

## The Oyster and The Wilderness

By Jonah Raskin

The quintessential Italian lover boy, Casanova, wolfed oysters by the score before he prowled Venice at night, searching for women to entice into his amorous arms — or so legend has it. The Miwok Indians harvested oysters on the Marin and Sonoma Coast for thousands of years, piling the empty shells into mounds known as “middens.” That’s a fact, archeologists insist.

Then, too, M.F.K. Fisher, the legendary food writer — who chronicled far more than just gourmet dishes like Oysters Rockefeller and Oyster Bisque — served them chilled and on the half-shell, along with champagne, to guests at her Sonoma Valley home in Glen Ellen.

Oak Hill Farm’s Anne Teller still savors those seductive and unforgettable evenings with Fisher and friends — the oysters cold, the champagne even colder.

Readers of Fisher’s books are not likely to forget her mouth-watering descriptions. “The delightful taste of the oyster in my mouth, my new-born gourmandize, sent me toward an unknown rather than a known sensuality,” Fisher wrote in a buoyant essay entitled, “The First Oyster,” in which she describes her initial encounter with the lowly bi-valve when she was a teenager in 1924. She writes as enthusiastically about her first oyster as she might her first sexual experience.

Food and sex have been inseparable throughout history and perhaps no food is linked more explicitly than the oyster. Harvested from Cape Cod in New England to Drakes Estero on the Marin County Coast, it has long been thought to be gustatory gold. Recent scientific studies prove their powerful aphrodisiac effect, crediting the high levels of zinc. Wow! Fortunately for Wine Country oyster lovers and for head-over-heals lovers of all kinds, oysters are available at various local restaurants, including Meritage Martini Oyster Bar & Grill, just off the Sonoma Plaza, the Glen Ellen Inn in Glen Ellen, where they’re served baked, fried, and raw, and at Valley Ford Hotel where they serve very delectable “Rocker Oysterfellers.”

As every oyster lover by now surely knows, Drakes Estero oysters are at the heart of a rumpus that has turned into an uncivil war. The fracas has also generated mounds of local and national news stories with citizens such as Senator Dianne Feinstein and chef Alice Waters of Chez Panisse — the foodie’s flagship restaurant in Berkeley — adding zest and sparkle. Die-hard environmental groups, land trusts in Sonoma and Marin, farmers of the

sea and of dry land, plus tea-baggers from far-off Louisiana – where locals and tourists alike love their oysters deep fried in po' boys – have also weighed in.

On one side of the controversy, there's Drakes Bay Oyster Company, owned by the inseparable husband and wife team, Kevin and Nancy Lunny. Drakes Bay produces about 40 percent of the commercial oysters in all of California. It even supplies other oyster companies such as Hog Island in Tomales Bay when their supplies run low. On the other side of the controversy, there's the powerful U.S. Department of the Interior, which aims to turn Point Reyes National Seashore into Point Reyes National Wilderness. On the whole, though, the Department — which has leased federal lands to companies for oil and gas drilling — doesn't have a stellar record on the environment. Last fall, Interior Secretary, Ken Salazar, came all the way to Point Reyes to tell the Lunnys in no uncertain terms to get out of the waters of Drakes Estero as fast as possible and to close down their funky Oyster Shack.

For Salazar and supporters of the conversion to wilderness, the issue couldn't have been simpler: the Lunny's lease was up, their time had run out, and like all tenants in the same or a similar boat, they had to vacate. According to the Wilderness Act of 1964, which created the National Wilderness System, commercial operations, such as Drakes Bay Oyster Company, are incompatible with wilderness areas, where human activity is supposed to be at a bare minimum.

For the Lunnys and their supporters, who include many environmentalists as well as foodies, the issue has never been as clear as Salazar and some wilderness lovers have made it seem. In fact, the lease argument isn't bulletproof. Cattle ranchers all around the oyster company have long-term leases. When the Point Reyes National Seashore was created in the 1960s the idea was to have ranching, oystering, backpacking, hiking, picnicking, bird watching, and more. That's what former Congressman and co-author of the Endangered Species Act, Pete McCloskey, says and he was in on the deal from day one. What's known these days as “working landscapes” were to co-exist with wild places. Kevin and Nancy insist they weren't pipe dreaming when they thought that their lease might well be extended and that they could continue to plant and harvest oysters as they'd been doing for years.

Now, everything and everyone seems to be in upheaval on the foggy, wind-swept peninsula that's buffeted by the Pacific Ocean. Soon after the Lunnys were told they had to leave, long-time ranchers began to worry they might be on the chopping block, though agriculture has become

sacrosanct in Marin. Cows and sheep on the coast are as much a part of the landscape as seagulls and pelicans. The Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) fights fiercely for farmers and for protection of the environment, too. Any government agency that aimed to dispossess the ranchers on the peninsula would have to wage a costly battle against MALT and against a whole community.

