

ROAD TRIP

More than a little pearler

**Jennie Milsom
visits Clevedon Coast
Oysters farm in
Kawakawa Bay and
finds the oysters live up
to their hype.**

'Shuck me, suck me, eat me raw...'
The request, printed on a T-shirt
pinned on the wall, catches my eye
as I step into the shop at Clevedon
Coast Oysters farm. Magical little
things, oysters - at their best, salty
like the sea, softly plump and alive
even as they disappear down your
throat. I peer closely at one. It's
beautiful, set against its rough shell,
with thread-like, blue-hued veins
pooling into its crimped edges.

Shop manager Ally Ford certainly
knows a thing or two about oysters:
she sells a mind-boggling 60,000
dozen a year over the counter. She
excuses herself as a customer walks
in. It turns out he's a regular who
doesn't speak English, but moments
later, a box of two dozen oysters
changes hands and he's gone. At the
back of the shop, a window invites
a behind-the-scenes glimpse into
another room, where apron-clad
packers hose down shells and fill
boxes. It's all very industrious.

Kawakawa Bay is perfect for
growing oysters, I'm told. There's a
good current, and its shallow waters
provide the oysters with ample
sunlight, vital for their development.

The farm became organic in 2005,
'though, really, we always have been',
owner Callum McCallum tells me.
'Now we're just a bit more stringent.'

Behind the building, barges chug up
the muddy inlet from the sea. The
salty air is still and birds sing into a
pale sky across the water. This is
where the oysters are grown, on criss-
crossed wooden racks, part-
submerged in the water.

'Growing them on racks spreads
them out and means every oyster
gets a feed,' says McCallum.

Harvesting oysters entails banging
them off the racks, then it's all hands
on deck as clumps of shells are
separated, cleaned and graded.

Size matters if you're an oyster,
apparently, and the shell is an



accurate indicator of the plumpness
of the meat within. Most of the
'jumbos' - a whopping 15cm long -
make their way to Japan.

Oysters are at their plumpest and
juiciest during the winter months
as the cold water encourages them
to feed.

Those harvested between January
and April are sold as summer
harvest oysters.

'They still taste good, they're just
skinnier,' says McCallum.

The business is labour-intensive as
it's mostly all done by hand, even
the shucking - albeit with a

pneumatic knife which splits open
the shells with a firm shudder. Most
oysters are sold ready-shucked.
'People don't want to open their
own oysters and, frankly, I put them
on ice to freeze their shells, and, as
they defrost, they open naturally,
doing away with any fiddly
shucking.'

Shucked oysters will keep for up to
a week in the fridge, though Ford
recommends cooking them after
three days. 'Some customers eat the
lot before they even get back to the
car,' she says, laughing.

I ask if it's true that oysters are an
aphrodisiac: the answer is an
emphatic 'Yes, definitely!'

Barely five minutes back on the
road, I can bear it no longer.

'Stop the car, I need an oyster,' I
demand. We pull over, I rip open
the ice-packed box and knock one
back. Then another... McCallum's
right - they're pretty darn good.

Ally Ford with a small
helping of the 60,000
dozen oysters she sells
every year.

