

Asheville Seafood Restaurants Love “R” Months.

Why, you might ask, do Asheville, NC restaurants love “R” months? Because it’s full-on oyster season, that’s why! The turn of the seasons not only marks a change in temperatures, shorter days and the impending holiday season, it also marks the unofficial start of oyster season. The cold days and cold water help make the oysters good and keep longer. These days, with on board refrigeration and a large shipping infrastructure you really can get oysters year round. However, the adage of eating oysters only in “r” months is persistent.

Why “R” Months?

George Baxevanis, owner of Asheville’s Fisherman’s Quarters II, explains that there are two reasons for “R” months, and they both have to do with temperatures. “The “R” months include every month from September to April, months when you can expect low air temps and low water temps.” Lots of old-timey food activities happen in this time of year, primarily because of spoilage. The air temperature is low enough to be considered refrigeration and allows the fisherman or farmer to handle raw foods safely. Another prime example is hog butchering, which always takes place after the first frost. The added bonus is that there are fewer insects as well. For an oyster fisherman, cold temperatures are a blessing. Oysters can be harvested and held on the boat without fear of spoiling. When the weather is cold, the oysters can be shipped safely to anywhere (remember, this is from the times before refrigerators). It also happens that the best oysters come from the coldest water.

Asheville Restaurants Love “Cold” Water Oysters

Oysters have an interesting life cycle, driven by temperatures. Oysters are hermaphrodites, that is, any oyster can be a male or a female or can switch from one to the other. In cold waters, during the winter, oysters tend to be female. Female oysters are plump, meaty and briny. Delicious. In the spring, as the water begins to warm up the oysters can change from females to males. Male oysters are thin and wispy, can have off colors and generally don’t taste as good. The males are still good to eat and can be enjoyed just like the females, but they just aren’t as good.

What Are the Best Kind?

Anyone with any experience dealing with oysters knows that there are dozens upon dozens of varieties. For the most part, all oysters are the same species, *Crasostrea Virginica*, the Virginia or Atlantic oyster. On the west coast there is another species, *Crasostrea Gigas*, the Pacific oyster. There are a couple of other species, but they are not as well known. These include the Belon oyster from Europe and the Sidney Rock oyster from Australia and New Zealand. The Virginia oyster is perhaps the most well known to Americans, especially on the east coast. It is found from the Gulf of Mexico all the way up into New England where the species changes in some areas to the Wellfleet Oyster. The names associated with these oysters are really referring to where the oyster came from. For example, Montauk oysters come from Montauk Point in New York and Cape Breton Oysters come from Cape Breton in Canada. Each will have its own distinct flavor that it gets from the undersea terroir. Salinity and other mineral content varies from river to river and bay to bay, imparting a flavor particular to the oysters grown. George tells me with a smile on his face, “The best kind of oysters are FRESH oysters. To truly appreciate oysters you must experiment with and enjoy oysters from around the world.”