

FEATURE

# A History of Rhode Island's Oyster Industry

From a boom-and-bust industry in the late 1880's to a recent resurgence, oysters remain vital to local industry and the environment



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**By Chip Young**

Rhode Island oysters are the gift that just keeps on giving. They provide a culinary delight whether being slurped raw on the half shell, deep-fried or thrown into a hearty New England oyster stew. They offer up the rare pearl treasure, and their

smooth and polished shells can be incorporated into jewelry. Or, those discarded shells can be dumped right back into the Bay and used to help anchor young oyster seeds (spat) to help renew their species. Oysters were recycling before recycling was cool.

And in perhaps their most important role, oysters serve as filters for cleaning the waters of Narragansett Bay, provide safe habitat for all types of marine life, help to remove harmful nutrients and even add valuable calcium carbonate to the waters. Each oyster filters up to 50 gallons of water a day, a full shift in helping to improve water quality and clarity. They might not be too big, but they do more than their fair share when providing benefits to Rhode Islanders.

Today, the oyster industry is getting an economic foothold. The 2015 annual report by the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), which is charged with permitting aquaculture in Rhode Island, reports that oysters remained the number one aquaculture product, with 8.2 million sold for consumption, an increase of 725,000 from the previous year. This has a dollar of valuation of \$5.4 million, a tidy little present to the state's current economy.

### **The Comeback Kid**

In the late 1880s and early 1900s, oysters were the most dominant and wildly plentiful shellfish in Rhode Island. Over 50 shucking, shipping and processing plants were going full-bore along the shores of Narragansett Bay, predominantly in and around Providence. Free-harvested and cultivated oysters were putting food on the table of both poor and well-to-do families alike, providing jobs for many, and giving Little Rhody a big-time industry. But factors ranging from those caused by humans – such as the waters being increasingly polluted by sewage and industry in upper Narragansett Bay – combined with natural changes in the Bay's ecosystem – shifting from a hard-bottom environment that helped oysters to secure themselves to the floor of the Bay to a soft bottom that gave no anchoring place for oyster spat to accumulate – caused a drastic reduction in the industry's output. This was exacerbated by factors such as near-constant political disputes over shellfishing leases and competition with other emerging marine businesses such as commercial quahogging, and so the Narragansett Bay oyster farming trade slipped into virtual nonexistence by the beginning of World War II.

Now with a boost in the past few decades from a burgeoning aquaculture industry in Rhode Island, and a sporadic hand from Mother Nature, oysters are making a comeback worthy of a star past her prime that Betty White would admire.

Sarah Schumann is a local writer and wild shellfisher who authored the new book, *Rhode Island's Shellfish Heritage: An Ecological History* ([www.RISMP.org/EcoHistory](http://www.RISMP.org/EcoHistory)). The comprehensive work is the be-all, end-all for anyone interested in the state's long and fascinating love affair with shellfish. She, like others who devote themselves to the industry, says that as far as wild oyster growth in the Bay goes, it is "boom or bust" over recent years. And in the area where she most often fishes in the Mt. Hope Bay waters, "there has been a good set in the last four to five years."

Noticeably and fortuitously, as the oysters grow, so does the market for them. The demand for Rhode Island oysters is actually outstripping the amount produced, a tribute to their recognized quality and flavor. Exported Rhode Island oysters are sold all over the United States, but most are in the Northeast Corridor between Boston and Washington, D.C., with New York City a major hub. David Beutel, aquaculture coordinator for the CRMC, estimates, "Between Columbus Day and Memorial Day approximately 80+ percent of the oysters are sold out of state. Between Memorial Day and Columbus Day it is about 50/50, but more of the product could be sold locally. More of it is not sold locally because the growers want to keep their year-round customers content."

### **That's Merroir to You, Monsieur**

Rhode Island oysters are prized nationwide for a simple reason: they have an exceptional taste. It is called the merroir (or meroir). The merroir is as distinct as a Rhode Island accent or Southern drawl, and similarly reflects where the culinary delicacy was raised. Within the state's waters, pond-raised oysters have more of a sweet finish merroir, while those from the Bay are saltier, or as they have been described, deliver to your palate a taste that "reminds people of the flavor that you get in your mouth when you're swimming."

So the next time you are in a restaurant sitting near a couple sniffing their vintage and aged Beaujolais, and swirling it around their glasses before taking a sip, just noisily slurp down a Rhode Island oyster, loudly smack your lips, take a long pull off your ice cold Narragansett beer, sit back with a satisfied smile and say, "Now that's a great merroir."

### **Oysters Gone Wild**

There are a good number of individuals, businesses, academics and agencies who are trying to assure that the future will be more boom than bust in the future by getting actively involved in restoration efforts for the prized Rhode Island oyster.

[The Nature Conservancy](#) has a shellfish reef building and restoration program known as “Oysters Gone Wild.” The goal is to create habitats that will not only promote the growth of wild oysters, but also contribute the positive aspects of improved water quality and habitat that accompany the shellfish. This is an answer to the oyster version of “Catch 22.” If there are no old oyster shells to anchor another generation’s spat, then they will have no place to grow. But you can’t have old shells if there were no oysters there to begin with.

John Torgan, director of Ocean and Coastal Conservation in TNC’s Rhode Island office, says, “Habitat restoration has to come first. One of the most important challenges (for the future) is creating the right conditions.” Oysters Gone Wild retrieves discarded shells from local restaurants, and dumps them at a site at Great Swamp where they are “cured” through washing and exposure. They are then distributed to sites throughout the Bay and coastal ponds.

[The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) is also jumping into the game through its EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) Oyster Restoration Initiative. This program pays oyster aquaculturists to grow oyster spat on shells and then move it to places around the Bay and ponds to give a boost to production.

While some of the waters that oyster spat is being transferred into by both programs is not currently open to harvesting, as with any shellfish transplant effort, there is a great hope that drifting spat will eventually anchor elsewhere and spread growth. And the oysters are always an immediate benefit to the water quality of the environment in which they are inserted.

### **The Watery Backyard Gardens**

One of the most interesting initiatives that has emerged from the revitalized oyster production in Narragansett Bay and South County salt ponds is Roger Williams University’s Oyster Gardening for Restoration and Enhancement (OGRE) Program, with its companion Practical Shellfish Farming classes, the latter led by RWU marine biology Associate Professor Dale Leavitt. The project began in 2006, and it recruits waterfront property owners to maintain an oyster nursery at their docks. The school then redistributes the young oysters nurtured in those watery “backyards,” where they spend six months to get to a size where they can be transported and introduced into restoration sites in the South County coastal ponds,

Block Island and to sites in the Bay at Bissel Cove in North Kingstown and near Portsmouth. Last year, Dale estimates that approximately 125 volunteer oyster “gardeners” set more than 300,000 to 500,000 oysters on their way to future harvest and reproduction to help support the Rhode Island oyster comeback.

If oyster farming piques your interest, Dale also teaches Practical Shellfish Farming classes to those who want to get their feet wet, so to speak. The popular education program drew 80 students this year, many from Massachusetts, and its combination of biology, technology, risk and permitting is a must-attend for anyone wanting to seriously enter the oyster cultivation chain.

So if you are an oyster enthusiast, learn a lot and get involved. When it comes down to it, oysters need all the help we can provide them. They certainly give us enough in return.