

Apalachee Bay oyster ranching: A new take on an old way of life

Karl Etters | Democrat staff writer
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Rob Olin, oyster rancher and CEO of the Panacea Co-Op Corporation, pulls a cage up from his farm on the waters of the Forgotten Coast.

Joe Rondone/Democrat

PANACEA – At low tide, the lines of oblong cages filled with oysters hang between craggy pilings over the water. If they look like something plucked from another world, that's because they are.

The burgeoning oyster farming industry along Florida's Gulf Coast is a new take on an old way of life that has reigned supreme in seafood for close to two centuries.

Farming or ranching bridges the gap between food, science and the environment and is fast becoming a way to satisfy growing stomachs anticipating a delicacy on a half-shell.

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It takes the pressure off the historic wild-caught shellfish grounds, which are still in the process of regenerating after mass harvests.

Farm-raised oysters account for 95 percent of those that make their way to the table in the U.S. Each year, Americans eat about 2.5 billion of the bivalves, according to the Oyster Recovery Partnership. In 2015, Florida oyster harvesters brought 437 tons of oysters to the dock totaling more than \$4.85 million in revenues.



Ben Wiggins, left, and Bob Bruggner of Palmetto Island Oyster Company work their aquaculture lease in Wakulla County.

Karl Etters/Democrat

But local aquaculturists estimate the taste for farmed oysters will continue to outpace oysters harvested in the wild in the coming years. Rather than threatening the old ways as some contend, the ascendancy of the new, more scientific methods could aid an industry that has long struggled on the Forgotten Coast.

Leaders representing the men and women, some for several generations, who still harvest by scraping the bivalve from the sea floor using rake-like tongs, reject that ranching is the way of the future and insist their industry can rebound with the right management.

At its core, ranching remains an experiment in coaxing the perfect oyster from the tannin waters.

And it's happening in Tallahassee's backyard.

Finding the perfect formula



Bob Bruggner holds one of the thousands of oysters grown by Palmetto Island Oyster Company off the Wakulla County coastline.

Karl Eppers/Democrat

Call them boutique. Call them grade A. Call them what you like. They're good oysters. But creating them consistently is a work in progress.

"We're still playing with it," said Ben Wiggins of Palmetto Island Oyster Company on a Sunday afternoon in September. "We're still young at this."

Wiggins is one of three — joined by father and son team Bob and Phil Bruggner— who works the 1.5-acre lease tucked inside Oyster Bay.

Just south of Shell Point and Spring Creek, their operation is one of 38 sharing the same water.

On any given week, they'll spend their days off on the water. Sometimes they'll bolt down to the coast after work to make adjustments, sort or harvest for market.

There's a bit of science that goes into making farmed oysters as appetizing as possible in the shortest amount of time. What separates them from the wild-caught specimens found on menus around the country is the intentional development of the cup.



In a farming style field, rows of cages filled with oysters line the coast where the Panacea Co-Op Corporation is working on cultivating the molluscs on a large scale.

Joe Rondone/Democrat

That's the interior of the shell where the meat and muscle live and grow. The deeper the cup, the plumper the portion that ends up being spritzed with lemon juice lying on a bed of ice at the table.

Farmed oysters come with a degree of certainty.

"You know what you're getting from us," Phil Bruggner said. "You're getting that oyster that for the most part is the same size every time. Same meat quality. It doesn't matter month of the year."

'Foundation species'

Oysters put food on the table and support the environment. One oyster filters roughly 50 gallons of water a day and is responsible for the health of 2,000 other aquatic species.

Crabs and small shrimp kick on the deck of Palmetto Island's boat when an oyster cage is pulled on board.

"One of the appeals is it really is good for the environment," Bob Bruggner said. "There's really nothing negative about growing these."

The places where oyster cages are hung in Wakulla County have a silty mud bottom and little seagrass. The natural bars that are there have few live shellfish on them.

The leases create habitat and hint at the health of the bay.

"They are an indicator species. If you have healthy oysters then your water is healthy," Bob Bruggner. "It's a changing ball game out there and oysters are an important part of the ecology. They're a foundation species."

'Not a solution' for traditional oystermen

The dawn of the boon of Gulf Coast oyster farming comes at a time when traditional methods of harvest are hitting some of their roughest patches in recent history.

Aquaculture might be a way to build an appealing oyster, said Franklin County Seafood Associations President Shannon Hartsfield, but for oystermen who have spent their lives harvesting using tongs, it's

not a feasible way to make a profit.

"There's some of them interested in it," Hartsfield said. "But for the oystermen, that's not a solution for our issue. It's not going to give a livelihood for us."

The issues in Apalachicola Bay, which at one point provided 90 percent of the state's oysters and 10 percent of the entire country's haul, are numerous.



Jon Rueben, an oyster rancher who started his professional career as a banker with a business degree, but left his job after becoming disillusioned with the trade, ultimately joining the Panacea Co-Op Corporation.

Joe Rondone/Democrat

The downstream flow of fresh water from Georgia and Alabama through the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint river basin has diminished over the years causing salinity in the bay to spike, inviting predators in droves.

