

Feb. 27, 2005---

TUCSON, Ariz.--Play ball!

Bulls testicles are the specialty at the Mountain Oyster Club in Tucson. The deep-fried appetizers go down good with cocktail sauce and a wedge of lemon. Long before steroids, there were "Rocky Mountain oysters," as the nuggets are known by their politically correct name.

Some of my favorite baseball sluggers are Rocky Colavito, Rocky Bridges and new White Sox coach Tim "Rock" Lincecum.

The Mountain Oyster Club is private. The block and native fieldstone building was originally the 1940s home of Miss Florence Pond of cold cream fame. You can gain entry to the club only through a member.

A couple of weeks ago I was a guest of commercial real estate developer Michael Stilb, whose father, Jack, was a founding member. I ate my oysters in the Western bar area under a sign that said, "Where The Women Cease From Troubling and the Wicked Are At Rest." I noticed a clipping on the wall about ex-Chicago Cub Henry Leiber, who left the University of Arizona at age 18 to play baseball. Leiber hit 24 home runs and had a .556 slugging percentage for the '39 Cubs. He once hit three consecutive home runs in a game. Leiber was a member of the Mountain Oyster Club.

Hmn.

So in an attempt to beef up my game, I downed a plate of the cowboy cavair (\$6.50). Like so much other weird food, the mountain oysters do taste like chicken. After dinner I spent six straight hours country line dancing at the nearby Maverick King of Clubs, 6622 E. Tanque Verde Rd.. I felt like Toby Keith!

Cowboy poet and humorist Baxter Black was my go-to-guy on mountain oysters. He is an honorary club member. He is also a former large animal veterinarian. "The best ones are from little lambs," he said in a phone interview from his home in Benson, Az. "They're about the size of your little finger. The Mountain Oyster Club serves them from young bulls. If you're getting them from a mature bull, it can easily be the size of a softball, except elongated. They're like any other gland you eat: soft and fryable. Very delicious."

I was told The Mountain Oyster Club is the only place in Tucson where the delicacy is served, but the Rock Creek Lodge Festival in Montana serves more than 2 1/2 tons of mountain oysters to 15,000 visitors every September.

The hostess at the Mountain Oyster Club is former Northwest side Chicagoan Eileen Wallace. She recently moved to Tucson because of a sinus condition. She knew all about mountain oysters before she took the job at the club. "For awhile I lived in the country outside of Terre Haute, Ind.," she said as Gary Stewart's "I See The Want To In Your Eyes" honky-tonked in the background. "There they have mountain oysters, but they come from a pig." I love those wacky Hoosiers.

During a tour of the club, a server snuck me into the woman's powder room to check out vintage art work and memorabilia.

The members wives designed a poster that said, "Grow Your Own Dope--Plant a Man" and affixed pictures of their husbands into the garden.

Black loves mountain oysters so much he wrote a poem about them, based around a proper Bostonian going out to lunch with a cowboy in the Wild West. The poem is passed around in regular rotation at the club.

In part, it reads, "....I would guess they're Chesapeake or Blue Point, don't you think?, 'No maa'm, they're mostly Herford cross.... (breed) and usually they're pink...." Black explained, "He's going to expose this person to what he considers the ultimate in cowboy cuisine. The poem is emblematic of something we all face; a rubbing of cultural tectonic plates. Country versus urban."