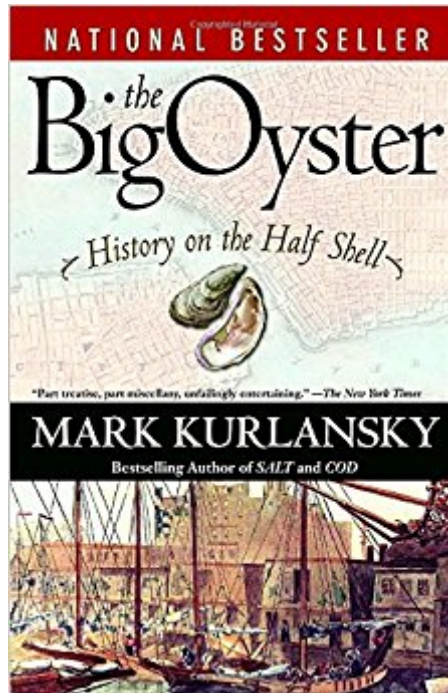




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The Big Oyster: History On The Half Shell



Synopsis

“Part treatise, part miscellany, unfailingly entertaining.” —The New York Times
“A small pearl of a book . . . a great tale of the growth of a modern city as seen through the rise and fall of the lowly oyster.” —Rocky Mountain News
Award-winning author Mark Kurlansky tells the remarkable story of New York by following the trajectory of one of its most fascinating inhabitants—the oyster. For centuries New York was famous for this particular shellfish, which until the early 1900s played such a dominant role in the city’s life that the abundant bivalves were Gotham’s most celebrated export, a staple food for all classes, and a natural filtration system for the city’s congested waterways. Filled with cultural, historical, and culinary insight—along with historic recipes, maps, drawings, and photos—this dynamic narrative sweeps readers from the seventeenth-century founding of New York to the death of its oyster beds and the rise of America’s environmentalist movement, from the oyster cellars of the rough-and-tumble Five Points slums to Manhattan’s Gilded Age dining chambers. With *The Big Oyster*, Mark Kurlansky serves up history at its most engrossing, entertaining, and delicious. “Suffused with [Kurlansky’s] pleasure in exploring the city across ground that hasn’t already been covered with other writers’ footprints.” —Los Angeles Times Book Review
“Fascinating stuff . . . [Kurlansky] has a keen eye for odd facts and natural detail.” —The Wall Street Journal
“Kurlansky packs his breezy book with terrific anecdotes.” —Entertainment Weekly
“Magnificent . . . a towering accomplishment.” —Associated Press

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Here's a chatty, free-wheeling history of New York City told from the humble perspective of the once copious, eagerly consumed, now decimated eastern oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*). Research addict Kurlansky (*Cod*, etc.) starts from the earliest evidence of Lenape oyster middens, or beds, discovered by explorer Henry Hudson and others as evidence that natives enjoyed the shellfish as a delicacy, much as the Europeans did. When the Dutch arrived, the estuary of the lower Hudson, with its rich confluence of rivers, contained 350 square miles of oyster beds—*"fully half of the world's oysters."* The huge oyster stores contributed mightily to the mercantile wealth and natural renown of New Amsterdam, then inherited by the British, who were crazy about oysters; pickled oysters became an important trade with British West Indies slave plantations. While cheap, oysters appealed equally to the rich and poor, prompting famous establishments such as black-owned Downing's oyster cellar and Delmonico's (the enterprising author handily supplies historic recipes). The exhaustion of the city's oyster beds and pollution by sewage effectively eclipsed the consumption of local oysters by the 1920s, yet the lowly oyster still promotes the health of the waterways by its natural filtering system as well as indicating the purity of the water. Kurlansky's history digresses all over the place, and sparkles. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Adult/High School—Once again Kurlansky uses an important natural resource as the focus of an inviting social and economic history. This time the topic is oysters native to the New York Harbor area, where once upon a time a pristine estuary, beautifully evoked by the author, created an ideal habitat. Oysters thrived there for centuries in enormous populations that were easily harvested, literally by the armful. When Western explorers led by Henry Hudson arrived in the early 1600s, gifts offered by initially friendly Native peoples included welcome supplies of the shellfish, a longtime favorite food item in Europe. (One of several dozen recipes in the book is a Middle English description of cooking Oystres in grave, dating from the 15th century.) The succulent bivalves became internationally famous and were popular with both rich and poor; specialized eateries, the city's famous oyster cellars, were established to meet the demand. The market for oysters boomed and kept booming—until waterfront pollution destroyed the abundant beds. This ecological

cautionary tale is enriched by wide-ranging narratives about the customs and politics of earlier times, all cleverly tied to oyster consumption and related in breezy, sparkling prose. --Starr E. Smith, Fairfax County Public Library, VA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