In the American tradition, the Lunnys hired lawyers and took their case to court soon after Salazar told them they had to leave. The Ninth Circuit heard oral arguments in mid-May. Meanwhile, the Lunnys continued to harvest and sell oysters, perhaps more than ever before and not just to foodies. The publicity has been good for business. Folks from all over California – including waves of Asians and Latinos – drove to Drakes Estero to devour the bi-vals in great quantities.

I've been to the Lunny's Oyster Shack a few times to eat oysters on the half-shell and to bring them home. In my kitchen, I've made oyster stew, oyster bisque, and Oyster's Rockefeller, following the recipes that M. F. K. Fisher provides in her classic, *Consider the Oyster*, which taught me the basics of oyster cuisine, oyster biology, and oyster history. Moreover, unwilling to accept the stories I read online and in newspapers, I signed up for a tour of Drakes Bay Oyster Company near the very point of the Point Reyes Peninsula, where I felt instantly like I was at the ends of the earth. Indeed, you can't go any further West, except into the Pacific Ocean, perhaps the last real wilderness on the face of the earth.

Scott Yancy, a big, burly, good-natured fellow from back east, has adjusted nicely to life on the edge of the Pacific. He is one of the mainstays at Drakes Bay. "We call it Little Alaska," he tells me. "The women who work here say they don't get old, they just get rusty." A graduate of St. Vincent College in Pennsylvania, where he learned about the Ming Dynasty and the Chinese emperors, Yancy knows the history of the oyster inside and out. "Oysters clean the water, promote eel grass and bio-diversity," he tells me. "What we do here is sustainable farming. We're good stewards and oysters are a great food supply — they're a fantastic source of protein. If you were truly green you'd support us. We're well worth saving."

Soon after Yancy showed me the works at Drakes Bay Oyster Company, I had lunch with the Lunnys — who have become modest local heroes — at Rancho Nicasio, where the waitress recognized them and told them she informs all her customers about their cause. (I ate oysters; they had salads.) These days, you can hardly find a restaurant around the country where the Lunnys don't have warm friends and close allies. A sign outside Meritage reads, "Save Our Drake's Bay Oyster Farm." Similar signs have

popped up across Marin and Sonoma and on websites, too.

In many ways, the Lunnys are as unlikely a couple as any I have ever met to be engulfed in the kind of knock-down-drag-out fight that has roiled the community and upset patterns of rural life. But the bitter feud and the often-vitriolic language that accompanies it, hasn't embittered or discouraged them. "The beauty in all this is that we're not in it alone," Kevin tells me over lunch. "The community really cares and they've come to our aid." Listening to him, I get the feeling that he'd much rather talk about the acidification of the Pacific Ocean, which threatens oysters from Washington to California, and about the coastal grasslands and prairies where his own herds of cattle graze — than argue about the facts in the court case or discuss the foul language that rural folks have hurled at one another.

Still, Kevin enjoys talking about wilderness and the Point Reyes Peninsula, where he has lived and worked most of his life. The son of parents who were ranchers, he went away to college at UC Davis, and then came home because he loved the land and the coastline. Nancy shares that passion and she's a powerhouse in her own right. Over the last few months, Kevin has thought long and hard about Point Reyes, which the government designated years ago as a "potential wilderness."

At the heart of the debate, it seems to me, is what it means to transform the "potential" Point Reyes wilderness into an "actual" wilderness. For some residents, including writer and rancher, Mark Dowie, it's a matter of semantics. How, indeed, does one define "wilderness"? Few words have been as thorny in all of American history. Hundreds of books have been written about the subject and yet bewilderment still reigns. Kevin tells me, "I don't know of a place around here that you could point to as truly wild." He adds, "A wild place, a real wilderness, is where man does not have a significant footprint. Look around here. You'll see roads, parking lots, power lines, barns, and fences. You'll hear cows mooing. It's very civilized. Don't get me wrong. Nancy and I and our kids love wilderness. We go hiking in the Marble Mountains. The trails there don't have 2,000,000 visitors a year as Point Reyes National Seashore does. In summer this place is mobbed with tourists."

