In nature, duck breasts occur in pairs. At Citarella, the venerable seafood and meat market on New York’s Upper West Side, they are sold in any combination the customer desires. You can walk in off the street, take a number from the dispenser at the meat and poultry counter, and, when it is called, ask the butcher for one duck breast or three duck breasts or four duck breasts, regardless of whether the amount you request is naturally divisible by two.

Oysters occur singly in nature. But at Citarella, they are sold only in multiples of six of a kind. You can buy six Wellfleets or twelve Wellfleets, but not four Wellfleets, or eight or fifteen. You can buy twelve oysters, but only if there are no more than two kinds in the order, and only if no fewer than six are of any one kind. To buy a dozen oysters at Citarella, you must buy either twelve of one kind or six each of two kinds (six Wellfleets and six Capes, for example). Purchasing four each of three kinds is not allowed under Citarella’s oyster policy. Oysters are sold at the seafood counter. Meat and poultry go by different sales policies than seafood, owing partly, perhaps, to the separation of the two counters. The meat and poultry counter lines the far left-hand side of the store’s brightly lit first-floor space, while the seafood counter is turned ninety degrees to run along the back wall.

Citarella’s oyster policy was articulated on a recent Sunday afternoon to a gathering crowd of customers after a long-time oyster customer attempted to order eight Wellfleets, eight Capes, and eight Belons. The young man taking his order said, “I’m sorry, I can’t sell you eight of a kind, I can only sell you a half dozen or a dozen. It’s policy.”

The mid-fiftyish oyster buyer, well though casually dressed, with the horn-rimmed glasses of a lawyer or a management consultant, replied, raising his voice slightly, “I’ve been through this before. I worked this all out in e-mail correspondence with the central office. I thought this had been communicated to the staff.” That’s when the crowd began to gather.

The young man behind the counter, who was polite but firm, explained to the customer that he could order six Wellfleets, six Capes, and six Belons, or twelve Wellfleets, twelve Capes, and twelve Belons, but not eight of each, to which the oyster customer replied, “But I have four of us at the apartment this afternoon, two of whom are from Boston.” The Boston information, while irrelevant at first blush, was provided, no doubt, because people from Boston know their oysters and presumably are accustomed to more freewheeling oyster purchase and consumption policies.
The customer went on to say that he did not want twelve of each kind, because that would mean thirty-six oysters, and thirty-six oysters, although divisible by four, were too many for four people on a Sunday afternoon unless oysters were the main course, which, the man added, they were not. The customer explained that he also did not want six each of three kinds (the other alternative offered by the young man under existing oyster policy, as stated) because six times three is eighteen, and eighteen is not divisible by four. Someone at the table would get shortchanged.

At this point in the math, the young man behind the counter offered to call the store manager to see if there were anything she could do. The manager, a woman named Helen, quickly appeared and confirmed the oyster policy as stated by the young man. Another woman, this one wearing an apron, materialized from the back and added that, only three weeks ago, a man named Steve, referred to in tones that implied he was a senior person in Citarella’s central office downtown, had gathered the Upper West Side seafood staff for an all-hands meeting, and had told them in no uncertain terms that oysters were to be sold “only in sixes and twelves.” The reason Steve gave, she said, was “so the company can keep good track of the number of oysters of each kind we sell.” It was not apparent whether Steve was a senior guy in the seafood chain of command or whether, in fact, he also presided over the meat and poultry department and its sales of duck breasts.

The oyster customer turned to a man standing next to him and said, with an air of resignation, “This happened for the first time three months ago. Up until then, for a year, my wife and I had been buying four each of three of a kind every weekend. Four each of three of a kind works well—she gets two of each, I get two of each. When three months ago the guy behind the counter balked at selling me four each of three of a kind, the manager who came out to talk with me was a different manager. ‘Tell me who’s been selling you four each of three of a kind,’ she said. ‘It’s against policy.’ But I refused to name names. In today’s environment, you hate to get anyone’s name on a bad list—particularly someone helping to make life a little better, even when it’s against policy.”