



Robin and Ben take oysters from sea to plate



OYSTERS

The Wright way

Oysters are for everyone, says Robin Hancock – co-founder of London seafood supplier and restaurants Wright Brothers. He spoke to Food Editor Emma Winterschladen about the history, health benefits and sustainability credentials of these shelled gifts from the sea.

The world of oysters may seem an unlikely business for a music producer and lawyer to find themselves in. But this is exactly what happened to brothers-in-law Robin Hancock and Ben Wright 17 years ago, when they were both seeking a career change. It started, like most things, with a conversation. ‘Ben was living in Paris and was introduced through a friend to Jerome Miet, a big oyster farmer in France, who was looking to buy oyster beds in Jersey.’ Asked to advise legally on the operation, Ben decided to do some on-the-ground research into how oysters make it from sea to platter. ‘He came back inspired by the whole process and asked me if I’d be

interested in creating a business with him, supplying oysters to the UK.’ The year was 2002, and oysters had long held a prestigious place in British culture. Seen by many as a luxury food product for the few, Robin and Ben wanted to change that. ‘Unlike in France where most people ate oysters, when we started, oysters were only really available from Wiltons or Harrods’ Oyster Bar.’ But it hasn’t always been this way, says Robin. ‘It’s not widely known, but oysters were once the food of the people – everyone ate them, including servants. At one point, there were oyster merchants all over the streets of London.’ They were also widely regarded as good for you, even back then, something we now know to be true. High in omega-3 fatty acids,

as well as being rich in vitamins A, B1, B2, E and C, and minerals (magnesium, iron, potassium and calcium), they have earned their reputation as a wonder-food. So why did the oyster shift from being a cheap and prolific health food to a Mayfair-only delicacy? ‘Before the mid 19th century, there was thought to be an endless supply of oysters, but then we realised there wasn’t. The 1867 Shellfish Act tried to protect them from overfishing, but as the population of London increased, and sewage started getting dumped into the Thames, native oyster numbers dropped.’ It’s the native oyster, or *Ostrea edulis*, which today remains the most revered – and rare. ‘Records from 1851 state that 500 million native

oysters went through Billingsgate, but when we started, the UK was only producing 20 million oysters a year, including only 70 tonnes of natives.' The rest was made up of Pacific oysters, *Crassostea gigas*, which were introduced into the UK in the 1950s to meet what was, after two world wars, an already dwindling demand. 'Pacific oysters are hardier, grow quickly and are easy to farm, taking three years to grow, compared to five.' What about the taste? 'Ah, a real oyster connoisseur will love the robust rarer native, which of course makes them more expensive!'

And so, over 150 years after Britain's oyster industry peaked, Robin and Ben entered the picture. 'Wright Brothers started off as two lads with an idea and a love of oysters.' A love that soon grew to a mission to 'democratise' the oyster and reintroduce

it back into British culture. 'It was a vintage year for oysters, and we had just two crates of French oysters, driving around in my wife's beaten-up Peugeot 306. We had the windows down as it was winter and we had to keep them cold!'

They were an immediate hit, with London's chefs soon queuing up, so to

speak, to get their hands on the pair's oysters. But what put them above the competition? 'Well, there wasn't really any. Oysters were often just sold alongside other seafood at the time, but we were able to go in and talk to chefs and tell them exactly where the oysters came from and how they were grown.' They were also able to educate chefs on different processes, like 'affinage' which, Robin explains, is when you take oysters and put them in a Claire (lakes that flood on big tide), high in minerals and algae, where they fatten up and develop a lovely taste. 'That's how you produce

Fine de Claire and Special de Claire, and chefs loved hearing about it.'

Today, diners want to know the story behind their food, too. In this way the Wright Brothers have grown into the market, setting up their first restaurant

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in 2005. 'Someone said they'd seen an empty shop at Borough Market. This was in the early days of it becoming a food destination and we wanted to base our wholesale out of there with a simple oyster bar.' It went well and they now own five restaurants, with another in the pipeline, as well as a thriving wholesale business, selling six tonnes of oysters (and other seafood) a week. But despite the fact Wright Brothers has grown beyond the two of them, they still know exactly where all their oysters come from, and how they got there. 'It makes a difference for us and the person eating them, because seafood is all about trust. All our oysters now are grade A or purified and 100% food safe.'

