

Oyster fishery

Femme de la Côte

This is the story of a woman of the isle of Oleron, in the southwest of France, who has reared oysters for more than 60 years

Like most other oyster fishers from the bay of Marennes-Oleron, the first bay in Europe for oyster production, Jeanne belongs to one of those deep-rooted coastal families, who have cultivated salt ponds, the land between the ponds and small vineyards, for many centuries. As far back as the 17th century—Jeanne’s genealogy has not been traced farther—her ancestors were already living in the same places as she does today, within a triangle of about 3 sq miles—her whole universe.

Until the turn of the 20th century, Jeanne’s ancestors kept working the soil belonging to richer landowners. After the French Revolution, they managed to buy small plots of land and vineyards. But only when artisanal salt production became threatened by a more industrialized production elsewhere were they able to buy the salt ponds they had cultivated from their former landowners. It was also only after the phylloxera crisis in the 1880-90 period that they could buy the vineyards at depressed prices and replant them.

Thus, on the eve of the First World War, Jeanne’s father had become one of the most powerful landowners and cultivators of his village. But the war was going to change his world forever. When he returned home injured, he still carried on producing salt and wine for a while, but progressively turned to what had become the only primary activity economically viable: oyster production.

The European coast had been covered with oyster beds for ages. In the beginning, there was just a sole bed from Denmark down to Portugal. In the bay of Marennes-Oleron, people had been eating flat oysters since antiquity. When the Romans invaded the area in the 1st

century after Christ, they brought with them refinement techniques, and started exporting oysters back home. In the 12th century, according to some historic documents, some kinds of constructions already existed, where oysters were let to grow. As centuries passed, oysters started to be consumed farther away from the coast, in the larger regional cities and in Paris.

The special characteristic of the Marennes-Oleron oyster is that it can turn green, thanks to an algae, the blue navicula. Mention of the green oyster can be found in historic documents as old as the 17th century, but the process might be much older. This green oyster was first produced on the left side of the Seudre river by salt producers. When working at their ponds, they had noticed that the oyster became green naturally. These poor people had the habit of going fishing at low tide to feed themselves. They used to pick the oysters stuck on the rocks, using a kind of hammer.

As they would spend a whole day out at their ponds before returning home, they also had the habit of stocking their oysters in a pond before eating them. This might be how they discovered that they could naturally turn green, in the process also becoming finer and tastier. Thus, they started growing the oysters in ponds, and began digging new ponds to grow more oysters. For them, this new resource was a way to get away from their dependence on the salt ponds owners who, most of the time, lived away in large cities and were only interested in speculating on salt prices.

New oyster ponds

In the 18th century, the development of thousands of new oyster ponds brought about a conflict between the different

social categories. The salt producers were summoned to destroy their ponds, but never did. On the contrary, a century and a half later, as salt prices sank, most salt ponds were turned into oyster ponds.

Until the midst of the 19th century, the oyster industry remained more or less the same in the bay of Marennes-Oleron: poor local families would invade the coast at low tide to pick young oysters on the rocks and sell them to salt producers.

Some fishermen would also keep dredging the beds, but most of the beds had been depleted by overfishing since the 18th century, forcing the government to forbid fishing during the reproductive months each year. They would also sell their fishing products to the salt producers along both sides of the Seudre, who would let them grow in their ponds for three to five years.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the fishermen of the bay, who used to stock their unsold production on the upper side of the coast, found that they could grow oysters on this upper part of the beach, called *estran*. This was a time-saving revolution. Oysters could become fat and mature without spending several years in ponds. From then on, the fishermen began leaving them for only about six months in ponds, sometimes even less, just long enough for them to turn green.

The major revolution, however, appeared in the 1850s, when, for different reasons, Emperor Napoleon III decided to modernize the industry. He first sent a scientist, Victor Coste, to Italy, where the French had maintained spat settlement techniques since antiquity. More particularly, they used to put wooden bundles into the water for the little oyster larvae to settle on them. On Coste's return from Italy, the Emperor launched a national natural bed replenishment programme on the basis of these techniques and others. As a matter of fact, the French had already started building their own tools to collect spat in Brittany. The Emperor also introduced a form of private property (the 1852 decree) to boost the industry. Each person who asked for it could obtain the lease of a public ground.

The beginnings were, of course, chaotic. After the first successes appeared the first failures. Coste died a doomed man. But shortly afterwards, the pioneers who remained in the industry, triumphed. The first to succeed were the fishermen from the Arcachon Bay, south of the Gironde estuary. They succeeded so well that in the 1880s already appeared what was to become the first national crisis of the oyster industry.

Good sales

The oysters were selling so well that each little bit of space that could be leased to grow oysters was given out.

Furthermore, the quality of the grounds in that bay has always favoured spat production over oyster rearing. Therefore, some Arcachon fishermen started leasing oyster grounds in the Isle of Oleron to grow their oysters.

