

Southern Living®

The Unlikely Oysterman Putting North Carolina Bivalves On The Map



PHOTO: CAROLINE EUBANKS

Former schoolteacher Ryan Bethea was bartending at a [Raleigh](#) restaurant, ready for a change. He came home from a shift and picked up a Farm Bureau magazine and was captivated by one particular article.

“There was an article about North Carolina having the perfect setup for being a major player in the oyster industry,” Bethea recalls. “It featured a guy named Jay Styron, who I call the grandfather of North Carolina aquaculture.”

He was excited at the idea of promoting the state's products and working in the water and went back to school. "I was fortunate enough to be selected into the Oyster Aquaculture and Genetics Program at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, which is an entity of William and Mary. And, they only allowed four applicants."

He followed up his studies with an externship with a man that became his mentor, where he learned how to grow [oysters](#) on a farm. He was given the chance to buy the oyster farm near where he went to the beach as a child.

"It's renowned for its waters and makes delicious oysters. The stars aligned, and Dr. Morris offered to sell us that part of his lease."

The farm where he created Oysters Carolina is on Harkers Island, located on the state's Crystal Coast. Driving down the quiet road, you might not know that just off the shore, the small creatures are growing.



PHOTO: RYAN BETHEA

"Where we grow them is pretty much a marine environment. And, what that does is it makes them harder to grow," he says. "But what it does is it just makes really, really delicious oysters that are extremely salty."

The types of oysters, specifically Beau Sels, Native Sons, and Sea Monsters, quickly gained a following. But what makes Bethea's operation most unique is that they sell directly to consumers in North Carolina, apart from one restaurant, and [oysters](#) are delivered across the state daily in refrigerated vans, which isn't easy in a state of its size.

"We're the only company in the whole country that harvests oysters and then delivers them the same day... It is extremely challenging," he says of the long drives from Harkers Island to customers. "It's hard to do that week, after week, after week. And then it's also hard to do that after you've harvested oysters."

But oyster lovers can also visit the island to get a small part of the experience of Bethea's daily life, seeing the bags where the tiny bivalves start their life cycle and later enjoying them raw, straight from the ocean.

"People can come, and hang out, and eat the oysters on the water, pop a bottle." There's even a new wooden platform where visitors can sit on Adirondack chairs overlooking the water.



PHOTO: RYAN BETHEA

Despite Bethea's unlikely entrance into the seafood industry, he's found success in the briny waters of the Atlantic, with fans around the Tar Heel State desperate for a taste of the oysters.

"We've never paid for marketing. It's all been word of mouth," he says.