

An Oyster Tradition Returns

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

When New York was still Nieuw Amsterdam and New England waters hadn't been polluted even by tea, oysters were a common commodity. Indians often welcomed new arrivals with an assortment of local oysters and oyster beds were so thick in some surrounding waters that people could walk on them like stepping-stones. Oyster shells, in fact, were a common debris in the streets of what we now know as Lower Manhattan.

That is some of what restaurateur Jerome Brody learned when he started researching oysters after taking over the Oyster Bar, that gastronomic landmark in the lower level of Grand Central Terminal.

Known best for its oyster stew and oyster pan roast, the restaurant had closed last July after 62 years, many of them under the auspices of Union News.

Brody, a former partner in Restaurant Associates and current operator of the Rainbow Room and Gallagher's Steak House, did his research before taking over the operation at the request of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

'Imbedded in History'

"Oysters are imbedded in the history of the city," he says, "and there are a lot of seafaring threads in the history of the family of railroad magnate Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt."

But why an oyster bar in the lower level of the 1913 terminal remains a mystery. No matter, Brody has treated his new endeavor with a respect not normally accorded city landmarks, architectural or gastronomic.

The barrel-vaulted ceiling has been scrubbed for the first time in 30 years. Made of ribbed beige tiles placed in a herring bone design, the ceiling is the same as the arched interiors in other areas of the terminal. Multiple coats of green paint have been removed from the marble wainscoting, brass grills and carved detailing and redwood paneling has covered what were considered unsightly wall areas.

The menu remains extensive but moderately priced, with many fishfood specialties and more than half a dozen varieties of oysters.

At a special reopening party yesterday that drew the likes of Henry Fonda, realtor Lewis Rudin and Councilmen Thomas Culte and Henry Stern, old customers oblivious to the celebration ordered old favorites. Many hardly knew the place had closed—"I pass through very infrequently"—and even fewer noticed the physical improvements.

"I've been coming here since 1924 because they do something special to the food," commented onetime Democratic kingmaker James Farley, who lives in the Waldorf Astoria.