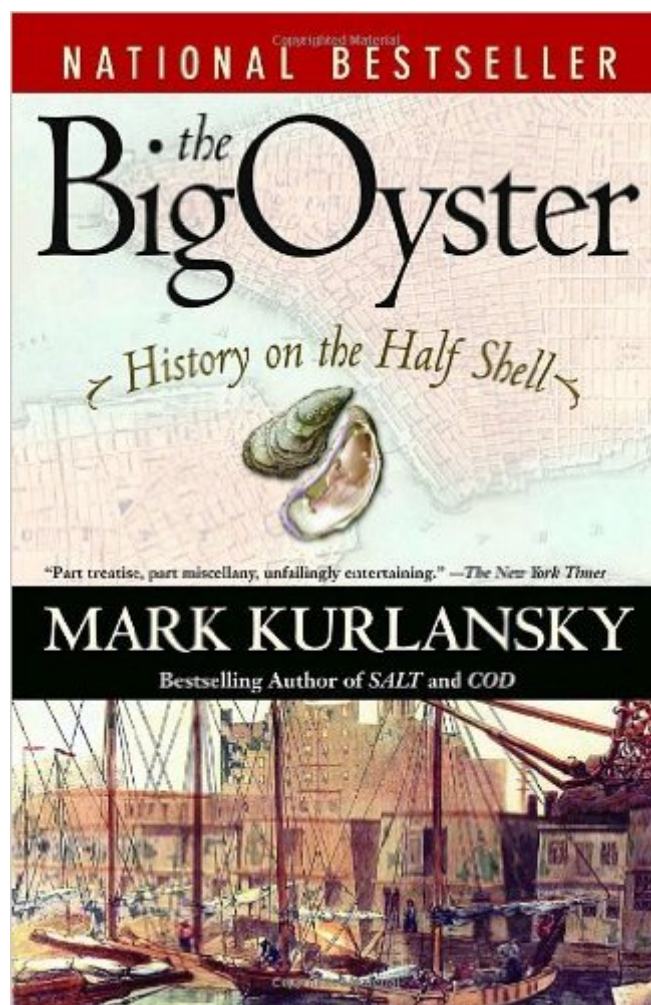


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The Big Oyster: History On The Half Shell



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 a 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

Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Random House Trade Paperbacks; Reprint edition (January 9, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0345476395

ISBN-13: 978-0345476395

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (105 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #50,512 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #4 in [Books > Cookbooks, Food & Wine > Cooking by Ingredient > Fish & Seafood](#) #65 in [Books > Cookbooks, Food & Wine > Cooking Education & Reference > History](#) #407 in [Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources](#)

Customer Reviews

Mark Kurlansky has a knack for writing about meaningful food histories ("Cod" and "Salt" precede his new book, "The Big Oyster") and much of his new work is as fun as the others. Kurlansky offers a somewhat zig-zagging tale of the forward march of the oyster, most of it revolving around the history of New York. Who would have thought that a writer could fill 280 pages of prose related to this delectable bivalve? Well, the answer is that while the author does tell much about the oyster there are many oysterless pages in evidence, somewhat stretched out by accompanying recipes. "The Big Oyster" is a book that is often in search of itself. It occasionally gets sidetracked in telling about the growth of New York, resulting in the unfortunate oyster sometimes getting pushed off to the side. However, Kurlansky is at his best when he gives reference to Oyster houses, floating wharves and markets and how the oyster became such a staple of both rich and poor. The demise of the New York City oyster beds (the last one closed in 1927) may be a depressing thought for most readers but Kurlansky heartens us by his providing readers with evidence that the waters around New York are cleaner now and that the oyster may one day return. Kurlansky is terrific at explaining the anatomy of an oyster and how it lives. I didn't know that the oyster is the only mollusk that doesn't move around.... once it attaches itself to an object it remains there for the rest of its life. He's also very good at tidbits of trivia. I hadn't realized that for most of the nineteenth century the Hudson River was known as the "North River". These small "eye-openers" give the book lots of color.

I wish I could be more positive about a history of one of my favorite foods. I eat oysters on the half shell whenever I'm near a coast, I make oyster stew regularly, every Christmas my turkey gets oyster dressing ... So I'm partial to oysters. And I'm partial to Kurlansky, too. I thought both "Salt" and "Cod" were examples of great writing, not just great food writing; great because they took mundane subjects and turned them into interesting literature. "The Big Oyster" could have done the same thing for bivalves. Why doesn't it get more than three stars? Too many mistakes. Some are little, quibbling mistakes, like his claim that the word "ecology" was not in use in 1891; Ernst Haeckel coined the term in 1869, and it was in widespread scientific use by the end of the 19th C. Others are more significant mistakes, like attributing invention of the telegraph to "Samuel T. Morse," and giving the same Morse credit for sending the first transatlantic telegram from Delmonico's in 1861. The telegraph, as most third-graders used to know, was invented by Samuel F. B. Morse. (Googling "Samuel T. Morse" produces only a reference to a 2001 lawsuit, filed in New Hampshire by the estate of one S.T. Morse, regarding some allegedly shoddy construction.) And the first transatlantic telegram was sent in 1858, not 1861, by Queen Victoria, not Samuel (F.B. or T.) Morse. The

second, more successful transatlantic telegraph was constructed in 1866. The worst mistake, however, is using the phrase "it was only a theory" when writing about Pasteur's work. To say that an idea is "only a theory" raises all sorts of red flags to scientists, indicating that the writer's grasp of the scientific method is perhaps somewhat tenuous.

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