago into water parcels. The shallow parcels or water fields are characteristic of the Marennes Oléron region and look like a patchwork quilt from the sky. The parcels



The colourful cabins where oystermen sort and size oysters in the Marennes Oléron



Oystermen in the Marennes Oléron

are regularly prepared by hand using specific tools to flatten the bottom and strengthen the sides to reinforce the natural impermeable properties of the blue clay of which they are made. The water there remains still and the oysters can grow and fatten peacefully. They take four years to produce and are harvested by hand, with their unique flavour stemming from the mixture of fresh and salt water in the water parcels.

It isn't easy to have a successful marriage between oysters and champagne. For a harmonious blend, it's preferable to choose oysters that are not too briny as the iodine almost always gives the champagne a metallic taste. On the other hand, raw oysters with a delicate savour of hazel nut and almond, not too fleshy yet firm, go well with a strong champagne, full-bodied and

not too acidic. Spéciales Isigny or Spéciales Gillardeau oysters are nicely combined with a Millésime Rare 1998 from the house of Arlaux, a champagne of delicate bubbles with a fruity and fresh taste.

SAVOURING OYSTERS IN PARIS

- Le Dôme remains a temple to the magical mollusc serving up no less than 10 different kinds, straight from the Atlantic Coast including the Tsarskaya, the pearl of the Czars from Cancale. 108 blvd Montparnasse (14th), 01 43 35 25 81.
- Rare oysters await in this Montparnasse seafood establishment, which opened its doors in 1981 and is experiencing something of a renaissance under its new owners. The decor is decidedly maritime with seashells covering the walls and columns. Connoisseurs come here to savour hard to find oysters from Ile de Ré, the Ar-Coums and the Cadoret belons. Meanwhile, the menu also features fine fish and seafood. The Bar à Huitres Montparnasse, 112, bd du Montparnasse, (14th), 01 43 20 71 01. For all addresses in Paris go to www.lebarahuitres.com
- Restaurant Prunier is where you will feast on over a dozen kinds of oysters including those raised by Gillardeau, Pierre-Marie Barrau and David Hervé in the Marennes Oléron, Tiamaraas from Ireland, the Isigny from Utah Beach in Normandy or the "Spéciales" from the bay of Mont Saint-Michel in Brittany. 16 ave Victor Hugo (16th), 01 44 17 35 85.



The champagne, Arlaux Millésime Rare 1998 (vintage): a superb savour served with Gillardeau "Spéciales" oysters, on the halfshell, from the Marennes basin.

- Boutique Champagne Arlaux, 29 rue Censier (5th), 01 47 07 43 08. M° Censier-Daubenton. www.arlaux.fr