Why Did Americans Lose Their Faith in Local Food?
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I am interested in the rise, collapse, and recovery of oysters in the American diet as part of a larger project on why Americans stopped eating locally in the twentieth century. What caused oysters to become the daily protein of the urban working poor? Why did they disappear so quickly and so thoroughly from the city? And how did this dramatic shift in eating habits reorganize Americans' relationship to the natural world?

At the Carson Center I will pursue two themes of this project. The first has to do with the rise of the American oyster to a place of paramount importance in the diet of working class Americans. We know from a range of sources that by the 1880s oysters were a staple of workers diets in cities as diverse as New Orleans, New York, San Francisco, and Baltimore. In fact, the oyster and the industrial city seem to arise together. Oysters were cheap protein. In San Francisco, the great slaughterhouse of the Pacific Coast, oysters were cheaper than beef. In New York, oysters were ubiquitous in poor neighborhoods—raw, steamed, and most of all, stewed. What is not yet clear is why this unlikely mollusk came to dominate the urban diet. Clearly one factor was local production. All of the above-mentioned cities had large nearby oyster production areas. Each port city was closely tied to its estuary. Oysters seem to have flourished in the nutrient-rich sewage produced by the organic city. I will explore why oysters and not beef or pork came to be the daily protein of the urban working poor, the Big Mac of the nineteenth century.

My second interest is in the equally precipitous decline of urban oysters. My preliminary research suggests that by the 1930s oysters had largely disappeared from working class diets in most major American coastal cities (New Orleans, as in so many things, appears to be an exception). In major cities around the country, the working poor stopped eating oysters and began eating frankfurters and hamburgers—inexpensive ground meats sourced from distant pastures. Pork and beef were not produced in the city in the twentieth century. This meat came from far away, by train and eventually by truck. Those few scholars who have noticed this revolution in the American diet have

concluded it was due to pollution and prices. The story goes like this: As the organic city became the industrial city, local shellfish died from the pollution. Oysters could no longer be grown locally. Simultaneously, the expanded national rail network brought cheap, refrigerated beef and pork to the cities. People bought the cheapest protein they could get. This story is powerful, but it treats consumers as mechanical. Did twentieth century Americans really care so little about what they cooked for their families or ate with their friends? What else might account for such a radical shift in eating? I am uncovering evidence consumer choice was a key part of this profound dietary shift. In particular, I want to know if fear of contaminated food and an understanding of oysters as particularly dangerous contributed to the fall of shellfish and the rise of red meat.