

# 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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WESTERLY — For years, commercial fishermen who live in the town and ply their craft in local waters have had to transport their catch to Point Judith or other ports in the state equipped and licensed for processing seafood and selling it to distributors.

"I've been driving to Point Judith, which is 52 miles round trip, to offload my fish. You get paid less because you are selling to a middle man who pays a processor, so you don't get the money you deserve. You do all the work, but you don't get the money," said Jason Jarvis, a resident of the town who has worked as a commercial fishermen for more than 30 years.

Fresh Harvest Kitchen is changing all that — providing a local spot for the town's more than 30 commercial fishermen to sell the fish they catch directly.

Jarvis is a founding member of the kitchen, which will eventually operate as a cooperative. The facility, in a commercial plaza at 9 East Ave., is a project of the Southern Rhode Island Conservation District in collaboration with a group of artisanal fishermen and small-scale farmers to open and operate a cooperatively run, fully-licensed and shared commercial kitchen and processing facility.

To start, the kitchen has been open for walk in sales on Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings. Special Fourth of July holiday hours will be in place this weekend with the facility open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. Expanded regular hours will be offered as the business grows.

To get the word out about the facility, the kitchen has so far relied on social media postings and word of mouth. It appears to be working.

"We have essentially sold out of all the fish we've had each weekend," said Gina Fuller, district manager of the Southern Rhode Island Conservation District.

On a recent Friday, the kitchen's offerings included little neck and cherry stone clams dug from local salt ponds, fluke (summer flounder), bass, and an assortment of vegetables including potatoes, arugula and squash, as well as honey from farms in the area. Frozen pork from a local farm is also available.

The kitchen also expects to sell frozen chicken and turkey from local farms, Fuller said. The items all meet state and federal standards including those promulgated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

About 10 local restaurants have been among those to purchase clams and fresh fish from the kitchen, Fuller said.

The 2,500-square-foot kitchen, Fuller said, is intended to provide small food businesses with the resources they need to grow their businesses and offer opportunities to the community to taste, purchase, and learn to prepare locally grown, harvested and

produced foods. Jarvis and Fuller had discussed the need for such a facility years ago but when the COVID-19 pandemic initially decimated the state's fishing industry, a new urgency took hold.

While the state enacted emergency regulations to allow direct dock to consumer sales early in the pandemic, the Westerly fleet did not have access to local marina or processing facilities where individual fishers could conduct direct to consumers sales.

Additionally, Jarvis and Fuller said, many consumers are not accustomed to buying whole fish directly from fishermen.

The COVID 19 pandemic resulted in small scale local fishers needing to engage in a market pivot, changing from a model of selling direct to large wholesalers or dock/deck direct sales, to a share processing facility," Fuller said. "This market pivot required investments in equipment and supplies to transform a restaurant kitchen into a seafood licensed processing facility as well marketing materials and COVID safety materials."

The conservation district applied for and won grants from the state Department of Environmental Management and the Rhode Island Foundation to help with build out and operational costs. An individual donor also contributed, Fuller said.

Westerly resident Nick Celico, also known as the Rhody Clammer, is also a founding member of the kitchen. He primarily digs clams in local salt ponds. Like Jarvis, Celico said having a local outlet saves him the drive to Point Judith or other ports in the state. And, Celico said, the consumer benefits.

"It's nice to have clams from the salt ponds in Westerly restaurants. I don't think they get any better," Celico said. The high salinity in the ponds translates to the best tasting, freshest clams, he said.

Freshness is a key selling point, Jarvis said. Fish purchased in a fish market is typically three days old or older, he said.

"What we are doing is trying to change that. We want to provide day boat fresh fish and if we don't sell it after two or three days we'll vacuum seal and freeze it," Jarvis said.

Establishment of the kitchen coincides with a growing demand for locally sourced food as well as shortages brought on by the pandemic, Jarvis said. The kitchen also represents a nod to the town's history when family gardens were common place and it was not unusual to find poultry and other small farm animals in a neighbor's backyard.

"When I moved here in 1976 as a 7-year-old kid it seemed like everybody had a farm," Jarvis said.

Fuller agreed.

"When I was growing up there lots of people in town with chickens and pigs," Fuller said.

The kitchen, she said, fits into the mission of the state's three conservation districts, an aspect of which includes supporting the state's farmers.

"We have big interest in supporting Rhode Island's food system and making it stronger through projects like this — building this place as an incubator for small fisheries and farm businesses," Fuller said.