

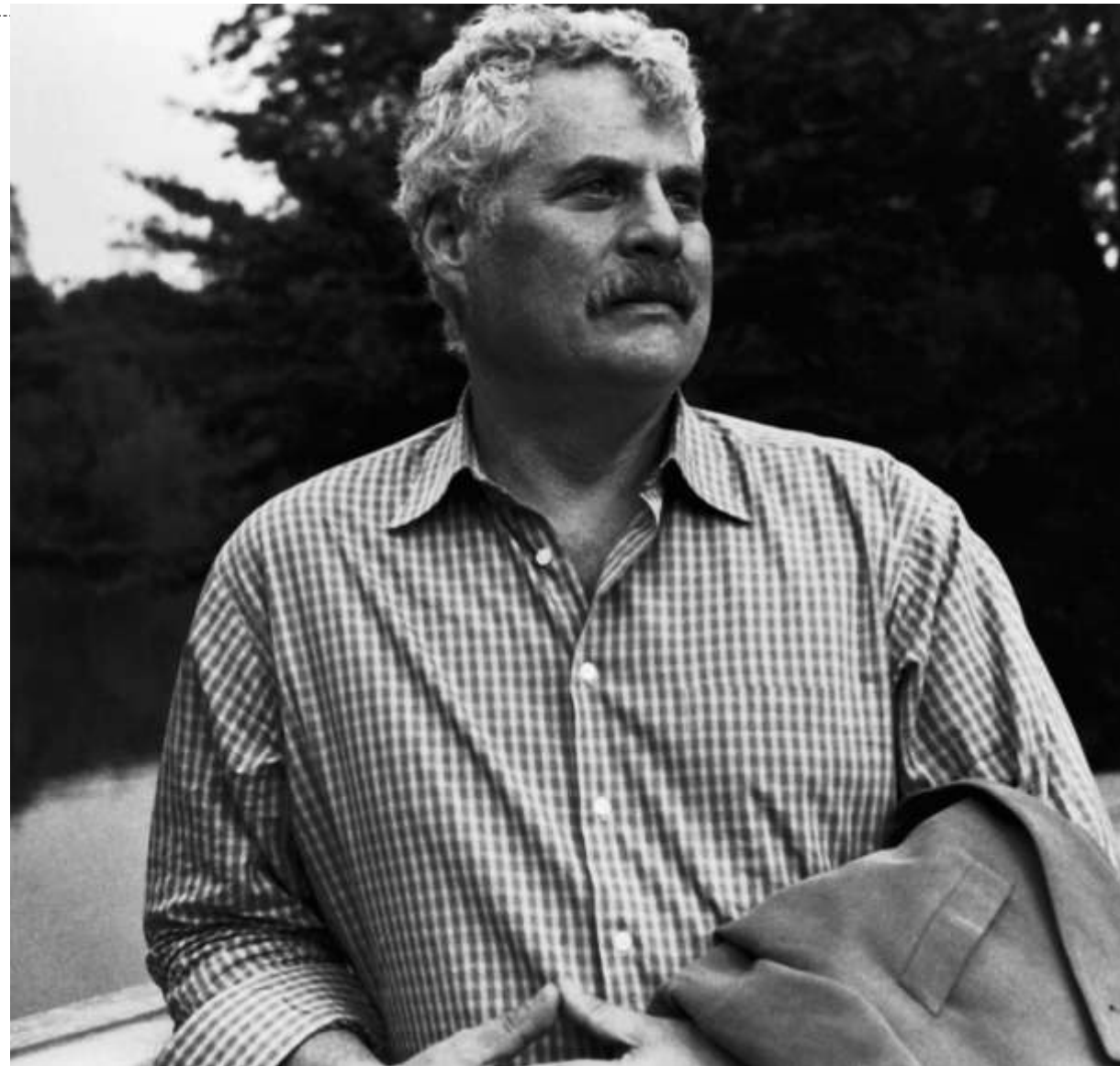
by [Kathy Mathys](#) | photo [Lisa Klausner](#)

When the Dutch settled in New York in the 17th century, they described the place as a true Garden of Eden. One of the delights of this paradise was the oyster. In *The Big Oyster: History on The Half Shell*, Mark Kurlansky tells the tale of a New York delicacy and its demise as a result of pollution. Kathy Mathys of Brussels joined him.

