

# Maine's Oyster Renaissance

BY CATHERINE SCHMITT

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Glidden Point. Basket Island. Flying Point. Pemaquid Point. Penobscot Bay. Cape Blue. These are names that for most people conjure images of sparkling ocean waters, salty air, and picturesque shores. But for a growing number of shellfish aficionados, those names evoke cravings for the world-class oysters being harvested along these areas of the Maine coast.

The Eastern or American oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*) was consumed by Maine's first inhabitants thousands of years ago, as evidenced by massive, ancient shell middens along the shores of the Damariscotta River estuary. Climate changes, and later pollution, depleted populations of the shellfish in more recent times, but now they are returning as oysters are experiencing a renaissance at restaurants across the country.

From south to north, Maine is home to Basket Island Oysters (Casco Bay); Flying Points (Freeport); Winterpoints (West Bath); Pemaquids, Glidden Points and Cape Blues (Damariscotta River); Gay Islands (Meduncook River); Weskeags, Penobscots, and Bagaduces (Penobscot Bay); Taunton Bays; Oak Points from the Mill River in Harrington, and more.

Today's annual harvest of around three million oysters is due in part to University of Maine scientists, whose research helped the industry grow from a handful of entrepreneurs a decade ago to some 45 individuals who currently hold licenses to cultivate oysters in Maine.

Barb Scully of Glidden Point Oyster Company, one of the pioneers of oyster aquaculture, is in her 21<sup>st</sup> year of business. "It used to be such a battle, not just to grow oysters, but to market and sell them, and get a price that reflected the work that went into it," she said, recalling the early days. Scully also had to work to educate consumers. "People had no idea that oysters could be grown in Maine or that they were native to the area," she said, "but because of our quality of life and good work ethic, high quality is naturally associated with Maine."

In her first year, Scully sold 50,000 oysters. Today, she sells that much in a month, and Glidden Point oysters are known around the world.

Scully is "extremely picky" about her oysters. From selecting and planting seed to harvesting and shipping, she takes no shortcuts and gets to know her customers. "When they get the end product, they can tell someone cared," she said.

"Maine oysters are achieving national recognition and worldwide acclaim, and they are right in our backyard," Scully said, noting



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Harvesting Oysters: a family affair

At left: Eric Horne, Valy Steverlynck and son

that Maine oyster farms are quiet, small-scale, family-run operations that fit in with the working waterfront. "It's been fun to watch the industry grow and to have contributed to that growth," said Scully. "I can't wait to see where we take it."

**An Oyster Farming Life**

Maine Oyster Company of Freeport is an example of the industry's progress. Eric Horne and Valy Steverlynck started their oyster farm after years of running the rat race in Boston. He has a master's degree in education and worked as a nonprofit management consultant. She has an MFA in fine art and worked at a design firm. "We had a very urban, downtown Boston existence. But we missed being outside, we missed being active, and we missed being together."

Horne is from Freeport, where his father started growing shellfish in the 1970s. The young couple spent a few summers working on the oyster farm, which remained in the background while they pursued their careers. As they saw less and less of each other, and began to feel a desire to start a family, Horne and Steverlynck knew they had to get out of the city. Meanwhile, his father Peter's farm was growing, and he needed help, so they

moved to Maine and worked for him as they developed their own business plan.

That plan was not worth much, as they soon learned that oyster farming was all about trial and error. "We didn't know anything when we started. Nothing we were told and nothing we read worked. At one point we had to get other jobs to make ends meet," recalled Steverlynck. But they knew oysters, and they knew that aquaculture would give them the lifestyle they wanted. "We could have grown something on land, but we saw an opportunity on the water," said Steverlynck, who grew up on a farm in Argentina.



Part of the challenge is that every site on the water is different, and so oysters may be successful in one location but not another. Historically, oysters were restricted to the upper reaches of Maine's tidal rivers and estuaries where the water was warm enough for them to grow and reproduce. The couple's grand vision changed as oysters failed to grow at site after site. After two years, they finally settled on two sites with potential, one in the Cousins River near their home in Freeport and another in the upper Sheepscot River.

