

The Rise and Fall of the Industrial Oyster, 1870-1930

Matthew Booker

I am writing a book about oysters in the industrial city. Oysters are important because they are a window onto the transformation of the American diet, the growth of American cities, and the changing conceptions of food safety that were a result of industrial growth. Long a local staple of the American diet in coastal regions, by the 1820s oystering entered a new phase. Middlemen shipped wild-caught oysters inland on the Erie Canal and by the 1840s oyster growers were planting oysters from Chesapeake Bay in Long Island Sound, harvesting their spawn, and selling the seed oysters to specialized aquaculturists. Oystering became a hybrid of wild and farmed, and its most productive and valuable growing areas were in urban estuaries adjacent to—even fertilized by—the booming cities of the late nineteenth century. By the turn of the twentieth century, oysters were a staple food in industrial cities of both Atlantic and Pacific coasts, eaten by rich and poor, up to three times each day.

The oyster industry epitomizes what Ted Steinberg calls the “organic city.” Organic cities recycled human and animal waste into fertilizer for nearby farms and then into food. With minimal processing and transport, cities partly fed themselves. This was a food system entirely different from the industrial model of distant monocultures. And it is quite different from the vision of today’s proponents of local food, who focus on farmers markets and farm to table programs and who generally imagine food producers as rural and consumers as urban. Nor is it the model embraced by high-tech investors in sealed vertical farms. The urban food system of the past relied on its environment, not on isolation from its environment.

The organic city faced enormous pressures. From 1870 to 1930, the U.S. population tripled, and over a quarter of that growth came from overseas immigrants seeking factory work. By 1930 more than half of Americans lived in cities. Those cities were the most dangerous places in the world, thanks to a second Columbian Exchange of epidemic diseases spread by crowding, unsafe food and contaminated water. That relationship between food, environment and health only slowly became clear. In telling the story of food, disease and the city, my project benefits from surprising new evidence from unlikely sources. Conservation biology studies of genetic diversity in Atlantic oysters show the lasting influence of human-assisted oyster migration and transplantation. Medical science also has reevaluated the causes, danger and frequency of urban epidemics. Using new digital tools like “distant reading” to access the New York Public Library’s newly digitized menu collection, my project reveals the role that consumer choice (and fears) played in changing the American diet away from locally grown oysters and toward distant, industrial meats. Together these diverse sources permit broader appreciation for the adaptability previous generations showed in adjusting to rapid social and ecological change a century ago. What might their failures and successes, long forgotten but hiding in plain sight, offer our generation, as we face another period of rapid change?

This will be an environmental history of one key food—oysters—in American cities. However, it amounts to something more, encompassing the story of changes in food production into the modern era. It reveals what people ate, where food was produced and why the city became a place solely for consumers, not for food producers.