



The Oysters of Locmariaquer

By Eleanor Clark
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Introduction

On the northwest coast of France, just around the corner from the English Channel, is the little town of Locmariaquer (pronounced "Loc-maria-care"), famous for its Belon oysters, called *les plates* ("the flat ones"). *The Oysters of Lamariaquer* is a vivid, fascinating account of how Belon oysters are cultivated, as well as an in-depth excursion into the historical background, myths, and legends of the region of Brittany.

Updated with a new introduction by Mark Kurlansky, the bestselling author of *Cod*, and -- most recently -- *The Big Oyster*, Eleanor Clark's most famous work offers lovers of oysters a revealing look into the little-known and arduous journey these succulent bivalves undergo as they are lovingly coaxed from briny homes on the sea floor to their lofty perches on cocktail dishes around the world.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does Eleanor Clark mean when she writes that the French term "dégustation," or "tasting...savoring," is the only way to describe the proper consumption of an oyster?
2. To what extent do the fragility of the *plate* oyster's ecosystem and the difficulty of its cultivation and harvest enhance its appeal for true connoisseurs?
3. How does Clark respond to two of the most common myths about oysters -- that they produce pearls, and that they are unseasonable to eat in months that end with the letter "r," and how do these myths hint at the ways oysters have been appropriated over time by the collective imagination?
4. To what extent does the village of Locmariaquer function as a kind of incubator or "nursery" for infant oysters, and what explains the locals' excitement at the annual sight of the barges going back out to sea at the *naissain*?
5. How would you characterize the bureaucracy and social organization of Locmariaquer, based on the author's encounters with the village postmistress and her efforts to borrow books on the local oyster industry from the Society of Many Learnings?
6. In what ways does oyster's sexual reproduction mark it as truly exceptional, and what does this unique ability suggest about the oyster's sustainability in the face of its vulnerability as a species?
7. How did Jean-Jacques-Marie-Cyprien-Victor Coste, with the assistance of Napoleon III, manage to save the oyster industry in 19th century France?
8. How does the Abbé of Locmariaquer combat against the hopelessness of some of the oyster-workers' lives, and reconcile his belief that "a good living can be as bad for people as a bad one"?
9. What do the many historical legends and myths about the people of Brittany suggest about their reputation, and how does this reputation shed light on their labors in the oyster industry?
10. How would you describe the image of Brittany and its people that Eleanor Clark establishes by combining highly specific factual information about the oyster industry, local anecdotes, and myths and legends in *The Oysters of Locmariaquer*?

About the Author

Eleanor Clark (1913-1996) was also the author of two other works of nonfiction, *Rome and a Villa* and *Eyes, Etc.*, and the novels *The Bitter Box*, *Baldur's Gate*, and *Camping Out*. She was married to Robert Penn Warren. *The Oysters of Locmariaquer* received the National Book Award in 1965.