

Hate Oysters? I Used to Until I Learned These 5 Things



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Carolina coast that is a prolific seafood spot). By the time I flew back home, I had a new appreciation for all things oysters. Keep reading to find out why—plus why you and your garden will want to gobble 'em up more, too.

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1. Oysters make our waterways so much healthier.

Think of these bivalves as the ultimate all-natural water filters. Just one oyster cleans 25 to 50 gallons of water each day. “It’s hard to quantify the impact of that or place a money value on the work they’re doing for us,” says Jay Styron, assistant director of marine operations at the University of North Carolina—Wilmington. “I consider it priceless, though.”

Plus, oysters that are farmed in cages offer a friendly habitat for small fish and lobsters. They can all camp out and stay safe together during hurricane season, since farmers like Styron (he’s also the owner of the [Carolina Mariculture Co.](#) oyster farm) can submerge the cages far below sea level when rough waters threaten. Once the storm passes, the cages are raised closer to the surface for easier sorting and access to sun.

2. Oysters are also really healthy for our bodies.

Oysters fuel up on algae and other floating nutrients (hey, that’s what helps keep the water cleaner!). But don’t be turned off by the fact that they are one of the only “living” foods we eat. One serving offers 40 percent of the iron you need in a day to keep all your cells supplied with oxygen, along with up to 1,000 milligrams of heart-healthy omega-3s, [says the National Institutes of Health](#).

Six medium oysters have only 45 calories, 5 grams of protein, and less than 2 grams of fat, so this is a diet-friendly starter you can snack on before your meal.



3. There's a right and a wrong way to eat them.

When you eat fresh-from-the-sea oysters, they taste, well, like the sea.

Like terroir for wine (an expression that relates to grapes sharing the "taste of a place" via the soil), oyster farmers talk about "merroir" for their harvests. The French term *mer* translates to *sea* in English, so this term refers to "terroir of the sea." Each oyster tastes different, depending on where it was born and bred, and on the filtering. To be honest, I never paid enough attention to the origin of the oysters I sampled at seafood restaurants in the Midwest to consider this factor—and by the time they hit the serving tray in the middle of Iowa, the flavors seemed to be a bit muted.

But I figured if I was ever going to enjoy oyster slurping, it would be when they're literally seconds from the sea. So when Styron offered to shuck and share an oyster right on his barge, I rolled up my sleeves and said, "When in Rome!"

The slimy texture I had never been able to get over turned into a complete afterthought as I tried my newly learned slurp-chew-swallow routine. And what took over was that "merrior:" an overwhelmingly powerful and shockingly delicious dose of fresh, salty sea.

4. Oyster shells can supplement your soil.

I noticed something interesting while walking around the adorable town of Beaufort after our oyster farm outing: Many of the flower beds were covered in oyster shells rather than rocks or wood mulch. Knowing there must be a reason, I did some research once I got back to my desk. Turns out, oyster shells are about 95 percent calcium carbonate, which has been proven to neutralize acidic soil that can potentially harm plants. Supplementing farmland with crushed oyster shells increases crop production, says a [study in the journal *Waste Management*](#). At the same time, its texture allows for more aeration and better water flow.

Here's how to try this organic mulch option in your own garden or potted plants:

1. Clean oyster shells.
2. Put them in a cloth bag (or cover with a large towel) and break into small pieces.
3. Sprinkle evenly over your garden bed in late spring.
4. Water the surface to keep the shell pieces in place.



5. They're remarkably versatile.

As surprised as I was about how much I didn't hate that unadulterated raw oyster, I can't say that it will become my go-to party app quite yet. Ample food safety measures are in place to make sure oysters are as safe as possible to eat as -is, but there's still a bit of a risk to noshing on an uncooked oyster.

Vibrosis, a bacterial illness transferred to oysters via infected coastal waters, impacts about 80,000 people each year. [The Centers for Disease Control](#) says the only surefire way to kill the vibrio bacteria is by thoroughly cooking the shellfish. While it's still a bit of a gamble, you have a safer bet enjoying raw oysters in cooler fall and winter months when the water is chillier.

Still, learning about how incredible oysters are for the earth—and for my body—inspired me to come back to the Better Homes & Gardens® Test Kitchen and dig around for new ways to doctor them up (beyond fried oyster sliders and subs). Experiment along with me by sampling these three appetizing oyster recipes: