

W H I T E F I S H A U T H O R I T Y

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TECHNICAL REPORT 109

A Report
on the Packaging of
Gigas Oysters

FOREWORD BY THE WHITE FISH AUTHORITY

The attached report on the packaging of shucked gigas meats and gigas products for the catering market was commissioned by the Authority and prepared by Packaging Development Consultants. This information is likely to be extremely useful for both prospective processors and indeed the growers themselves, most of whom are becoming increasingly aware, following the stimulus of the Authority's market development work, of the suitability of gigas for this market.

A Report
On The Packaging Of
Gigas Oysters

Prepared under contract to the White Fish Authority

by

Packaging Development Consultants

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BACKGROUND

During the present century, consumption of oysters has declined acutely. They have been known in Britain since pre-Roman times, and whereas in Victorian times they were the food of the poor, they are now a scarce, expensive luxury. Yet they breed prolifically.

Now, the White Fish Authority plan to promote the cultivation of the gigas oyster in a number of oyster farms around the coast, and, side by side with growing, they are setting up a marketing operation to encourage the wider use of oysters by caterers and domestically. One prerequisite is effective, inexpensive packaging. We have, therefore, consulted growers and caterers (see appendix) about their views. Our conclusions on the packaging of both shucked and processed oyster meats will, we believe, be found acceptable to growers and caterers.

GROWERS

Shucking

This is still a difficult operation for as yet no automatic or semi-automatic machines exist. Certain developments at the W.F.A.'s Industrial Development Unit have produced a prototype semi-automatic machine which, by cutting off the end of the shells, makes the opening by hand a very much lighter task, although quicker by perhaps only 20%. As further development work is required, most growers considered that hand shucking is the only method presently available to them and they rather jibbed at the idea of supplying shucked oyster meats in large quantities.

Market Trends

The growers appeared to be particularly conscious that present production is small, and they felt it would take years to satisfy demand in catering outlets, let alone retail demand. They felt therefore that marketing plans should not be too ambitious, and that no elaborate processing or packaging would be desirable for a long time yet.

Scottish growers especially considered that unshucked oysters only should be sold, until the market demand for unshucked product is met. They seemed averse to any form of processing, and considered their role to be production only. They accepted that it would be feasible for them to carry out shucking and blast freezing operations.

From discussion we learned that the growers hoped that a co-operative marketing organisation might be set up eventually. This would sell unshucked oysters, and would sort out the misshapen oysters for processing.

Growers in more southerly regions (especially Wales) seemed more receptive to original thinking on the marketing of Gigas. Seed Oysters (U.K.) already have conducted their market and product test on breaded oysters prior to selling in to the trade. The packaging envisaged in this operation is for 4lb breaded oysters (yielding approximately 15 meats to the lb) packed random in a polythene bag and contained 1 pack per corrugated case. This is purely a functional pack for the catering trade, although advertising graphics can be used on both bag and case.

The general feeling was that battered and breaded meats, together with unprocessed frozen meats, would provide sufficient introduction to the catering trade and consumers to a relatively unfamiliar product. Production of Gigas would have to be tremendously increased before progressing to special retail packs according to estimated figures given by several growers.

Discussion on the serving of thawed oysters led almost unanimously to the conclusion that they must be served in half shells. No other presentation would be acceptable. The southern growers appreciate that the meats would be blast frozen after shucking, then held in cold storage, either on site or at a commercial depot nearby.

CATERING OUTLETS

It was evident from discussions with catering users that they had very definite ideas on presentation of oysters and oyster products. Strong preference was for:

1. Frozen separated (but unprocessed) flesh packed in 1 or 2 kilo packs and presented in the cheapest suitable materials. Chefs could then incorporate the product into a variety of dishes of their own. They could also be used as a main ingredient in sauces. It might not be acceptable to use half shells on table since Gigas are not really elegant or attractive.

