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OYSTER REVIVAL GAINING STEAM IN NEW JERSEY



Lying 50 yards off the shore of a remote cove along a stretch of mud flats on the Delaware Bay - where prehistoric man once cultivated oysters with a kind of primitive aquaculture - modern-day researchers and aqua-farmers have been working hand in hand for more than a decade to seed and grow New Jersey's beleaguered oyster industry.

And the results are paying off in a farm-to-table Cinderella story that has taken oysters out of the depths of blight- and disease-decimated shellfish populations, through the thorny trial and error of scientific research, and into a recovery phase that is producing a marketable product fit for gourmands.

Though the numbers still may not be what they were before a blight in the 1950s, when the Delaware Bay alone produced more than a million bushels a year of oysters, things are definitely looking better. Up from lows of yielding almost nothing some years in the 1960s and 1970s, over the last decade state waters have produced an average of 72,000 bushels of the oysters annually, according to the New Jersey

Department of Agriculture.

Types such as Cape May Salts are being grown in Cape May County by Atlantic Cape Fisheries, and elsewhere along the coast in places such as Mantoloking in Monmouth County, where 40 North Farm is operating. Cape May Salts are becoming as well-known to East Coast raw bar operators as Long Island Blue Points or Florida's Apalachicolas, officials say.

"When people come here, they really want to have oysters that are of this region, and so they order the Cape May Salts . . . they are the most popular oysters on the board right now," said Michael Crean, general manager of Dock's Oyster House in Atlantic City, where on any given day as many as a dozen varieties of oysters are offered, including Rappahannock from Virginia and Malpeque from Prince Edward Island, Canada.

As probably the longest-standing purveyor of oysters along the Jersey Shore, Dock's has been acquiring, preparing, and selling oysters and other seafood to hungry patrons for 118 years in its dining room along Atlantic Avenue.

Industry experts say oysters from the mud flats along the Delaware Bay will have a subtly different taste and texture from a bivalve plucked from Barnegat Bay or any other locale. Though each will possess that briny taste and soft, fleshy texture, they may differ by being less salty and perhaps having a more buttery flavor profile and crisper bite.

Between 1880 and 1930, more than two million bushels of oysters were annually pulled from the Delaware Bay in an industry that made fast millionaires out of boat captains and their crew members. Specially scheduled trains took fresh oysters overnight to market. In the oyster industry's heyday, so plentiful were the oysters and so voracious were the appetites for them in Philadelphia and New York that at least two boxcars a day filled with them left Cape May and Cumberland County's bay shore upon the tracks of the New Jersey Southern Railroad. The New York train traveled north through the Pinelands, arriving on Jersey Central Tracks in Jersey City in view of Manhattan on the shores of the Hudson River.

At one point, there were so many millionaires per square mile in the Cumberland County town of Port Norris that it was the wealthiest per-capita municipality in the state. Now Port Norris is among the poorest communities in the most poverty-stricken county in New Jersey.

But overfishing and a disease called MSX caused by a protozoan parasite stopped the industry dead in its tracks at the end of the 1950s. Just when the industry began to see some signs of a recovery from MSX in the 1990s, oysters along the coast were struck by another parasitic disease, Dermo. Both parasites killed the oysters before they could reach a marketable size.

Ultimately, it took more than 40 years and many tries by the late Rutgers biologist Harold H. Haskin to develop a disease-resistant strain of oysters that is now the industry standard from Maine to Florida. So remarkable was Haskin's research and ultimate success in helping revive the oyster species here and elsewhere that after he retired in 1984, Rutgers named its Shellfish Research Laboratory in Port Norris after him. The research Haskins began continues today at the lab, according to Kathryn Ashton-Alcox, a field researcher there.

How an oyster ultimately tastes depends on the growing conditions, according to Brian Harman,

aquaculture and husbandry manager at Atlantic Capes Fisheries in Cape May, which since 1997 has been leasing Delaware Bay oyster beds to farm Cape May Salts on a site that is probably one of the most geologically interesting in the state.

Researchers have found evidence that prehistoric tribes used it to grow and harvest their own oyster crops, Harman said.

Using a modern method called "rack and bag," it is Harman's job to make sure proper salinity levels are maintained from the seed, or "spelt," stage to the three-inch size they grow to when they are harvested, sorted, bagged, and sent directly to restaurants such as Dock's. Harman is also making sure the oysters spend as much as eight hours a day underwater.

"Making sure the conditions are right helps produce that oyster liquor that is present when they are opened, or shucked," Harman said. "It's that salty goodness that everybody loves."

That's what Ava Green, 77, of Margate, looks for on her weekly visit to the Atlantic City Country Club to lunch on her favorite meal: a longtime Jersey Shore tradition of fried oysters and chicken salad.

"Maybe it does seem like a strange combination, but apparently they've been serving it here for 100 years," Steiner said. "And I've been enjoying it for at least 50 of those years."

(By Jacqueline L. Urgo, The Inquirer 6-28-15)



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