The 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill sent all of Florida's Gulf Coast seafood industry into a panic with the threat of approaching pollution that never materialized. During that time, Apalachicola Bay was open and unregulated to harvest. Tons of oysters were taken leaving little behind for the future.

The area was declared a federal commercial fisheries disaster in summer 2013.

Turn the page to now, and the struggle continues.

The 40 or so oyster men who still tong each day barely scrape together enough to fill two 50 pound sacks, Hartsfield said. They get top dollar for them, but there isn't enough to support an entire industry.

At its peak in the 1990s, he said, there were about 32 local dealers and over 500 oyster men and women.



Panacea Pearls, the branded oysters from the Panacea Co-Op Corporation, are laid out on the bow of a boat.

Joe Rondone/Democrat

There are efforts to re-shell the seabed to help give fledgling oysters a place to grow, which is going well. But as soon as the new oysters reach the legal, 3-inch size, they're being sent to market.

"They're being harvested as fast as they're growing," Hartsfield said. "I'm scared there'll be a time when it'll be harvested out and there won't be much left to grow and spawn additional oysters. It needs to be closed to give it a chance to rebuild."

Aquaculture hauls could never take the place of the number of oysters harvested by hand if the bay is allowed to regenerate, Hartsfield argued.

"There will be wild harvesting in Apalachicola Bay," he said. "Yet you've got to take the pressure off of them and give them a chance."

While it might seem that aquaculture is pushing wild tonging out of the way, that's not the case, said Wiggins with Palmetto Island. Both methods can co-exist, he says.

Wild harvesters are looking to keep their way of life and ranchers are working to fill the appetite for oysters, which continues to grow in popularity.

"In no way does this hurt the wild tonging," Wiggins said. "It's just as wild bars continue to decline ... the demand has started to increase. I don't think we could ever out tong or out farm the demand for this product."

Bringing the aquarium back

It takes between six and nine months to grow an oyster to the size in which it is ready for the table.

One of the hardest parts about being a rancher is the labor. But the aspect that is affecting Wakulla aquaculture's success is the availability of seed oysters, young oysters that at first resemble coarse sand.

Palmetto Island Oyster Company has struggled to get seed, bringing in 400,000 this year alone. Last year, they were lucky to get a quarter of that.



Rob Olin, oyster rancher and CEO of the Panacea Co-Op Corporation looks over some of his crop, harvested from the waters of the Forgotten Coast on Thursday, Nov. 2, 2107.

Joe Rondone/Democrat

Panacea Oyster Co-op's CEO Rob Olin is looking to change that by planning a future when aquaculture plays a role in regenerating an ailing waterway.

"We have to get past the point that tonging is gone. It may come back if we do this correctly, but it will never be a premium oyster like this," Olin said. "This is the future and some of the older guys who were tonging can't embrace this."

Part of embracing the growing industry is building a hatchery along Florida's Gulf Coast.

When oysters reproduce, they spawn tiny larvae that freely navigate the water until they find somewhere to make their permanent home. Once the larvae attach to a surface, they are known as spat. Currently, seed oysters come from Louisiana State University and Auburn University, but they only make their way to Sunshine State ranchers after the needs of their respective states have been satisfied.

The co-op operates from its Spring Creek Marina and recently purchased the former Metcaff Crab processing building in Panacea that will house a hatchery and expand its operations, Olin said.

The co-op and its 30 members are working toward more than just growing oysters, he added. Members' hauls are combined and sold at market as "Panacea Pearls." Several ranchers in the bay, including Palmetto Island, are not part of the co-op.

Farming oysters is an effort to restore ecological stability to Apalachee Bay in a sustainable yet profitable way.

That's no easy task.



Oyster spat, or young seedlings, are poured out for inspection from the Panacea Co-Op Corporation farm. According to owner Olin, a 1.5 acre area can produce up to one million fully grown oysters in a six month period.

Joe Rondone/Democrat

"We're trying to do this as a holistic coastal community resurrection," Olin said. "There are 30 different ranchers, all of them in some way committed to saving this bay profitably and they're all sharing these innovations they come up with. It's the advantage of inclusion."

The Co-op works closely with Tallahassee Community College's Wakulla Environmental Institute, which attracts people to oyster farming then turns their curiosity into knowledge of the industry.

Banks in the area are starting to come around to giving loans for startups. Olin said an average loan to begin an aquaculture lease is roughly \$25,000 – to purchase cages and seed and equipment.

But on top of profits, what Olin and others hope to do is use oysters to revive the bay. He estimated in the next five years, aquaculture grown oysters would take the place of wild caught oysters.

He likened the shellfish to an aquarium's filter. Turn the filter off – lose the oysters – and the health of the bay starts to decline.

"If we get this right, we repopulate this area," Olin said. "We bring the aquarium back and not just oysters, it's all the fish so that your grandkids can enjoy these waters like my grandkids did."

Contact Karl Eppers at kettters@tallahassee.com or @KarlEppers on Twitter.

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