New York's Oysters Gone Forever

The oyster tale came to an end, according to Kurlansky, due to the shortsightedness of the New Yorkers. “The waters in New York were used as a garbage dump. This inevitably affected the oyster beds. In 1927 the last natural oyster bed in New York was closed. At a fairly early stage, however, there was growing public opinion that the oyster beds should be handled with more care, but no action was taken. The newspapers, for example, wrote about the delicacy with great enthusiasm, but before 1880 no attention whatsoever was paid to the effects of pollution. In 1855 there was a slight oyster panic during an outbreak of cholera that affected only wealthy citizens. In those days people still assumed that cholera was spread by poor immigrants who were supposedly living under unhygienic circumstances. Because the 1855 crisis didn’t cause any deaths

among the poor, it was assumed that there was a link with oysters. This assumption was later confirmed by scientific analyses. Nevertheless, the city continued its reckless garbage disposal policy. You could compare it to today’s global warming problem. Everyone knows about it, the newspapers write about it, and yet little action is taken. *The Big Oyster* for me, therefore, is more than a story about food. I wanted to illustrate how a city grows and all the things that can go wrong. Although I love New York, I think the city is being totally irresponsible by having so few policy plans. Problems are not being dealt with adequately.” New Yorkers hardly remember anything from their rich oyster history. In 1940, an oyster bar was set up in Grand Central, the famous train station; residents are familiar with the place,



but the oyster history that goes back for centuries seems to have been forgotten. “The tradition of oyster cellars has been lost. Also the streets offer nothing that reminds us of its existence. Traditional oyster cellars were shabby places with dubious reputations – they were often frequented by prostitutes. Their interiors with lots of red velvet somewhat resembled whorehouses; the lighting was dim and the alcohol flowed

abundantly. Oysters were also sold on the beach and on night markets, like Washington Market, which had to make way for the World Trade Center. Nowadays, awaiting the construction of the Freedom Towers, it is once again home to a market. Everyone speaks highly of this brilliant idea, but no one knows that this used to be a marketplace half a century ago.” The early citizens of Manhattan already

ate oysters. But how they opened them and whether they ate them raw or not, nobody knows. The culinary habits of European immigrants in the US are better documented. When you consult recipe books of the 17th and 18th century, you'll find that oysters were mainly used in cooked dishes.

"In those days even the French, who now swear by raw oysters, made oyster stews. This didn't change until the early 19th century. Most of the historic recipes that you find in my book would now be extremely expensive because many of these dishes require lots of oysters and they are also rather heavy compared to today's standards.

Personally I like oyster stew, which has many variants. Oyster bread, on the other hand, doesn't appeal to me much. When the oysters are of a good quality, it's better to eat them raw, I think. Nowadays oysters are served raw almost everywhere in the US. Only in the South, where they have to make do with variants of inferior taste, they are served grilled or in stews. In *Consider the Oyster* (1941), the famous culinary author M.F.K. Fisher wrote that turkey stuffed with oysters was an American culinary classic. This method of preparation has almost disappeared now. I did prepare it once for my family, but it was greeted with little enthusiasm."

In his city history, Kurlansky highlights the *Ostreidae crassostrea virginica*, a species that is found along the North Atlantic coast, that tastes different from the *Ostrea edulis*, the European oyster. "The *Ostrea* looks different, breeds differently, and has a different anatomy.

You find this oyster on 17th century paintings such as *Preparations for a Feast* by Clara Peeters and *The Fish Market* by Frans Snijders. The most famous *Ostrea* is the *Bélon* from Bretagne, a species that is now also bred in the US. It doesn't taste as good as the Breton *Bélon* because the natural environment of the oyster is very important for its taste. I prefer the European oyster but the *Crassostrea* is gaining in popularity. It is stronger than the European oyster, it flourishes in different climate zones, it grows faster and it doesn't require very salty water."