Other people, particularly some industrialists from other French areas, had also started their company on the island. But, until the 1920s, most of the spat was not produced in the bay of Marennes-Oleron. The salt producers of the Seudre had been reluctant to change their way of life. They would keep buying young oysters from Brittany or Arcachon or even from the mouth of the Charente river and grow them in their ponds. Due to their insulation from the continent, most Oleron oystermen would also rely on the Seudre sellers to sell their production. These sellers from La Tremblade (the main city on the left bank of the Seudre) controlled the market in the big cities and made a lot of money with what was known as the *Marennes*.

In Arcachon, however, the success of the trade led to too many people entering it. Soon the oyster sellers (*expéditeurs*) of La Tremblade could only refine a limited quantity of oysters in their ponds. As prices went down, the producers tended to put more oysters on their grounds to compensate for the loss of benefits. As that happened, the quality of the oysters

deteriorated. The crisis, which had first started in Arcachon, eventually reached the bay of Marennes-Oleron. For 40 years, it went through ups and downs until the indigenous flat oyster eventually died from an epidemic in 1920-22. It was not until 1915 and 1919 that the law was modified to make the industry adapt to the changing circumstances.

Jeanne's father had started growing oysters in 1919. His account book remained empty until 1922. He had probably planted flat oysters that died. In 1922, he started planting oysters again. This time, it was the Portuguese oyster (*Crassostrea angulata*).

As the story goes, this species was accidentally introduced into France in 1867, by a boat returning from Portugal with a full cargo of oysters for an Arcachon producer. (In times of shortage, French oystermen have always imported oysters from Spain or Portugal to fill their markets.) The boat missed the entrance of the bay. The captain, who took refuge in the Gironde estuary, would later have dropped his cargo overboard, either because the oysters were thought to be dead or because he wanted to go home.

Oyster invasion

The oysters, however, were not dead, and, in a few year's time, they invaded the coast up to the Loire river. Thus, when the flat oyster disappeared, the cupped

Portuguese oyster, which had been denigrated until then, was adopted by the oyster sellers of the Sèvre river.

Jeanne's father developed his business in the 1920s. He turned former salt ponds into *claires* (the ponds where oysters are left to acquire a finer taste and turn green), built himself a shack, and leased new grounds. For a decade, the Sèvre oyster sellers who were not very numerous, made good profits. With the downturn in the market, around 1930, as a consequence of the international crisis and the development of the oyster industry in the bay of Marennes-Oleron and elsewhere, his first son started selling his production and that of others.

That was also when Jeanne started learning the trade. Leaving school when she was 13, she started learning sewing, before joining her parents in the oyster industry. She first learnt sailing and the male aspects of the trade with her father, then the female aspects with her mother. In this way, she would later be able to teach oystering to her husband, who had been trained as a carpenter.

Jeanne married Charles in 1938. Less than a year later, Charles was called to war. He was injured at the Front and came home in July 1940. During the German Occupation, Jeanne and Charles carried on working with her parents, while starting to 'buy' their first grounds. With the development of the industry, competition for space had increased. So had the value of the rent.

Jeanne and Charles could only truly start their activity after the war. For a decade, they re-invested most of their earnings into new grounds. 'What are we going to throw at the sea this year?' Jeanne would ask her husband each year. Up to 1958, they built a nice 'property' and made good money. In the industry, this period is

known as the Eldorado, especially for the oyster growers of the isle of Oleron. As demand kept growing, they started overexploiting their grounds. Ironically, as the quality of their oysters decreased, the prices kept on rising.

The oysters, however, could not survive the production boost. In 1966, and then in 1970, it was successively struck by two diseases, the second one being fatal. Fortunately, some oyster growers had clandestinely introduced the Japanese oyster (*Crassostrea gigas*) in 1966, which heroically survived.

Meanwhile, for Jeanne and Charles, the 1960s were decidedly a bad time. She first suffered from tuberculosis for three years, and then Charles was struck by a tumour that forced him to stop working.

Michel, their son, came to the rescue, with his young wife and baby daughter. They entered the industry the year of the epidemic.

Michel paved paths with the empty shells and replanted the grounds with *gigas* imported from Japan or Vancouver Island. The first oysters grew to maturity in 18 months and the oystermen started hoping again.

In two years, the industry was back to normal. But then other problems emerged. The government had been encouraging national production since 1977. Marennes-Oleron was now enduring the competition of new, and more modern, production sites, like Normandy and Brittany, which could produce faster and cheaper.

Supermarkets

At the start of the 1970s, the market had also turned into the hands of supermarkets, which tended to take advantage of thousands of small, unorganized oyster producers. The oyster growers of the isle of Oleron were among

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those who suffered most from the new circumstances.

Most oyster growers started selling their own products directly, to avoid intermediaries. But this was a short-term solution. Out of 7,000 ground leasers in the 1960s, only about 1,200 remain today. And, out of every four leaving the industry, only one enters. Though the industry does not produce less of oysters, employment around the bay has been disappearing. The oyster industry is following the same pattern as agriculture: the crisis had led to a concentration of bigger businesses using more technology and equipment, and less manpower. The question raised now is of the future of the bay, in terms of employment and the environment.

Jeanne's son and wife, Michel and Colette, will soon leave the industry... 

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