Proponents of the wilderness idea — at least "the purists" among them — insist that the oyster shack is inconsistent with plans to transform the National Seashore into something primitive and elemental, something closer to the way that the land and sea were before Europeans and Americans arrived, bringing their noxious civilization with them. The purists claim that the oyster operation has inflicted damage on sea life and sea creatures. They point to data. Dr. Corey Goodman, a prestigious scientist

with an international reputation who lives in Marshall, took apart, piece-by-piece, the allegations that the park and its supporters made against the Lunnys. Goodman showed that the oyster operation did not disrupt the habitat of the beloved harbor seals or interfere with the birthing of seal pups. In fact, it appears as though kayakers often intrude into waters that are off limits and that they thereby caused real harm. Goodman spoke truth to power and locals admire him greatly for his gumption. Call an area “wilderness” and open it to the public and there are bound to be individuals who don’t respect it. That lesson has been learned at Point Reyes and in other wilderness areas around the country.

In some ways, it’s easy to understand the passion of the wilderness proponents. After all, the planet is increasingly paved over. Urban and suburban sprawl seems almost everywhere; in Wine Country, too, there’s steady encroachment. Pollution of air, land and water has reached critical levels. We’re suffocating in our own trash, the oceans are rising and global climate change is upon us. “Please, please,” citizens practically beg, “give us the wilderness” — which as Henry David Thoreau noted in *Walden*, is a “tonic.” These days, “wildness” is increasingly viewed as an antidote to the habitual overdose of computer screens, anti-depressants, and endless freeways.

Jules Evens, the author of a thorough, compelling, illustrated guidebook, *Natural History of the Point Reyes Peninsula*, looks back to a time before Queen Elizabeth’s aristocratic pirate, Sir Francis Drake, arrived in 1579 at what is now Drakes Bay. Evens also waxes poetical about a past before the Spanish explorer, Sebastian Vizcaino, set foot in 1603 at the place he called Punto de Los Reyes, now called Point Reyes. “In the old days, before the dams, when the streams were free,” Evens says, “the people began to prepare for the return of the salmon when the days shortened and ravens soared in circles over the ridge.” It’s a powerful and a seductive myth that he conjures — the myth of a primitive past that’s untamed, pure and pristine. Except no place in American has ever been really pristine.

The myth of the oyster is no less compelling. Eating an oyster seems sometimes akin to swallowing the wild of the world itself. At Meritage, chef Carlo Alessandro Cavallo offers the Lunny’s oysters as well as bi-vales from the East coast — both raw and cooked. “I sell two to three thousand oysters here every week, week after week,” Cavallo tells me. “I’ve been doing this for 14 years. We’ve had a long run. I like oysters with a little lemon juice and very, very cold. They have to be well chilled. And what they say about oysters as an aphrodisiac is true. Take it from me. I know.”

Over the last six months, I’ve eaten more oysters than ever before

and have come to enjoy them thoroughly. I feel a personal stake in the outcome of the trial, as do oyster lovers and environmentalists all around the U.S. Like them, I look forward to reading the decision of the Ninth Circuit. Some observers believe that Constitutional issues are involved and that the case may go all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Then, perhaps, when all the many different sides are articulated, we'll have far more accurate information than we do now. My own feeling is that wilderness and sustainable "mericulture" — there's a fairly new term — ought to be able to co-exist. After all, Thoreau, the arch-naturalist and patron saint of conservationists, farmed in the woods at Walden Pond. Moreover, now more than ever before, we need food that's locally and organically produced; Drakes Bay seems to be a natural habitat to cultivate bi-vales rich in protein. Then, too, 2013 isn't 1964 when Congress passed the Wilderness Act. The world has changed, the wilderness has changed, and Point Reyes isn't the same, either. As a nation we need to catch up, redefine terms, and reframe the whole wilderness debate.

In May and June, while the judges at the Ninth Circuit deliberated, ten to twenty million oysters at various stages of development went on flourishing in the clear, clean, nearly pristine waters that the Lunnys leased. Mexican farm workers — such as Jorge Mata — almost all of them from Jalisco, went on planting, tending, and harvesting bi-vales, in much the same way that Mexican farm workers from Jalisco and elsewhere in Mexico, tended and harvested grapes, tomatoes, lettuce, peaches and more in the Valley of the Moon. Maybe the Mexican crew ought not to figure in the legalities of the case. But for me their plight is caught up with the plight of the oysters, the Lunnys, the park, and the wilderness itself. They're all a part of the same whole. Over the years, the oyster has been world for Jorge Mata, his family, and his co-workers. Closing Drakes Bay Oyster Company will put them all out of work. It will also leave them high and dry on shores where they'll surely have to scramble to survive. Many of the best minds in Marin, Sonoma and around the country, too, think that human beings ought to live in wilderness areas, to caring for them, nurturing them, and protecting them. Farmers and ranchers can be some of the best stewards of land and sea. Maybe now's the time to turn that wild idea into a civilized reality and to end the uncivil war that has divided citizens all across northern California.