Nowadays you find less and less natural oyster beds. A cultivated oyster is not necessarily inferior to wild species. "The only difference between the two is that cultivated oysters have a more regular shape. Taste-wise they are of similar quality. With fish it's a completely different story. Recently I took part in a tasting, where both cultivated and wild cod was served. One of the fish had big flakes, the typical texture associated with cod. It turned out to be the wild variant. After all, you can't cultivate texture since it develops as fish move around and grow muscles."

Oysters take a special place in culinary history. Usually rich folks look down on food eaten by the poor. This was not the case with oysters in the 19th century. Rich people ate them at banquets, while the commoners in Canal Street could have unlimited oysters for only six cents. Kurlansky can't think of any other food with this bizarre status. "There are some examples of food that were first consumed by the poor, but as

they became more scarce, like caviar, they became delicacies for the rich. With oysters however, one can speak of a simultaneous obsession. I think this can be explained by the emblematic meaning of the oyster. Those who ate oysters in the 19th century, did so as an expression of their New York identity."

What is the current situation with the New York oyster madness? "After a period of relative obscurity oysters are becoming very popular again, which, by the way, is the case in all of the US. Today you find oyster bars all over New York. It's a shame that cozy places like the old oyster cellars have disappeared. Not that I would argue for the return of oyster bars that were also whorehouses. Nevertheless, I regret the loss of this tradition. Today's New Yorkers are more into exotic products, like oysters from New Zealand, Australia and the US west coast. More than ever, it is an international city, not only with regard to recipes but also ingredients. As long as the products are good I don't object to it, although I do find it regrettable that so little attention is paid to local products. Whenever I visit a city, I want the food to tell me where I am. Here in Amsterdam, for example, I immediately look for the herring stalls."

The Romans were the first ones to praise the oyster as an aphrodisiac. Kurlansky started searching for scientific proof of the age-old connection between oyster consumption and virility, but with little success. "The only thing I found is that oysters contain a lot of zinc and zinc is an

element of testosterone. Some time ago, I interviewed a woman who held the record for eating oysters. She ate 52 dozen in only a few minutes. I asked her if she felt 'anything special' afterwards, but mainly she felt nauseous. The link between oysters and eroticism is very old. Marcus Aurelius's physician prescribed oysters for a decrease in libido. Byron spoke of the erotic powers of oysters in *Don Juan*. In Shakespeare's work, an 'oyster woman' could either be a woman who sells oysters or a lady of ill repute.

Ten years ago, Kurlansky's book *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* was published. Does he see any parallels between the story of the oyster and that of the doomed fish? "In both cases it concerns animals who suffer from the shortsightedness of us humans. In the case of the oyster it's pollution, while the cod suffers more from overfishing. It can't be denied that the cod, too, is affected by pollution and the effects of global warming. Since *Cod* the situation has deteriorated even more, especially in Europe. As for cod, the North Sea has practically been emptied. In 1987 I wrote that this problem was restricted to Norway and Iceland, but things have changed considerably. However, I am against a general boycott against cod. This usually means that minor players get in trouble, while the giants stay out of range. Famous chefs in the US, for instance, recently called for a boycott against swordfish. Such a measure, however, will also affect the harpoon fishermen who operate in an environmentally aware and ethically



responsible manner. It would be great if you could only boycott fish that is caught in trawls. Unfortunately, it's hard to tell for us consumers how the fish that we buy was caught."

Kurlansky is a busy guy. Later this year, his recent work, *Nonviolence: Twenty-five Lessons From The History of a Dangerous Idea* will be published. He is also working on some culinary projects. "I'm working on a book about American eating habits just before World War II. In addition, I'm writing a collection of short stories about people who have a special relationship with food, and a history of Gloucester, the oldest fishing town in the US."

BIOGRAPHY

Mark Kurlansky (1948) is best known for his culinary works *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World* and *Salt: A World History*. He also wrote *1968: The Year That Rocked the World* about the roaring late sixties. Kurlansky worked as a professional chef in New York and New England. He also wrote a column on culinary history in *Food and Wine Magazine*.

For *Cod* Kurlansky received the Glenfiddich 1999 Food and Drink Award for Best Book.

The White Man in the Tree was Kurlansky's first non-fiction work. He is currently working on a compilation of short stories, the translation of an Emile Zola novel and a number of nonfiction projects