1. Hygiene might be a problem. They could also be incorporated in seafood cocktails, etc.
2. Graded, unprocessed oysters, frozen and contained in half shell to sell at a premium price to meet a limited demand. Serving in the actual shell would be much more acceptable than plastic substitutes. Shells must NOT be re-used for reasons of hygiene.
3. Breaded/battered meats for selling as plain constituent of meal, deep fried. This would be in direct competition with scampi.

MARKETING DEVELOPMENTS

It has been proved that oyster meats, processed and cooked, are acceptable products to the public taste. Breaded meats and deep fried meats found a ready market when offered for sale in Brixham. Likewise, the Turks Head has for some time offered successfully breaded and battered oysters on the menu. Many other attractive ways will no doubt develop as public taste grows to accept oysters as a dish bordering on the luxurious and available throughout the year. Emphasis has been placed by growers and caterers alike, that oysters should not be allowed to become a cheap product, but should maintain an acceptable price consistent with a fairly luxurious product. The cooked Brixham oysters (supplied by Steer Point) re-tailed at 4p each on the counter as against the present approximate reported retail price of 15p each for fresh native oysters in shell.

It was stressed that only prime, well shaped shells and meats should be offered as frozen in half shell raw meats and these could command a premium price. Packaging might be more elaborate for reasons of presentation. The additional shell weight would also increase transit costs.

There was a general awareness of the heavy costs involved in transporting oyster shells. This obviously led growers and users alike to stress pre-shucked meats only as their main preference.

The Scottish growers maybe had not fully appreciated the transport costs in relation to margins and the overall objective of the White Fish Authority to make oyster meats a "high day and holiday" type meal to cater for all age groups - especially the young, many of whom have never tasted an oyster. It is intended that oysters should be widely enjoyed, not only by gourmets.

DISCUSSION

There seemed to be a complacency amongst growers that it would be years before the home market demand could be completely fulfilled for oyster meats, and oyster products. Figures were tossed about, quoting that "if X number of outlets sold Y quantities per week, this would be three times the number of meats that the producers could have available even if they trebled production."

French growers' figures of 80,000 tons per annum against the present British 173 tons, were quoted as examples.

It was noticeable that all catering outlets were emphatic on several points, viz:

1. Their requirement for oysters would be for either breaded or battered meats or bulk packs of frozen meats (additional to a limited demand for frozen uncooked meats in half shell).
2. All products must be free flowing - not block frozen.
3. Packaging must be obviously protective, but composed of the simplest forms - no frills.

All outlets felt that chefs would prefer to create their own specialised dishes and sauces from unprocessed meat, but would also accept breaded/battered oyster meats on economy grounds.

Serving in half shell was felt to be unnecessary and undesirable with the attendant risk of bacterial infection. When the subject of facsimile half shells was discussed, all felt that this would not represent a true oyster shell and was best completely avoided.

One user felt that an education programme should be instigated by W.F.A. or Shellfish Authority to demonstrate the various culinary uses of oyster meats and to arouse their interest. Finally, it should be noted that the following conclusions are based on analysing information on packaging requirements for the catering trades. This report would not apply to retail requirements.

CONCLUSIONS

Frozen Meats in Half Shell

A unit pack of ten or a dozen specially selected shells is required. Packaging is to be suitable for transit and storage only with each half shell individually protected from contamination. It is appreciated that only a limited demand is expected. Packaging costs should be approximately 4-5p per pack for materials.

As uniformity of meat size and shell ratio is desirable, this selecting operation ideally should be performed at the shucking stage. Meats would then be blast frozen without delay, then packed.

Breaded/Battered Meats and Frozen Meats

These are to be processed and packed loose in polythene bags and contained in a corrugated outer. A unit of 4lb (yielding approximately 60-65 meats) was considered ideal. A 21lb pack was also discussed, but without much enthusiasm.

The packaging requirement is, in effect, a typical catering pack as already used for quick-frozen foods.

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