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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.

The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell Details

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From Reader Review The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell for online ebook

Liesl Gibson says

I started this book completely fascinated, and really did learn a great deal about oysters and the history of New York. Lots of great trivia and fascinating bits that I'm glad to know and that help other bits fall into place in my mind. But about halfway through, the book just starts to disintegrate. This should either have been a much shorter and really great New Yorker article or it needed a good editor to give it some strong organization. It's all over the place and feels a bit like the author pushed it out as fast as he could after pouring over stacks of books at the library. Those lovely index cards full of worthwhile details would have benefited from a bit of thought while pulling them together.

Seán says

Not as encyclopedic as advertised, and definitely the literate foodie/gourmand has more to profit by than the historian, but an enjoyable read nevertheless that makes one pang for lost oyster cellars, the Washington Market, and all-night ferries. Kurlansky cites him a few times, but I suggest anyone really interested in knowing about the Black Staten Island oystering community, the oystering legacy of the South Shore of Strong Island, and the withering of New York Harbor fisheries of every stripe should consult with the best: Joseph Mitchell.

Susan says

Better premise than execution. An overview of New York history as seen through the oyster (or, better, the history of the oyster as seen through the lens of one city). Its great moments come from some fun historical oddities--e.g., the discovery of a new oyster bed is such major news that it makes the front page of the NYT. It sent me running to the Oyster Bar for a feed but otherwise didn't live up to my expectations.

Samira says

An inherent problem with being a historian reading popular history is that there is a bunch of exposition in most popular histories that I already know, and so I often find that popular American history can drag a bit. While that was sometimes true of The Big Oyster, it was very easy to skim those sections and Kurlansky's writing style and use of language are so entertaining that I did not really mind. I had no idea there was so much to say about a food that has always struck me as salty snot on a half shell or a bit of brine, deep fried. I was fascinated by how central oysters were to New York identity. It was also deeply depressing to read about their fall to pollution (though not really a surprise that the New York Harbour is vile) and to know that because of heavy metals, there is little to do about it.

Lizzy says

fascinating ecological and social history of the oyster as compared to the social history and growth of NYC. once again my main man Mark is brilliant. makes you think and look closely at how a species existence and relationship to humans can evolve alongside human social history

Tobi says

I really enjoyed this book. It is about the history of New York City as much as it is the history of the oyster.

Hester says

Typical Kurlansky, in that he uses a very small topic to explore very big themes. I did not know that oysters used to be the food of the poor, that New York used to be a major oyster producer, and that the typical New York eatery was an oyster saloon.

New York harbor used to be filled with oysters, until they were killed off by pollution and overharvesting. The pollution, however, is from about a hundred years ago. As the Hudson becomes cleaner, the oysters are very slowly coming back. If they every return in their previous numbers, then they will be able to keep the harbor clean.

The book tries to make a case for oysters being complicated. While Kurlansky doesn't come out and say it, he strongly hints that oysters can feel pain. They do not. They have a nervous system, but not a central nervous system. I wish he had been clearer about this, because I was racked with guilt for eating raw oysters. My brother and I like to talk about starting an oyster farm together, and all those dreams would have died if oysters could feel pain. Shame on you, Mark Kurlansky!

Kurlansky is best when he describes social history, like how bad life was in Five points. He also describes pockets of New York that were scandalous for being integrated. Much of our modern lives would have been scandalous in the past; any woman dining alone was assumed to be a prostitute. Ladies' clubs formed because there was nowhere women could go by themselves or with a couple friends. At one point, Kurlansky describes a European bakery shocking New York because the owner's wife worked the cash register, which meant she was allowed near the money. Insanity!

It is so easy to forget how far we have come, and how much farther we have to go. I think bringing back the oysters is a good goal. Before my brother and I start our farm, I want to read a history of oysters in the Chesapeake!

jersey9000 says

By the man who wrote Salt and Cod, both awesome books that use the aforementioned products to trace out the development of the world itself, comes another book along the same wonderful lines, but this one with a narrower focus: the oyster beds of New York City. I found this to be a fascinating read, and it gave me lots of insight into New York that I didn't even know I was lacking. I was born and Raised in New Jersey, and I

was astounded by how little I knew about the history and evolution of NYC before reading this book. Wonderfully told, equal parts science, history, and a philosophical examination of man's relationship with nature- if you liked the other two, read this. If you never read the other two, read this anyway :)

Clayton says

A laser focused history of the New York City oyster. Once considered the greatest tasting oyster in the world, now gone thanks to pollution.

Kurlansky always manages to focus his story telling whether it's the history of salt, cod, or the oyster.

David E Gurak says

History of Oysters in NYC

Grist detail around how prominent oysters have been in the history of New York City. Lots of interesting stories and facts that often slip through the cracks in traditional story telling. Highly recommend!

Jill says

I must say I had rather high expectations for this book. I rather like one of Kurlansky's earlier books - Cod - and how wrong could you go with a follow up about "the remarkable story of New York by following one its most fascinating inhabitants - the oyster"? Alas, to my chagrin, the blurb for the book was a tad misleading.