In Mark Kurlansky's wonderful book, *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* we learn about the bivalve bounty that once existed off the shores of Manhattan. Kurlansky writes, "By 1880, New York was the undisputed capital of history's greatest oyster boom in its golden age, which lasted until at least 1910. The oyster beds of the New York area were producing 700 million oysters a year." The first blow to oyster production was sewage. "The reality is that millions of people produce far too much sewage to co-exist with millions of oysters...A million times worse than pollution happened. The silt and sludge alone would have been enough to kill oysters, which would sink in it and suffocate. But the industrial wastes consisted of heavy metals, including seven thousand pounds of zinc, copper, lead chromium, and nickel that entered the city sewer system every day...Between the 1940's and the 1970's, General Electric dumped hundreds of thousands of pounds of polychlorinated biphenyls, PCBs, into the Hudson..Concentrations of six heavy metals were found in the 1980's in the central muddy portion of the bay (Raritan). They had entered the water from the many factories built on the Raritan River during World War II. With the sentiment "anything for the war effort," these industries were allowed to freely dump into the river, and the practice continued after the war. In 1978, Raritan Bay was found to have the highest concentration of hydrocarbons. Fish in the bay were found to be laced with PCBs. The fish were often misshapen by a pollution-caused disease known as "fin-erosion disease." *The Big Oyster.* World War II was the most destructive war in the history of mankind claiming the lives of around 60 to 70 million casualties worldwide; another casualty was the oyster beds of New York. America's Military Industrial Complex may have knocked off Hitler and Tojo, liberated the Nazi and Japanese concentration camps, but it also has the death of billions of oysters on its hands as well. In order to construct Freedom's Forge (*Freedom's Forge: How American Business Produced Victory in World War II*) and win World War II the tasty bivalves of New York had to walk the plank. This book is filled with tasty insight into the history of oysters around the New York area and much more. I loved it. If you liked *The Big Oyster* you will also enjoy *America Invades: How We've Invaded or been Militarily Involved with almost Every Country on Earth* by Kelly / Laycock and *Italy Invades*

Very disappointed, the topic had great potential but it ended up being more of a cookbook than a

history of New York City and oysters. As others pointed out there are many, many inaccuracies which makes me wonder if anyone bothered to fact check his work. For example, he says Port Jefferson is a town on the East River when actually it's a town on the north Shore of Long Island and is on the Long Island Sound. As a NY ERROR he never should have made that error. If you want to read historical fiction then buy this, for true history look elsewhere.

I gave up and hadn't made it more than 25% in. That is unusual for me. The start of the book was good, but the author put in so many esoteric stories and details that I found I was dreading reading on.

As an ex-pat native New Yorker and reader of American History, I thought that I had a pretty good knowledge of New York City history. I knew that there had been oyster beds in areas around the City (there are many locations with Oyster in their names) and had read about oystering off Staten Island around the beginning of the last century, but I had no idea of how central to New York City's economy oysters were. As usual with Kurlansky I learned a lot. I am distressed with some of the erroneous information, most importantly the reference to George Washington's "son", Phillip, about whom I can find no historical reference, and would like to know where he found that false fact. However, there was much information in the book which coincided or correlated with information that I already knew so I do not doubt the underlying truth of his theme. I can't wait to read "Cod".

So many details left out of our understanding of where we come from. NYC was once known for its plentiful and delicious oysters. Like so many places on the east coast of North America before we polluted the rivers to death, oysters were a staple. Kurlansky keeps the history lively and entertaining, there's rarely a dull moment from hot corn girls to how New Amsterdam became New York to why all my childhood attempts at finding pearls were in vain. A great read!

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