

~Charlotte Wood ~

# FOR THE LOVE OF OYSTERS

*The esteemed novelist recalls that life-changing stopover at a servo on the NSW south coast that sparked an all-consuming love affair with the food she once despised and which inspired the name of her popular blog.*

**M**y first response to tasting an oyster was predictable. I was 12 years old, and at a backyard barbecue with my best friend and her parents. I recall just a few impressions of the day: the glare of the sun bouncing off the white weatherboards of the house; a bristly, threadbare lawn. I remember pushing the oyster off its shell and into my mouth. And I remember promptly spitting it out, mid gales of adult laughter, onto the hot pale concrete of the garden path.

In that instant, I knew that the utter shocking disgust of the sensation, that taint on my tongue, would never leave me. How on earth could anyone put such a slimy, poisonous, slug-gobbet of a thing in their mouth and claim to enjoy it? It was mystifying.

It was not a promising start, and the attraction of oysters remained a mystery to me for many years. Growing up in an inland country town, I was rarely confronted with fresh seafood of any kind, let alone oysters. So I found them rather easy to avoid until I moved to the city in my mid-20s, taking up with a man whose extended Italian family were devotees of all seafood, but most particularly, of oysters.

All special family gatherings were held at a particular city hotel with an all-you-can-eat buffet that was legendary for the quality of its seafood – especially the oysters. So profound was the buffet’s allure that one aunt would actually leave an esky full of ice in the boot of her car, and somehow smuggle into it sizeable servings of oysters and prawns from her handbag when lunch was over.

This obsession with oysters was unsettling to me, but I managed to make my way through several seafood buffets without touching one. This caused the aunts an unspoken but obvious consternation, as they stared at my oyster-less plate and then looked at each other with

sidelong glances, eyebrows raised. But they had been warned that I was strange – my beau’s mother had told them I was “quite nice, but very women’s lib” – and they tried to give me the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps the oyster aversion, I could feel them thinking, might be attributable to the same bizarre set of alien beliefs.

However, the day came when I found myself at Sunday lunch in the family home, with my boyfriend and his parents. His father was a sweet, elderly man with impeccable manners and emphysema, whose name – poignantly, at this stage of his life – was Boy. And he was sitting across the table from me, holding a heavy platter of oysters in both frail hands, and inviting me to take from it.

Boy adored oysters. To him they were the height of extravagant pleasure, and I knew his desire to share the platter of glistening grey slugs with me was a gesture of pure generosity and warmth. Of course I could not refuse.

I took three, resisting more on the pretext of restraint. I could feel the rictus smile on my face as I stared down at the plate. There was no getting around it: they must be eaten. All I could do was pray I would not audibly retch as I downed them as quickly as possible.

I swallowed the first one whole, forcing myself not to wince through sheer force

of will. Gah! So salty, and so acidic. But something strange was happening – it was not, I was astonished to find, so repellent after all.

The second oyster I ate in two bites, astounded at finding the taste... interesting. By the third, I had detected a glimmer of what I would soon fall in love with: the briny tang, the softness in the mouth.

I ate no more oysters that day, but I had learned a crucial lesson about food – one must always taste things at least twice. I had begun to experience what psychologists call the ‘hedonic reversal’ – the human capacity to appreciate and desire something not simply despite, but

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Charlotte shucking oysters with her husband Sean McElvogue at Wombarra, NSW, on New Year's Eve last year.

because of, the very properties that first repelled one. Indeed, in many cultures, some of the most highly esteemed foods involve an element of ‘acquired taste’: the deliberate overcoming of some initial unpleasantness or revulsion (chillies are the most obvious example).

But if I was beginning to understand what philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer has termed the ‘paradox of aversion’ at Boy’s table that day, the full hedonic reversal was yet to come. It was not until I ate a freshly opened oyster that I truly began to understand that one that was newly shucked, complete with its essential little pool of icy sea-juices, is a completely different animal from the dried-out smears of sludge one buys in styrofoam trays from the fish shop.

My first oyster shucking lesson might have been insalubrious, but it was also life-changing. And serendipitous. It happened during the first camping holiday my now-husband and I took together almost 15 years ago, and my memory of it is suffused with a kind of dirt-road romance. The classroom was a petrol station on a dusty road outside a national park on the NSW south coast, and my teacher was a bloke wearing a singlet, a pair of stubbies and a welding glove.

My new boyfriend Sean was back at the campsite at Saltwater Creek, and I had driven into town for some supplies. On the way back, a scrawled sign outside the service station advertised ‘fresh oysters’, and on an impulse, I swung into the drive.

But when the Servo Man presented me with a hessian sack full of unshucked oysters, I balked. What was I supposed to do with these? “Don’t you have any opened ones?” I pleaded with him.

I know now that the far south coast of NSW is home to the finest Sydney rock oyster leases in the country – and that to an oyster lover, asking for them pre-opened when closed live ones are on offer, is akin to refusing bread that’s fresh from the oven and asking instead for a month-old loaf with extra mould. But I didn’t know this then. All I knew that day, was there was no way I could convert this sack of dirty rocks into the plate of silvery oysters I wanted to offer my beloved.

“Nah, shucking em’s easy, I’ll showya!” Servo Man said. He then whipped on his welding glove, seized an oyster knife and went to work.

He clamped the oyster to the counter surface with his giant gloved mitt, the ‘lid’ uppermost and the hinge end of the shell exposed. Then he applied the knife to the hinge, and within seconds, he had popped the lid open. There on the white shell lay a shining, silky oyster in a tiny pool of saltwater. He scooped his knife beneath the oyster in a clearly practised way and then slurped it from the shell into his mouth, declaring it “bloody beautiful”.

Somehow, despite the lack of welding glove or oyster knife back at our campsite, he convinced me. He loaded me up with the sack and a bag of ice, insisting on the latter. Not to keep the oysters fresh, for they were alive, he told me, and would remain happily so in the damp sack for an amazing couple of weeks – but fresh oysters, Servo Man said, absolutely must be chilled before eating.

I arrived back at the campsite with the sack and the ice, promising my doubtful boyfriend that I knew exactly how to do this. The romance of the idea must have smiled upon us, because I somehow taught Sean my newfound shucking technique using nothing more than a bone-handled butter knife and a tea towel wrapped around my hand in lieu of the protective glove.

We lay the oysters on a bed of ice on a battered tin tray, as I had been instructed by Servo Man, and opened a bottle of ice-cold wine as the sun set behind the eucalypts. Minutes later with a squeeze of lemon, and a taste of this freshest thing I had ever eaten, my oyster-led hedonic reversal was complete. I understood, finally, what the point of oysters was. *This*. This luxe creaminess; this icy, briny, metallic zing. The taste of the ocean, the slosh of water, the grit of sand, the buffeting of the wind. It was incredible.

Since that long-ago day, my devotion to oysters has only intensified, and my technique has had a little professional polish with shucking workshops in fancy restaurants and a growing oyster knife collection. But my gratitude to Servo Man and his welding glove remains undimmed, for his significant contribution to my twin love affairs – with my husband, and with the simple, earthy bliss of a fresh oyster shucked with a butter knife at a campsite by the sea. 🍷