

Tarbouriech
"tables" on the
Thau lagoon

Facing page: the
family patriarch on
a nearby wharf



Cracking the *Oyster*



Over the course of three generations, the Tarbouriech family has discovered the secret to cultivating world-class molluscs in a sleepy Mediterranean bay.
JEFFREY T IVERSON reports

France boasts multiple grand cru oysters, from the Cadoret "Perle Noire" in Brittany, to Jean-Paul Guernier's "Utah Beach" in Normandy, to the Gillardeau "Spéciale" in Charente-Maritime. As the chef of the restaurant Prunier, a luxe Art Deco monument near the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, Eric Coisel knows their every secret. For more than a century, Prunier has been synonymous with the finest French caviar and most exquisite seafood in the capital. When the heroine of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* longingly eyes some common street-market shellfish, the narrator laments, "She would find better oysters at Prunier."

And if there's one thing that Prunier's and all of France's premier oysters have historically shared, it's an origin on the Atlantic coast. The reason is simple: thanks to daily tides, which strengthen their shell and muscle, Atlantic oysters can maintain freshness for days. "When an oyster finds itself out of the water twice a day, exposed to the sun and the elements," explains Coisel, "it builds a resilience that an oyster from a tideless Mediterranean lagoon could never develop." So Coisel believed, until one day in 2007, an oyster farmer named Florent Tarbouriech walked into his restaurant. →

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arbouriech had come to Paris to try to entice chefs with a new oyster he'd recently developed, but had been struggling to get his foot in the door. Coisel was sceptical, but admired the man's pluck, and agreed to a sample.

What the farmer presented was an oyster unlike any Coisel had seen before – its shell was rippled like a giant clam's and shimmered with shades of pink and violet. "I immediately recognised this was something special," recalls Coisel. "Its appearance alone, the beauty of its shape and colour, is enough to arouse one's appetite. Then when you open it and see this muscle and flesh, and the quality of its mother-of-pearl, you know this is an exceptional product."

One taste confirmed his intuition: it was firm and meaty, with an elegant balance between briny saltiness and sweetness, and delicate hazelnut and mushroom aromas. What most shocked Coisel, though, was the oyster's origin: the Bassin de Thau – a tideless Mediterranean lagoon. With a handshake, the "Spéciale" Tarbouriech had broken into the world of fine dining.

So how did Tarbouriech transform the humble Mediterranean oyster into a grand cru? It began with an incredible natural site. A 21km stretch of sand along the French coast between Sète and Marseillan separates the sea from the Thau lagoon – over 7,000 hectares of salty waters teeming with pink flamingos, sea horses and phytoplankton, making it a shellfish paradise. Here, in 1962, a vigneron named Pierre Tarbouriech decided to leave vineyard work to launch a small oyster and mussel farm. Sadly, Pierre died young, and in 1986 his son Florent found himself at the age of 20 trying to save the family business. And did he. In a decade, he became France's biggest producer of Mediterranean mussels, while expanding his oyster beds from three then to 100 today. "My father was always in a hurry, always racing to break into new markets," says Florent's daughter Florie Tarbouriech, who joined the family

business a decade ago alongside her brother Romain. "I think he had this fear that he would die young too, and that always pushed him to grow, to improve and to innovate."

One market, though, always seemed out of reach – fine-dining restaurants. Chefs found Tarbouriech's oysters pleasant, but too lean and salty to entice true aficionados. Florent knew why. His magnificent lagoon lacked one thing – tides. Cultured in the traditional Mediterranean manner on ropes hanging from table-like structures in the water, his oysters lazily consumed plankton 24/7, reaching maturity in just a year. But without the stress of exposure to the sun and air, they didn't amass glycogen reserves in their flesh like their sweeter, more muscular Atlantic cousins.

So, in 2006, Florent came up with an audacious yet simple solution: he equipped his tables with solar-powered motors that could raise the ropes out of the water at whatever interval he desired, to create his own tides. "Not only can we replicate the tidal effect, we can accentuate it," explains Florie. "By experimenting far beyond the typical six-hour intervals, we sought an oyster's maximum capacity for improvement. The result was incredible – its flesh became dense, sweet and briny, its abductor muscle growing to nearly the size of a scallop, and even its shell was tinted pink by the sun. It was a complete transformation."

The "Spéciale" Tarbouriech would conquer the world of gastronomy, from Le K2 Palace restaurant in Courchevel to the seafood oasis Rockfish in Dubai. Back at the restaurant where it got its start, one of Chef Coisel's most beloved dishes remains his sublime tartare of wild stone bass, Tarbouriech oyster and Prunier caviar, served in the oyster's rosy pearl shell. It is a dish the chef himself would once have considered impossible. "The Tarbouriechs are truly a family of trailblazers," says Coisel. "Not just because their product is exceptional, but because they changed the image of the Mediterranean oyster." tarbouriech.fr ●



By lifting the oyster baskets out of the water, *above*, the Tarbouriechs replicate tidal patterns and produce the remarkable rosy pink shell and dense muscle, *below*