Now in their ninth year, the couple is finally able to relax (as much as anyone can relax with two towheaded sons, ages two and four). They know the waters where they are working, and they've had enough experience in the industry to gain confidence.

**From Seed to Plate**

Each spring, Horne and Steverlynck purchase oyster seedlings from local hatcheries and raise them in a floating nursery in Maquoit Bay. In late fall, when the oysters are about the size of a quarter, they are planted on the bottom of the Cousins River





## SEASONINGS MAINE OYSTERS



to grow until they are at least three inches, which takes about three years. They harvest oysters from late April through November, using a small drag to scoop them from the bottom of their lease area.

The majority of the harvest of Flying Point oysters—as many as 200,000 oysters in a good year—goes to wholesalers in Boston and Washington, D.C. The couple also manages a growing business from their back door.

Flying Point and Glidden Point oysters from the Damariscotta River were recently on the menu at Old Port Sea Grill and Raw Bar in Portland. Bar Manager Laura Romasco said that serving raw oysters has helped the Grill find a niche in the Old Port's busy restaurant scene. "We carry between four and six varieties at any time, from New England to the West Coast, but the Maine ones are the most popular," she said, adding that the raw bar shucks 240-300 oysters per day. Elsewhere in the city, Street & Co. usually features Maine-grown oysters. Hurricane in Kennebunkport has an extensive list on the chalkboard in their raw bar, and Primo in Rockland offers \$1 local oysters on Thursday and Sunday nights. In general, those in search of Maine oysters outside of the Portland area will have the best luck at restaurants that are close to an oyster farm, such as Boathouse Bistro in Boothbay Harbor, Schooner Landing and King Eiders Pub in Damariscotta, and the Royal River Grill House in Yarmouth.

### It's a Good Time to be a Maine Oyster

Oysters, especially high-quality, "boutique" oysters like Maine's, are experiencing a renaissance of sorts, thanks to Rowan Jacobsen's book, *A Geography of Oysters*, and Mark Kurlansky's *The Big Oyster*. Also promoting the oyster are local food and sustainable seafood movements: Slow Food Portland recently hosted an Oyster Night. Tom Robinson of York Lobster and Seafood noted that oysters are the company's fastest-growing segment. "Oysters are exploding. Five years ago I would have had probably three varieties available. We now have 15-25. Everyone wants Maine oysters."

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Oysters are named by the place where they are grown, and so their label indicates the characteristics of the water and, in turn, of the oyster. The taste of oysters varies depending on what kind of algae they eat, as well as the temperature, salinity, and cleanliness of the water. Oysters grow slowly in Maine's cold waters, which





gives them more time to soak up the flavor of their home. The cold also keeps away shellfish diseases that affect southern oysters, and Maine's waters are relatively unpolluted when compared with other oyster-growing areas. Cold also means that most of the time oysters do not spawn here, rendering obsolete the old "R" rule, that oysters are only good in months ending in the letter R. This derives from the fact that in southern waters, oysters are unpalatable in the late spring and summer months during and just after spawning.

These characteristics—slow growth, desirable flavor and shape, and lack of disease—make Maine oysters more desirable for the raw bar than the stew pot, and indeed most Maine-grown oysters go out-of-state to the country's top oyster bars. As the industry continues to develop, oysters may become more plentiful, but for



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Three Oyster dishes, as prepared at Schooner Landing in Damariscotta.

now Maine's climate and the small, family-operated nature of the business constrain the volume of oysters that can be produced. All the more reason to seek out and enjoy them.

Maine Oyster Company, 62 Pine Street, Freeport 207.221.5172

Glidden Point Oyster Company, 707 River Road, Edgecomb 207.633.3599

Schooner Landing, Route 1, Damariscotta 207.563.3380

Catherine Schmitt is a science writer with Maine Sea Grant College Program at the University of Maine.

