

In the kitchen



This month **Paola Westbeek** savours delicious Arcachon-Cap Ferret oysters, regarded as some of the best in France

With handsome Belle Époque villas, sandy shores and myriad possibilities for recreational pursuits, Arcachon, located approximately 65 kilometres south-west of Bordeaux, has been a popular summer retreat since the second half of the 19th century.

But its charm doesn't end there. The swanky seaside resort is synonymous with some of the best oysters in France. In fact, that's what brings me there every year.

Few culinary experiences can compare to the joy of slowly savouring a platter of freshly shucked Arcachon-Cap Ferret oysters with nothing more than a wedge of lemon and a glass of chilled sauvignon blanc at one of the bay's colourful shacks.

Though oysters were naturally plentiful in the region since at least Gallo-Roman times, overzealous harvesting almost led to the extinction of the original species - the *ostrea edulis* or European flat oyster - by the middle of the 18th century.

Paradoxically, oysters were not only an affordable source of protein for coastal peasants, but they also became highly regarded at royal courts as well as famed for their aphrodisiac properties. Ordering half a dozen oysters may seem like a small luxury today, but back in the 17th century, consuming as many as 12 dozen in one sitting was nothing out of the ordinary.

In an attempt to restore the oyster supply, the first farming regulations were passed in Arcachon in 1849,



PHOTO © S. COUSIN-CEITNA

but it wasn't until the 1870s that the cultivation of oysters proved to be successful. By 1920, however, disease had fully wiped out the indigenous oyster and farming continued with the Portuguese hollow oyster (*crassostrea angulata*), which suffered the same fate in 1970.

Today, it is the imported Japanese oyster (*crassostrea gigas*) that thrives abundantly in the Bassin d'Arcachon. Approximately 7,000 tonnes of the briny bivalves are cultivated in the bay annually by 280 dedicated *ostréiculteurs* (oyster farmers) spread out over 23 oyster ports.

Arcachon-Cap Ferret oysters are best enjoyed at one of the many seaside restaurants or directly from the local farmers who are always eager to share their know-how and let you sample the oysters' diverse and complex palate of flavours, which can range from zesty and crisp to herbal and even sweet, depending on where they're harvested.

You can also stop by the Maison de l'Huître museum in Gujan-Mestras, Arcachon's oyster capital, for a guided tour followed by a tasting at one of the 12 huts spread out over the town's ports.

Oysters can be slurped year-round, but it's advisable to respect their reproductive period (May through August) and keep in mind that during this time, they acquire a pronounced milky flavour. Finally, don't forget to chew! Swallow an oyster whole and you'll be missing out on all its exquisite taste nuances and textures.

RECIPE

Onion and fig tartines

"All over the French Riviera I saw variations on the idea of an open-faced sandwich, or tartine. The size of the bread slices varied, as well as the toppings. With a glass of rosé, to me, this is the perfect light meal" - Erin Gleeson

INGREDIENTS

- Half a large onion
- 1 tbsp butter
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 tbsp balsamic
- Four slices crusty French bread
- 2 tbsp goat's cheese
- 1 tbsp fig jam
- Pinch of pine nuts
- Salt and pepper

METHOD

Very thinly slice half a large onion (use a mandoline if you have one).

Sauté the onion for 15 minutes on a medium to low heat, stirring often with one tablespoon of butter, one tablespoon of olive oil and one tablespoon of balsamic.

Toast four slices of crusty French bread and top each slice (in this order) with: two tablespoons of goat's cheese, one tablespoon of fig jam and a spoonful of the onions, a pinch of pine nuts, a drizzle of oil olive and salt and pepper to taste.



Serve with...

A wedge of lemon and a glass of chilled sauvignon blanc.



The Forest Feast Mediterranean
by Erin Gleeson
(Abrams, £26.99)

© 2019 Erin Gleeson

Next month's recipe:
Molten chocolate cakes