The Big Oyster starts out promisingly enough with its description of New York as a veritable Eden of oysters. According to the estimates of some biologists, NY Harbour "contained fully half of the world's oysters" and the Dutch called Ellis Island and Liberty Island Little Oyster Island and Great Oyster Island because of all the "sprawling oyster beds that surrounded them". And apparently Manhattan and its environs were strewn with shell middens - at Pearl Street (which got its name from the middens), the Rockaway Peninsula (with a particularly large one in the Bayswater section of Far Rockaway) - now covered by railroad tracks, roads, docks, etc. But NYC was apparently more than just an Eden of oysters. It was Eden, period. Looking at Manhattan today, it's a little bizarre to read the excerpts from the letters of early Dutch travellers and settlers, who described Manhattan as a land with fine meadows, woodlands, and burgeoning wildlife both on land and in the water.

Unfortunately, the Big Oyster starts to flag about a third of the way into the book. Kurlansky appears to run out of material that will allow him to convincingly weave the story of the oyster together with the history of New York. Instead, he starts to cram the book with random factoids of oysters and NY (the two tenuously but not necessarily related): food markets in Manhattan in the 18th century sold oysters! Here are some recipes for oysters that people used to cook back in the day! During the civil war, they fed the troops with oysters! Some famous people back in the day used to love oysters and would eat them in NY! Kurlansky could just as easily have (and possibly more convincingly) written a book about Meat and New York City; food markets in Manhattan in the 18th century sold meat! During the civil war, they fed the troops with meat! Some famous pp back in the day used to love steak and would eat it in NY! ooh - there's also the Meatpacking District!

On the whole, I'd only recommend this book to those who are food lit devotees AND who love anything to do with Manhattan. Otherwise, you might want to save your time and shelf space for other worthier reads.

Joyce says

Much of the charm of this sort of monograph lies in judicious wandering off the main topic and back... and in that regard I have to admit I found Kurlansky rather heavy-handed. He's grimly focused on a single storyline: New York City was built on top of shit-tons of oysters, but a classic tragedy of the commons has left the Big Oyster with nary a namesake to call its own. For light relief, he reprints numerous old oyster recipes -- and you know, there aren't THAT many fundamentally different ways to cook oysters. Bounty, recipe, overharvesting, recipe, pollution, recipe, culminating in oystergeddon... that's pretty much your outline right there.

It's a shame because there are so many obviously alluring narrative loops that could have adorned this topic. Just some things I wondered as I was reading:

* Turns out that the European oyster of art and literature (*Ostrea edulis*) and the American/Asian oyster (*Crassostrea*) are not just different species but different genera. How, why, ker-what? Did they have a recent common ancestor that went extinct, or did they somehow evolve separately? The Atlantic is so much smaller than the Pacific... why does the genus line split there? Lay some science on us, yo!

* For many centuries, oysters and fowl were considered a supernal culinary pairing... but it's a taste that seems to have died out except in certain Thanksgiving stuffing recipes. How does a foodway go from the top of the heap to oblivion so quickly?

* Why DO different oysters taste so different? Is the taste more affected by variety, or by whatever the piscine version of "terroir" is?

* What would it even mean to have a "natural" oyster bed when apparently humans have been oyster farming in all the major areas for over a century, and have consequently imported foreign species all over the world?

* Is oysters rockefeller the definitive New York oyster dish? If so, how come it makes no appearance here?

The best and most relaxed parts of this book are the sections on oyster harvesting and cultivation. The worst and tensest parts are when Kurlansky gets on some kind of weirdly moralistic "oysters up, cities down" high horse.

Tara says

I'm a big fan of Kurlansky's work, and this book did not disappoint. Being a Native New Yorker, the destruction of the New York estuaries is a sad story, but hopefully one that is not permanent. I will warn potential readers that consuming oysters may never be the same experience for you again after reading this book.

Clark Hays says

Commerce, consumption and the end of an era

Awhile back, I read *The Oyster: The Life and Lore of the Celebrated Bivalve* to learn how oysters reproduce. Apparently, I developed a little crush on the bivalves -- not in the gastronomical sense; I've never eaten one - - because when I saw *The Big Oyster* by Mark Kurlansky in an airport bookstore, I snatched it up.

It's an entirely fascinating account of the evolution of New York from under-populated backwater wilderness to the bustling world capital of today (easy Paris, it's just one of the many) as seen through the rise and fall of oysters -- both as source of commerce and item of (over)consumption.

Kurlansky also wrote *1968: The Year That Rocked the World*, which I liked, and *Salt: A World History*, which I loved, and it follows a similar pattern, using a quirky single subject to dissect history and bring it to life. In *Salt*, his scope was global, but in *The Big Oyster*, it was narrowly focused on New York -- with a few excursions in time (to ancient Greece) and place (London, Paris, etc.). The author has found a style that works for him and does a masterful job of weaving together an oyster-based narrative (how often can you use that qualifier?).

