

DELICIOUS



LOCALLY GROWN



Oysters,

A BENEFIT TO THE ECOSYSTEM

By DEBORAH G. SCANLON

Legend has it that Mark Twain relished oysters, eating them from breakfast to a midnight snack. If you have sampled locally farmed oysters, you can understand why.

These tasty mollusks benefit the environment, removing nitrogen from estuaries caused by fertilizer runoff and septic tanks. This nitrogen can fuel algae growth and cause low oxygen levels in waterways.

Sippewissett Oysters, composed of Falmouth oyster farmers Peter Chase, Eric Matzen and Mary Murphy, grows most of its oysters in Eel River East, off the shore of Washburn Island, with additional sites in Buzzards Bay and in Great Harbor in Woods Hole. Their oysters are known for their “sea salt liquor, firm texture, and clean refreshing taste.”



Pete Chase began oystering in 2003, the first oyster farmer on the Upper Cape in recent history. He had taken courses in aquaculture in college, which piqued his interest in the aquaculture concept. In 2003, he decided to apply for the necessary permits in Falmouth. He found, however, that since no one had done this, the process was slow. It took him two and a half years to finally get approval for a site in

Buzzards Bay, and his first oysters went into the water in 2006. By 2010, there were other oyster farmers in Falmouth who were trying to set up operation in Buzzards Bay. They decided to work together instead of compete, and they formed the Falmouth Shellfish Cooperative, with their oysters branded as “Sippewissett Oysters.”

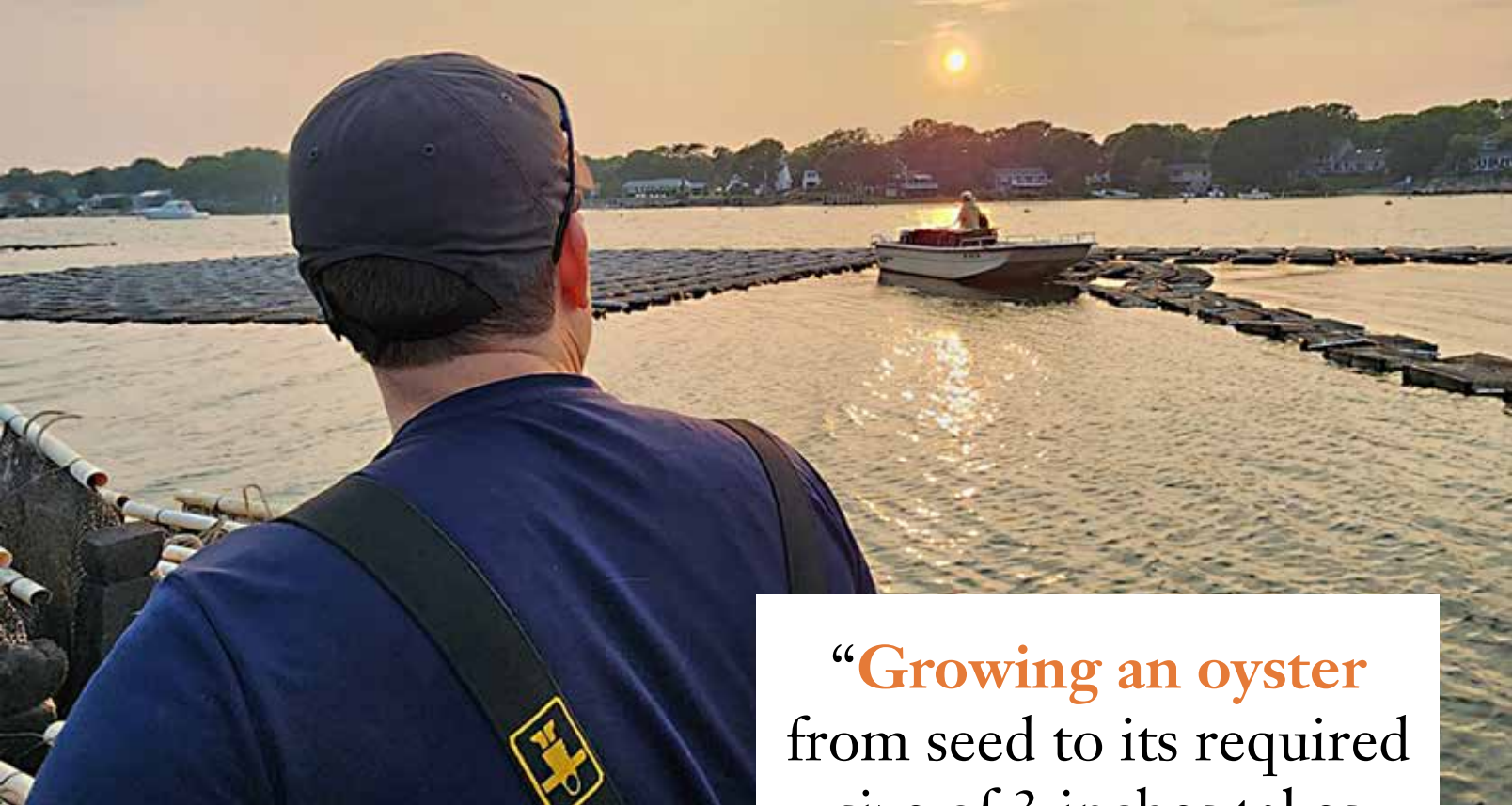
The cooperative initially grew oysters using bottom cages in Buzzards Bay, and later added floats in Woods Hole’s Great Harbor. In 2019, the cooperative (consisting of Mr. Chase, Ms. Murphy, and Mr. Matzen) applied for a three-year permit for the Town of Falmouth’s new pilot aquaculture program. They received one of three half-acre parcels in Eel River East in Menauhant.

