



The OYSTERS of Santa Catarina

by Orlando Santos

From breeding farms in the open sea, oysters travel a long way before they are savored in diverse forms in the sophisticated restaurants of Rio and São Paulo.

The very freshest oysters can be tasted in the restaurants, bars and beaches of the southern state of Santa Catarina. Extending along more than half of the state's long coastline, peppered with many islands, the oyster sea farms of Santa Catarina produce more than 12,000 tons of shellfish per year, almost 90% of Brazil's total production.

Oysters are prepared in a variety of ways, from the classic *ao bafo* (steamed), to being served as a canapé with foie gras. The most popular modes are raw oyster with lime, salt and pepper, and *au gratin*. Most



Steamed or au gratin, always a delicacy



OFTEN EATEN RAW, WITH LIME, salt and pepper, there are also two classic and quite simple recipes for preparing oysters. The first method is to steam it, while the second is *au gratin*. It is said that the first method is the most common, as it best brings out the mollusk's taste.

The preparation for steaming is simple: Put the oysters into a large pan with the flat shell upwards; add water, put the lid on, and place it over a low heat; in 5 to 10 minutes, the shells will open and the oysters will be ready to be consumed at once. The people of Santa Caterina traditionally serve steamed oysters with pepper jelly.

For oyster *au gratin*, remove the upper shell, peel off the flesh from the lower part, but keeping it inside the shell; put the oysters in a baking pan, cover each one with a little white sauce, sprinkle over some grated cheese and put the pan in the oven, pre-heated to 180°C, for 3 minutes; serve right away.

At Margutta, a restaurant in Ipanema, chef **Conceição Neroni** offers her clientele, as a starter, Santa Catarina oysters *au gratin*, with spinach and fine herbs.

Now, in the summer, the restaurant's Oyster Festival has begun, which follows on from their recent Lobster Festival.

This special promotion is taking place at the Margutta restaurant in Rio's downtown, in the building that also houses the headquarters of FIRJAN, the state of Rio's industry association.

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of the oysters served in urban centers are bred in oyster farms, grown in nets spread out in the open sea.

The harvest is made after a period of four to 12 months after the planting of oyster seed (this is the technical term, although referring to mollusks) of various species; this time depends on the size of the oyster one intends to obtain. Some of the seeds used in Brazil are imported from Chile; others from a laboratory at the University of Florianópolis, which conducts research in this field.

According to specialists, a healthy oyster should be moist. A delicate food, it must be consumed within four days of harvest, and always maintained at a

temperature of four to seven degrees Celsius, Oysters are best served with dry, austere, non-fruity white wines.

For many, the perfect accompaniment for oysters is a classic French Chablis, with its slightly salty, mineral taste, producing a perfect combination with mollusks fresh out of their shells. Evidently, this recommendation is for those with healthy bank accounts. In times of economic crisis, there are those who suggest that a domestic sparkling wine produces an excellent gastronomic result.

Most oyster suppliers to the restaurants of Rio are from Santa Catarina, and almost all *carioca* chefs have visited the state's coast to see for themselves how the mollusks are bred, to ensure their menus feature the best. Quality also benefits from the Marine Mollusk Laboratory, part of the Federal University of Santa Catarina. It is in this laboratory that researchers produce seeds

which they sell to the region's oyster growers.

These measures dispel the long-standing impression that it is dangerous to eat oysters, especially raw ones. The myth arose that they cause intoxication. However, technicians, specialists and researchers are unanimous in stating that it is essential to have vigorous control of quality, temperature and hygiene conditions in which the mollusks are bred, transported, stored and served. In some locations in Santa Catarina, for example, oysters are consumed on the same day they are taken from the sea.

Oysters have a unique, refined flavor, which may and indeed should be enjoyed throughout the year. But it cannot be said often enough that the best time for their production and consumption is now, in the summer, whether at the beach, or in a bar or restaurant – preferably accompanied with a chilled white wine. ■