I haven't spent too much time in New York, but even as a casual visitor I got a guilty thrill when a street name suddenly made sense or I recognized some historic figure -- like Dickens -- noshing oysters in a dimly lit oyster house cheek to jowl with rough necks and prostitutes.

Ultimately, this book feels like a cautionary tale, tracing the degradation of habitat that ultimately destroyed the oyster beds -- along with a significant line of business -- and changed the eating habits of an entire city. I'm not sure even the best, most long-sighted urban planning could have preserved the pristine waters and farmlands of New York as it grew into a behemoth, filled with millions and spitting toxins and waste into the once clear, bio-diverse waters, but it's certainly fun to think about.

The only criticism I have is the page space spent on historic recipes. It was interesting enough to see the changing writing and cooking styles from the earliest days of America to the present, but once or twice would have been fine. Since the scope was less culinary, I would rather have seen more of the historic details and his unique insights and less about the care and cooking of oysters. That's just me being greedy though.

This is a fast-paced, engaging and rewarding read filled with "oh, that's why!" moments, so if you like oysters, or New York or history well-done, give this a try.

Shawna says

Awesome book. It is more than just about oysters! Lots of tidbits on food and general history of NYC and NJ. Definitely will be in my top 10 of 2014. Chapter headings and acknowledgement are also super word-nerdy funny. He thanks caffeine! Haha!

Lisa says

3.5

Mark Kurlansky likes to take a subject (like salt, cod, or even oysters) and after thoroughly researching, divulge all of the details in a historical background.

Kurlansky instructs the reader in all things relating to oysters in New York. He does touch on oysters grown in other locations, like the tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay where I grew up seeing crews of small wooden work boats using large tongs to dredge up oysters.

I would have liked to have heard a little more about modern day oyster men and their stories. It is hard work in hard conditions:

I grew up crabbing with my brothers and cousins, but we never tried tonging for oysters. Evidently, tourists can participate, but I have never seen this:

Kurlansky supplies many recipes and almost makes me think I might like to eat them again.

Oysters Rockefeller:

Kurlansky then launches into the problem of the heavily polluted waters of New York. That was in back of my mind throughout this book. The oyster is a natural filtration system for the water, but the New York waters were too polluted and the oysters themselves contained dangerous chemical toxins.

The effort to clean up the waters and oysters is discussed, but you won't see me eating any raw oysters!

Cheers!

I bet this guy had a few beers first!

Heather Page says

Love love love this book. Interesting information about oysters in general and awesome history of NYC in relation to oysters. I work downtown Manhattan, so the history in this book was great for me. Highly recommend this book!!!

Jim says

Yeah right. How is a book on the history of oysters going to be interesting? But it's not only interesting -- it's fascinating and wonderful.

Kurlansky is a great food writer ([Salt](#) and [Cod](#) are among his titles) but he has a brilliant sense of culture and NYC history as well. Oysters were a primary economy to New York; particularly in Five Points. Before the NY waters became so polluted (and remember that oysters are bottom-feeders) people came from all over the world -- notably Cas. Dickens -- just to get them fresh.

Science, history, and culinary delights (and horrors -- raw oysters are still alive when you eat them) await, not to mention good humor and writing.

Jason Koivu says

The title of *The Big Oyster: History on the Half Shell* is a nod to The Big Apple and could very well be considered a solid stand-alone history of New York itself.

Mark Kurlansky's book titles do not get the reader's blood pumping:

Salt

Nonviolence

Cod

You'd half expect to fall asleep before finishing the intro. But keep pushing on and you'll find a highly enjoyable read filled with interesting facts. Seriously, Kurlansky can make oysters and cod interesting. That's impressive!

The Big Oyster takes us through the history of the oyster, its life cycle, its biology and its importance to mankind.*

That last topic mainly focuses on North America's relationship with the oyster and more specifically New York city's, for Manhattan and this particular shellfish are particularly linked in growth and decline. It doesn't seem to matter if you're a Wall Street fat-cat or a loincloth-wearing native, humans used and abused the little buggers. Though I enjoyed the detailed descriptions of both (with a great section on the "Gangs Of New York" Five Points area), it's the whens, hows, wheres, and what fors that make truly make *The Big Oyster* a fascinatingly good read!

* FUN FACT: Did you know pearls do not come from oysters?

Megan says

I just gave up on finishing this book. And I hate not finishing a book. I so wanted to keep reading. But I found myself looking around the subway for something more interesting to entertain me every time I picked it up. This is definitely not a page turner, like some of the other reviews suggest. Maybe if you're a history buff, but otherwise, no. It's interesting and there are tons of little tidbits about New York City and how this metropolis came to be what it is today (both due and not due to the early oyster trade), which is why I decided to read it in the first place.

All the first 100 pages really did for me was take me back to my 10th grade U.S. History class. I'm interested in New York's history but not in so much depth. I would have liked to finish for the sole purpose of

furthering my education on NYC history, but there was just not enough substance to keep me interesting. Right now I have a list of other books that I'd rather read.

I've heard his earlier books are better reads.