In 2020 they started the project, putting their floating oyster bags off Washburn Island. The pandemic, however, impacted the first year of the program. Sales were

very slow, so the town extended the permits for a year. The market eventually rebounded, and Sippewissett Oysters now distributes oysters to large wholesalers as well as local markets. Oysters can be ordered online at SippewissettOysters.com, or purchased at local seafood markets. They also sell to restaurants, offer raw bar catering for weddings and private parties, show up for local events, such as Falmouth’s summertime Coast-Fest, and sometimes set up raw bars at local venues. Each summer, they give a talk and tasting at the Woods Hole Historical Museum.

The town takes care of permitting for the aquaculture sites, and the oyster growers are able to rent their gear through the town. The fees that the town receives for the floating bags, booms and other equipment are used to buy quahog seed. Quahog seeding benefits commercial and recreational shellfish harvesters, and





“Growing an oyster from seed to its required size of 3 inches takes two years in Eel River.”

also helps remove more nitrogen from our waterways. Shellfish like oysters and quahogs are efficient because they are filter feeders and incorporate the nitrogen into their shells and tissue as they grow. But that does not mean they won't taste good. In fact, the oyster growers note that Eel River oysters are tasty, “meatier, due to more food (algae), so they grow faster.” Oysters from Buzzards Bay and Great Harbor are brinier than those from Eel River.

Oyster aquaculture is not a new concept. After Cape Cod's initial natural abundance of oysters was depleted in 1840, shellfishermen transplanted seeds from beds in Wareham and Long Island Sound and harvested millions annually. By 1870, oyster grants were offered by individual towns throughout Cape Cod, and growth increased dramatically until disease reduced production in the 1930s. The current resurgence began about 20 years ago with disease-resistant strains, specialized seed hatcheries, increased demand and prices, and new growing

technologies.

Growing an oyster from seed to its required size of 3 inches takes two years in Eel River, and seeds are deployed in late spring/early summer. The growers maintain them through the fall, then in December, the seeds get taken out of the water and stored in insulated cargo containers in a process called “pitting” to protect them from ice and winter storms. In March, they get put back in the water.

Overall, the process of growing in the Eel River farm has been easier for the oyster farmers. The floating bags are less work than bottom cages because the bags can be flipped when the side facing down gets fouled, and the crew doesn't have to haul the heavy cages from the seafloor into their boat.

In addition, FDA regulations no longer allow harvesting in Great Harbor from May to November, due to the number of boats on moorings.

All three of the Sippewissett Oysters

crews have full-time jobs. Mr. Chase and Mr. Matzen are biologists at NOAA Fisheries in Woods Hole, while Ms. Murphy is in the US Coast Guard and also works at Burr Brothers Boats in Marion.

So, it is no surprise to hear them say they get up “insanely early” in the summer, launching their boats at 5 AM to go out to the farm. They are done by 8 AM, in time to go to their full-time jobs. Clearly, they enjoy their mission: “to grow and distribute fresh, local, sustainable seafood of the highest quality”; sell locally; and do good for the environment. ■