As for the business of sustainability, it's in the DNA of the Wright Brothers, says Robin. 'We're

Robin's top tips on how to eat an oyster

TAKE YOUR TIME Suck in a bit of air with it, sip the liquor and really savour it. Oysters boast one of the most incredibly complex flavour profiles.

CHEW IT There is a fallacy that you have to 'down' them, but having farmed them and seen the process involved in producing the perfect oyster, to just swallow it straight feels a crime!

EAT THE ADDUCTOR MUSCLE The soft fleshy bit that connects the oyster to its shell is what makes them (and scallops) so sweet. It is worth cutting off and eating.

BE ADVENTUROUS A naked oyster is a joy (especially an Irish Ostra Regal) but I'm up for eating them in all sorts of ways. Tempuraed, baked or simply eaten with a delicious sauce. We serve them with hogwash – rice wine vinegar, coriander, shallots, chilli, spice and lime, and it's delicious.

passionate about everything that comes out of the sea, and how we can conserve that for future generations.' Oysters, he explains, are by their very nature a sustainable seafood choice. 'You don't feed them anything, so even if you're farming oysters, it's a natural process.' Not only that, but oysters benefit the environment, too. Speaking from their experience with the Duchy of Cornwall Oyster Farm, which they took on and regenerated until 2014, he says: 'We found that by introducing reefs of oysters to the Helford River, they cleaned up the



Dressed oysters ceviche

SERVES 4

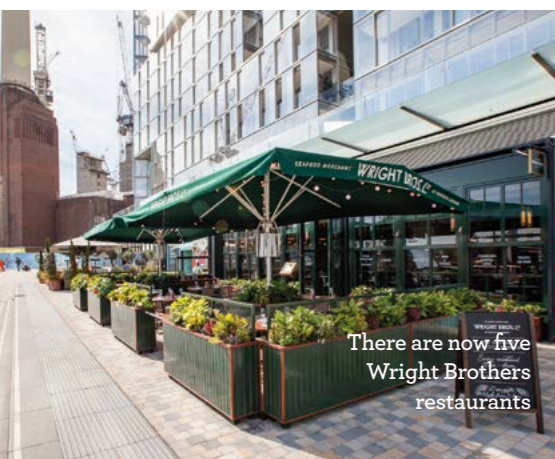
- 12 oysters
- 3 limes
- 20g red onion, finely diced
- 20g red chillies, seeds removed and finely diced
- 10g coriander, picked and finely chopped
- 10ml olive oil or extra virgin rapeseed oil

algae and revived the surrounding ecosystem. We had seals and bird life coming back!'

For Robin, ensuring their seafood is responsibly sourced is something he takes seriously. 'We have a sustainability adviser, which is important to us. As custodians of the planet, it's up to us all to make sure the seafood we're eating is sustainable and we know where it has come from.' It helps that they now have their own depot in Brixham, one of the south coast's biggest seafood ports. 'Our team goes to market every morning

and if you look at our menus, you'll see the boat every fish has come off.' As for the Wright Brothers' original mission of bringing oysters back to the people? 'They're still a treat, of course. But we have a happy hour from 3-6pm, where they're a pound a pop – so you can get through a lot!' It seems to be working, with a new generation being introduced to the wonders of the oyster. 'Nothing gives me more joy than converting an oyster virgin with one of our oysters – that, and seeing my ten-year-old eating one!' 🍷

- 1 Carefully shuck the oysters and place in a bowl with a few drops of the juice from the oysters.
- 2 Cut the limes into halves and squeeze one and a half limes over the oysters.
- 3 Allow the oysters to cure for two to three minutes.
- 4 Add the chopped onion, chilli, coriander and olive/rapeseed oil.
- 5 Mix gently and place the oysters back in their shells, topped with the rest of the dressing.
- 6 Serve on a bed of crushed ice with the remaining lime segments.



There are now five Wright Brothers restaurants